# Civic Education *in Vocational Education and Training*

The Case Studies of
Croatia, Romania, and Thuringia

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# INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democratic societies are facing numerous social, economic, and political challenges, two of which are particularly significant for their future socio-political and economic development. On the one hand, contemporary societies are undergoing rapid demographic changes, most notably an aging population and a decline in the number of young people. Such demographic trends lead to a shortage of qualified labor, especially in specific trades and professions. As a potential response, many societies are seeking to equip young people in vocational education with the skills needed to enter the labor market as quickly as possible, often by encouraging them to spend part of their schooling in workplace settings. However, with this approach, general educational content, including civic education, is increasingly marginalized in vocational schools.

The marginalization of civic education in vocational schools is occurring precisely at a time when contemporary societies are facing another major challenge: the rise of extreme political options, particularly right-wing populist movements, which question core values of liberal democracy. There is a growing concern that young people with lower levels of education are more likely to vote for such political options, and even more worryingly, they may adopt attitudes that reject liberal democracy as a political system. It would therefore be reasonable to expect that contemporary societies, in response to these threats, would intensify efforts to promote the development of a democratic political culture through their education systems. It would be exceptionally reasonable to expect that from vocational schools, which are attended by students for whom this level of education is often the last point of contact with the formal education system.

Contemporary social and political processes present contradictory challenges for vocational education. Therefore, in this study, we aim to analyze how contemporary societies address these conflicting challenges—specifically, how civic education is implemented in vocational schools. This paper is a direct continuation of our previous research (Šalaj, 2024), in which we initiated an exploration of the issue of civic education in vocational schools across European countries.[1] That initial study, which covered seven European countries, presented findings on how civic education is implemented in vocational education and training. The study was based on qualitative data collected through desk research and semi-structured interviews with experts in each country. The primary focus was on how civic competences are developed, whether civic education is taught as a separate subject, integrated into other subjects, or treated as a cross-curricular theme, and on the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical approaches employed. Thus, in the first study, we focused on the models and types of civic education, primarily examining its content and objectives in vocational schools. Civic education was analyzed through the lens of official documents and expert perspectives.

In this paper, while acknowledging and building upon the insights from the first study, we shift the perspective somewhat. The second study comprises three case studies that focus on civic education in vocational schools. While it builds on the findings of our earlier comparative research, this study aims to offer a more in-depth insight into national systems. Therefore, we have limited our analysis to three countries: Croatia, Romania, and Thuringia (Germany). The primary objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how civic education is implemented in these countries and to identify the key challenges associated with its

delivery in vocational schools. This study will focus primarily on issues related to the practical implementation of civic education within vocational education and training. Accordingly, the report will emphasize the educational and learning experiences and needs of various stakeholders. In line with this, the study is strongly informed by the perspectives of key actors, including students, teachers, administrators, experts, and youth workers. It seeks to highlight the principal challenges in implementing civic education in vocational schools, offering a deeper understanding of what practitioners—students, teachers, youth workers, experts, administrators, and others—believe needs to change.

The research design of this study is qualitative, incorporating an adequate number of focus groups, interviews, and online surveys with students, teachers, administrators, youth workers and experts. In addition to focus groups, interviews and online surveys, the study will also employ desk research, which involves analyzing two types of sources. The first includes official documents such as laws, regulations, rules, and curricula. The second consists of academic literature — namely, scholarly books and articles - that address civic education, with a particular emphasis on its implementation in vocational schools.

Given the stated objectives, the study is divided into several parts. Following the introductory part, the second part presents the theoretical framework that links the concepts of democracy, democratic political culture, education, vocational education, and civic education. The content of this section is primarily drawn from our first research study, where a similar framework was already presented. The third part is the core, most substantial, and most significant part of the study. It consists of three separate case studies that examine the practice of implementing civic education in the three

countries included in our analysis. Each of the case studies contains three chapters. The first chapter presents the development of civic education within the public education system, from the beginning of the democratic transition in the 1990s to the present day. This analysis is not limited to vocational schools but also covers developments in primary and secondary education. In addition, while the main focus is on formal education, this chapter also highlights major civic education initiatives undertaken by civil society, particularly non-formal civic education programs implemented by key non-governmental organizations. The second chapter focuses on the current state of civic education in vocational schools. It primarily draws on the material prepared for the first study, while also using this opportunity to expand and deepen the analysis. The third and most important chapter addresses the implementation process of civic education in vocational schools. It is based on the presentation and analysis of data collected through focus groups, interviews, and online surveys with students, teachers, youth workers, and experts.

The fourth part of the study begins with a summary of the key insights emerging from the three case studies. It then identifies the main similarities and differences in the implementation of civic education in vocational schools across the three countries. Additionally, this section compares the perspectives of key stakeholders on potential improvements to civic education in vocational settings. The final part of the study presents our recommendations for enhancing the implementation of civic education in vocational schools.

# KEY CONCEPTS

In this study, we build on the theoretical framework developed in our previous study (Šalaj, 2024), in which we connected the concepts of democracy, democratic political culture, education, vocational education, and civic education.

Our understanding of democracy is based on the work of American political scientist Robert Dahl, who describes democracy in his book *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989) as a political regime in which all those affected by a decision participate in the decision-making process. In reflecting on how democracy functions, particular attention is given to the conditions that favor the stable and effective operation of democratic political systems. Of special importance to us is the impact of socio-cultural factors on the functioning of democracy. A systematic explication and empirical verification of the role of socio-cultural factors in democratic performance was undertaken by American political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their influential study *The Civic Culture* (1963). In this work, Almond and Verba introduced the concept of political culture into the social sciences, defining it as "the particular distribution of orientations toward political objects among the members of a nation" (p 21). Their comparative analysis of political life in five different countries led them to conclude that the development of a stable and effective democratic government does not primarily depend on institutional structures, but rather on citizens' orientations toward the political process, that is, on political culture (p 365).

Following the publication of this study, the concept of political culture gained significant popularity and became widely used in empirical research, leading to the recognition of a political-cultural approach within the social sciences (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Vujčić, 2001, 2008). The central idea of this approach is that the subjective dimension of politics—which encompasses citizens' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values—is essential for the proper functioning of democracy.[2]

Given the importance of this socio-cultural dimension of politics, it is logical to ask how it is developed. Citizens are not born with a formed democratic political culture or civic competence; instead, these qualities can be cultivated through processes commonly referred to as political socialization (Greenstein, 1969; Jennings & Niemi, 1981). This concept emerged from the understanding that individuals are not born with innate political knowledge, attitudes, or values. A key insight that profoundly influenced the development of political socialization research is the recognition that it is not a linear or one-dimensional process, but rather a complex and multifaceted one. Political culture is acquired, shaped, and transformed through the influence of numerous factors. A review of the relevant literature (Dekker, 1991; Sigel, 1995) identifies several key agents of socialization, including the family, peer groups, the education system, mass media, religion, and the economic system.

2    In this study, following contemporary understandings in political science (e.g., Zakaria, 2007; Mounk, 2018), we define democracy as liberal democracy. The democratic segment emphasizes popular sovereignty and the equality of citizens, while the liberal aspect underscores the importance of individual rights and freedoms. The democratic tradition stems from the idea that the highest power in a political community should rest in the hands of the people, who, directly or through their representatives, decide on all significant political matters. The liberal tradition is based on the idea that individuals should be protected from arbitrary use of power through constitutional and legal constraints, even in cases where that power has democratic legitimacy.

Our primary focus is on the role of education—specifically, public education systems—as a key factor in political socialization. Since the establishment of formal public schooling, one of its fundamental objectives has been to prepare new generations to become active and responsible citizens, equipped with the competencies needed to participate effectively in the political process. In this sense, the entire public education system functions as a crucial mechanism for fostering democratic political culture among young people. Through curricula and school practices, students are introduced to essential concepts such as democracy, governance, citizenship, and political participation. Schools also provide a structured environment in which young people can learn about their role in society and the significance of civic engagement. Moreover, extracurricular activities—such as student councils and community service initiatives—offer practical opportunities that reinforce democratic values and participatory practices.

Over time—particularly in the period following World War II—democratic political communities increasingly embraced the idea that a specific component of the public education system should be devoted to preparing young people to assume the roles of active citizens. This component is most referred to as civic education (Crick, 2000; Galston, 2001). Discussions surrounding civic education gained particular significance with the expansion of voting rights, especially following the introduction of universal suffrage. To shape the political culture of younger generations in a democratic direction, many countries have incorporated civic education programs into their school curricula since the end of World War II (Šalaj, 2002). Civic education is thus typically defined (e.g., Gutmann, 1987; Crick, 2000) as a distinct part of the education system whose primary aim is to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for meaningful participation in the social and political life of their communities.

Two questions are crucial for the discussion on the status of civic education in public school systems. The first relates to the types, and the second to the models of civic education (Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017a; 2017b). The discussion about types addresses the

content of civic education, arising from the fact that different content can promote different goals. For example, civic education can be used to strengthen allegiance to the current political order or to encourage critical thinking about society and politics. Most analyses (Patrick, 1977; Harber, 1991; Maitles, 1999; Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017a) that have researched the types of civic education agree that four main content dimensions can be identified. These are knowledge, intellectual skills, participatory skills, and attitudes. The existence of distinct types of civic education stems from the fact that specific programs vary in the amount of time and space devoted to each of these dimensions.

Different models of civic education emerge from the various ways in which this form of education is implemented within school systems. These models reflect differing conceptions of nature and the significance of civic education within the broader educational framework. Based on current practices in democratic political communities, three primary models of civic education can be identified (Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017b). In the first model, civic education is present within the school system but is not incorporated into the formal curriculum. The underlying assumption is that students will acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes through the overall educational experience, without the need for a dedicated subject or structured program. The second model explicitly integrates civic education into the curriculum, but not as a standalone subject. Instead, it is conceptualized as a cross-cutting educational principle that should permeate the entire curriculum—informing the teaching of all subjects, from mathematics to art. For this reason, it is commonly referred to as the cross-curricular model. The third model is the most straightforward: civic education is delivered through one or more dedicated subjects within the school system. In this case, civic education is clearly defined, taught as a distinct component, and assessed as such.

In this study, we are particularly interested in the status of civic education within the vocational education and training sector. Why do we consider this issue crucial for the future development of democratic political culture in liberal-democratic systems? The answer lies

in the specific nature of vocational education's primary objectives. All countries eventually categorize students within their educational systems into different types of education. After the portion familiar to all students, usually referred to as primary education, which varies in duration across different countries, the start of secondary education marks a differentiation of students into various types of education or schools. The most important distinction for this study is between schools that provide general education and those that offer vocational education.

General education, also known as academic education, is primarily focused on the transmission of theoretical knowledge and fostering broad intellectual development. It aims to equip students with a wide-ranging understanding of various disciplines and to foster the development of critical thinking and analytical skills. The primary goal of this educational track is not to prepare students for a specific profession, but rather to provide a strong foundation for further education at the tertiary level, such as universities and colleges. In contrast, vocational education focuses on the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills, with the explicit aim of preparing students for direct entry into the labor market upon graduation. During their vocational education, students acquire the competencies necessary to perform specific tasks associated with particular professions or trades. This type of education emphasizes hands-on learning, with a substantial portion of instruction delivered through experiential methods, including workshops, simulations, and real-world practice. A key component of these programs is their cooperation with employers and businesses through internships and apprenticeship schemes, which are designed to expose students to authentic work environments. This work-based learning component brings students as close as possible to real-world professional contexts, thereby enhancing their employability and readiness for the labor market.

The above considerations suggest that vocational education is primarily structured to facilitate students' smooth and rapid entry into the labor market. Its core function is socio-economic, that is, to produce a skilled workforce aligned with the economy's needs. However, this raises an important question: What becomes of the socio-cultural function of education in such settings, particularly in preparing young people to become active and responsible citizens? Is this civic dimension overlooked or marginalized in vocational schools? Or are there, in fact, elements of civic education present within these institutions—elements that are essential for fostering a democratic political culture?

# CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES

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# 3.1.

# CROATIA

## 3.1.1.
## THE HISTORY OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education in Croatia has undergone a complex and multi-layered development path, marked by significant political, social, and educational changes since the Republic of Croatia's independence to date. Although the topic of civic education has occasionally appeared in curricula and educational discussions, its systematic and integrated introduction into the educational system remains a challenge. In this chapter, we present an overview of key moments in the development of civic education, with particular emphasis on the role of the school subject *Politics and Economy*, local practices (such as the *Rijeka model*), as well as the significant role of civil society in its implementation and popularization.

### 3.1.1.1.
### Civic education in the formal education system

Civic education gained importance in the formal education system only at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, although this concept has been around for much longer. After Croatia gained independence in the 1990s, its education system underwent the process of nationalization of the curriculum, with emphasis on patriotism, national identity, and Croatian historical and cultural heritage.

The first serious attempts to institutionalize civic education emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, in 1999 the *National Programme of Education for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship* was adopted, covering topics such as human rights education, democratic citizenship, identity and intercultural education, peace education and non-violent conflict resolution, sustainable development, prevention of prejudice and discrimination, research into humanitarian law, etc. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 1999).

The Education and Teacher Training Agency, a public institution under the supervision of the ministry responsible for science and education, has assumed responsibility for a civic education program called *Project Citizen* from the US *Center for Civic Education*. From 1999 to 2010, *Project Citizen* was the basic form of civic education in schools. This program encourages pupils to participate actively in local communities and is implemented as a project activity in schools. Since there was no systematic strategy at the national level for its implementation, its implementation largely depended on the interest and enthusiasm of certain schools and teachers.

Significant support for teachers wishing to implement *Project Citizen* was provided by NGOs, notably the *Forum for Freedom of Education*, *Gong*, and *the Centre for Peace Studies*, which organized educational initiatives aimed at improving the existing implementation of school programs. In 2009, these organizations formed an informal network called the *GOOD Initiative*, which remains active and brings together over 60 civil society organizations. The goal of the *GOOD Initiative* and the focal point of its advocacy is to systematically and comprehensively introduce civic education in all schools, so that such content is accessible to all students, regardless of the school they attend.

*The National Curriculum Framework for Pre-school Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education* – NCF (MZOS, 2011) recognizes civic competence as one of the eight basic competencies that students need to develop. In the mid-2000s, the first proposals for the *National Civic Education Curriculum* were drafted. However, their implementation was limited, primarily due to political disagreements and a lack of consensus on the objectives and methods of this education. It was only with the introduction of the *National Curriculum Framework* that civic education gained a formal place in the education system, albeit not as a separate subject, but rather as a cross-curricular subject. This cross-curricular subject encompasses the development of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that contribute to shaping students' democratic consciousness. The aim is to encourage them to participate actively and responsibly in school, the local community, and society, to strengthen their identity, mutual respect, and develop sensitivity to global problems, all on the principles of democracy, fairness, and peacekeeping (MZOS, 2011). Although progressive in principle, the implementation encountered several obstacles: teachers were often overburdened, undereducated, and lacked adequate support for introducing civic content into their regular classes.

Concurrently with the adoption of the *National Curriculum Framework*, the Government of the Republic of Croatia established and defined the tasks of the *National Committee for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship*. According to the decision, the Committee was tasked with promoting civic education at all levels, from pre-school to higher education, and in all forms, including both formal and non-formal education. In June 2011, the *Draft of the Civic Education Curriculum* was sent to teachers, competent authorities, civil sector representatives, and university teachers for review and

opinion (Spajić-Vrkaš, 2014). The improved version was accepted by the then Ministry of Science, Education, and Sport. In September 2012, experimental implementation and monitoring of the *Civic Education Curriculum* started in twelve primary and secondary schools during the two school years (2012/2013 and 2013/2014). The experimental implementation covered eight primary and four secondary schools across Croatia. The *National Centre for External Evaluation of Education and Research,* in collaboration with the *Education Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship* of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, published a detailed report on the effects of experimental implementation titled *The (Lack of) Power of Civic Education* (Spajić-Vrkaš, 2016).

It is also worth noting that the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, in the context of the *National Youth Programme 2014-2017*, recognized the importance of introducing civic education—one of the envisioned measures included creating institutional prerequisites for developing civic competence in young people. The program explicitly states that, until the school year 2015/2016 civic education is to be introduced as a compulsory subject in the eighth grade of primary school and the first and second grades of secondary school, while at the same time being conducted cross-curricularly throughout primary and secondary education. From all the foregoing, during that period, the topic of civic education – at least at the declarative level - became present in many institutions and was discussed within the framework of educational policy with evident interest of civil society and the media. The number of key stakeholders who expressed their willingness to contribute to a better introduction and implementation of civic education in schools has also increased.

In December 2013, the Ministry of Education established a commission to prepare for the implementation of civic education in the 2014/2015 school year. The Commission's task was to develop an expert framework for implementing the civic education curriculum, as outlined in Articles 26 and 27 of the *Primary and Secondary School Education Act*. The basis for this expert framework was a research report that provided recommendations based on the opinions of teachers and students regarding potential ways to improve the curriculum. In April 2014, a draft of the *Civic Education Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Schools* was submitted for public consultation. However, the results of these public consultations were not disclosed on the Ministry's website and the proposal from the Commission for preparing the implementation of civic education for the 2014/2015 school year was withdrawn without a formal explanation by the Ministry. Shortly thereafter, the Commission ceased its work. In July of the same year, a new public consultation was launched, this time on the document titled *Draft Decision on the Adoption of the Program of Cross-Curricular and Interdisciplinary Content in Civic Education for Primary and Secondary Schools*. This document had not been publicly announced until then (Pažur, 2017). Although the results of this consultation were published in the form of a summary, the public was again not informed about the content of the comments received, their authors, or the proportion of accepted proposals (Pažur, 2016). This radical change in the model of civic education coincided with a change in the ministerial position. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the abandonment of the *Civic Education Curriculum* was the result of the personnel change, which redefined the ministry's political priorities.

Civic education was also part of an attempt to comprehensively reform and modernize the Croatian education system, known as the *Cjelovita kurikularna reforma* (*Comprehensive Curricula Reform*). This reform was based on the previously adopted strategy for education, science, and technology, which aimed to meet the needs of modern society and the labor market in Croatia. As part of the reform, numerous relevant curricula have been developed, with an emphasis on learning outcomes, competence development, and the introduction of cross-curricular topics. For example, for the first time, the new high school curriculum for *Politics and Economy* explicitly includes topics such as democracy, human rights, active citizenship, and political literacy. However, the change in government in 2015 also led to a change in the political climate, slowing down the reform process. Although it formally began in 2019 under the title *Škola za život (School for Life),* the reform remained largely vague and fragmented. Within the same reform, the Ministry responsible for Education adopted the *Civic Education Curriculum* in 2019 as a cross-curricular topic (Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia, 2019). According to this curriculum, civic education topics should be integrated into all existing school subjects. The content is organized around three main areas – democracy, human rights, and active participation in the community – and educational outcomes are defined depending on the level of education.

### 3.1.1.2.
### Politics and Economy

Despite the absence of a mandatory civic education subject in primary education, the subject *Politics and Economy* has existed in secondary education for decades. The subject was introduced into the school system as early as 1991. It was conceived as a key instrument for imparting political and economic literacy to secondary school students, to develop the competences necessary for active and responsible citizenship. However, its presence in secondary schools is not universal: while it is mandatory in academic high school programs, in vocational schools it is often marginalized or completely absent. The subject curriculum was often criticized for its obsolescence, lack of contemporary and relevant content, and poor connection with the experiences and everyday life of young people. New curricula and reform interventions, such as the reform of the previously mentioned *School for Life*, have tried to modernize it. However, there are still significant differences in its implementation among different types of schools. That subject remains the closest replacement for formal civic education, but its limited number of teaching hours and uneven quality of implementation make it challenging to achieve that objective. The situation is worsening regarding 3-year programs in vocational schools. As we will show in further analysis, *Politics and Economy* will, as a separate subject, be removed entirely from these educational programs, further reducing the scope for systematic politics education for students.

### 3.1.1.3.
### Local Practices

In the absence of comprehensive and systematic civic education in all schools, some local communities and schools have begun to develop their models of extracurricular civic education. In this context, the cities of Rijeka and Zagreb are particularly emphasized. The *Rijeka Model of Civic Education* was introduced in 2016 as an optional subject in primary schools. It was developed through cooperation between city authorities, educational experts, and civil society organizations. The curriculum of the *Rijeka Model* is based on the themes of active citizenship, human rights, social justice, volunteering, and sustainable development. The model proved to be very successful, and its successful implementation encouraged other cities to introduce similar programs. Among them is Zagreb, which started implementing extracurricular civic education in primary schools in 2021.

At the same time, civil society organizations such as the *Forum for Freedom in Education* and the *Centre for Peace Studies* have developed manuals and guides aimed at schools and teachers to compensate for the institutional lack of support in this area. (Forum for Freedom in Education, 2021; Centre for Peace studies, 2021).

### 3.1.1.4.
### Conclusions

The history of civic education in Croatia reflects a broader social context in which traditional educational paradigms constantly clash with modern requirements for inclusiveness, participation, and modernization of education. Unfortunately, Croatia is also one of the few European countries in which civic education is not systematically and effectively institutionalized and implemented in primary and secondary schools as of 2025. The causes of this situation are complex and multi-layered. However, previous analyses (Šalaj, 2018) indicate that the key problem lies in the lack of political will, specifically in the unwillingness of Croatian political elites to adopt decisions on the systematic and quality development and implementation of civic education programs. The lack of political will is a result of a specific understanding of politics and democracy that is widespread among Croatian political elites. Politics is understood only as a struggle to acquire power and, if successful, a struggle to maintain that power. Citizens are those whose votes are needed by politicians to achieve their goals, not active political actors who must participate in important political decisions. Therefore, politics is not understood as a collective solution to common problems in which as many citizens as possible should participate, but as a fight in which the ultimate goal and reward is to conquer power. The neglect and marginalization of civic education in the formal education system is thus not a coincidence, but the result of a conscious political decision. Such a decision by the Croatian political class reflects the existence of a vision of society, politics, and democracy in which the participation of citizens in political life is not considered important or valuable, and therefore, the preparation of young people for such participation is not deemed necessary.

In this context, local initiatives and activities of civil society organizations gain additional importance. They aim to at least partially fill the institutional gap, strengthen the competencies of young people, and initiate bottom-up changes – despite the absence of systematic state support.

**3.1.2.**
**CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS:**
**THE CURRENT SITUATION**

This chapter is based on our recent analysis (Šalaj, 2024), which showed a systematic inequality in the approach to civic education between grammar schools and vocational schools in Croatia. In addition to the compulsory subjects of *Politics and Economy* in the fourth grade, students of grammar high school also have several other socio-humanistic subjects throughout their secondary education. On the other hand, students in vocational schools typically have only one or two years of subjects, such as *Politics and Economy*, often without their integration with other curricula. This already limited space for building civic competency is further narrowed by the reform of vocational education, specifically the announced introduction of modular teaching from the 2025/2026 school year.

Civic education in vocational schools in Croatia is formally carried out as a combination of an interrelated model and a separate subject, already mentioned, called *Politics and Economy*. As pointed out earlier, the Ministry responsible for Education adopted the *Civic Education Curriculum* in 2019 as a cross-curricular subject. According to this curriculum, the content of civic education needs to be integrated into all existing school subjects. The curriculum was organized around three main areas: democracy, human rights, and active community participation. Within these areas, the content and educational outcomes vary according to the level of education and the type of program. In three-year vocational schools, the area of democracy covers topics such as power and authority, electoral systems, characteristics of democratic and non-democratic regimes, the establishment of government in the Republic of Croatia, and the institutions of the European Union. Within the area of human rights, emphasis was placed on national and international instruments for the protection of human rights, the rights of national minorities, and the system of human rights protection in Croatia. The third thematic area – active participation in the community – includes topics such as civic initiatives, community projects, the role of civil society, the activities of NGOs, and volunteering.

The second part of civic education in three-year vocational schools was conducted as a separate subject, *Politics and Economy*, which was taught with two hours per week – approximately 70 hours per year (Šalaj, 2024). As the title suggests, the subject integrates knowledge of political and economic phenomena. The primary objectives in the politics segment include acquiring knowledge of politics as a phenomenon, understanding political institutions and processes, and fostering the development of a political culture that encourages active participation in the political system. The political aspect of the subject primarily covers Croatia's constitutional and political structure, including topics such as the state, parliament, parliamentarianism, elections, and political parties.

Formally, the framework described above could suggest that the current state of civic education in vocational schools in Croatia is not particularly unfavourable. However, several studies (Šalaj, 2018, 2024) highlight significant issues and shortcomings in the implementation of civic education in schools, particularly in vocational schools. The use of the cross-curricular model faces two key challenges. The first is the limited time available for teachers to deal with civic education topics, as they focus primarily on achieving the objectives of their subject. Another issue is the lack of training for some teachers to teach topics related to human rights, democracy, and civic participation, which is why they often avoid these topics whenever possible. Furthermore, teachers often lack sufficient guidance, support, or high-quality teaching materials to integrate civic education into their work effectively. Consequently, although annual plans and programs often formally mention the inclusion of civic education elements, their actual presence in classrooms remains mostly minimal, fragmented, and symbolic. Topics such as human rights, sustainable development, active citizenship, and democratic participation are rarely addressed systematically. In addition, it is also important to consider the social dimension of the problem: vocational school students often come from economically and socially vulnerable environments, where there is a higher risk of social exclusion. Denying access to quality civic education further reinforces their marginalization. It makes it difficult for them to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for active and equal participation in a democratic society.

A particularly unfavourable development of the situation occurs with the subject *Politics and Economy*. Between our first study (Šalaj, 2024) and the second, a final decision was made regarding the adoption of new curricula for all vocational schools (Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth, 2025). The main goal of the adopted curricula is to strengthen the vocational component of education, and the changes stem from the initiative of employers' and artisans' associations. These associations advocated for a stronger orientation of vocational programs towards the specific knowledge and skills required for certain occupations, in line with labor market needs. In practice, this resulted in a reduction in the hourly rate for general education content and a parallel increase in the share of vocational subjects and professional practice. Because of this approach, *Politics and Economy* have been completely removed from the mandatory part of the curriculum of three-year vocational programs. Its contents may be included in the form of modules, which may be optional or extracurricular, depending on the decisions of the principals of individual schools. However, even in this form, there is a possibility that the module may not be offered at all. As decisions on the implementation of modules do not contain clear criteria for school principals to follow when choosing them, there is justification for concern that previously covered political topics will no longer be systematically taught in many three-year vocational schools. Such developments make access to civic education more difficult for many students, especially those who already belong to educational and socially vulnerable groups.

### 3.1.3.
### IMPLEMENTATION OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS, TEACHERS, YOUTH WORKERS, AND EXPERTS [3]

*3.1.3.1.*
*Students' Perspective*

Through the implementation of focus groups, we included 28 students from four vocational schools located in different Croatian cities: Daruvar, Rijeka, Varaždin, and Zagreb. In each school, we conducted one focus group to discuss students' understanding of politics, active citizenship, and civic education. The students expressed diverse interpretations of the term 'active citizenship'. Most commonly, they associate it with political participation, primarily voting in elections, but they also mentioned participating in protests and strikes, signing petitions, and volunteering. Some students believe that active citizenship includes obeying the law and contributing to the community. One group specifically linked the concept to their school experience, giving examples of students who actively advocate for improvements in the school environment.

The concept of civic education is understood differently among students: some associate it with the subject *Politics and Economy*, others are unsure of what the term means, while a third group, significantly, have never heard of it and do not know what it refers to. Regardless of their familiarity with the term, most students believe that topics such as politics, democracy, and civic activism are addressed inadequately or superficially in their schools.

Most students express distrust toward politicians and the political system, with some claiming that elections are often rigged and that politicians are corrupt and ineffective. Nearly all believe that they lack real political power and think that their political engagement cannot lead to meaningful change. Nevertheless, some students expressed a desire to learn about ways—specifically, concrete actions—through which they could participate in political processes even before reaching adulthood. They are also aware of the potential power of collective, group action, and particularly recognize the important role of social media in political engagement.

Most students are not interested in civic education as it is currently implemented in vocational schools, which they generally equate, as previously mentioned, with the subject *Politics and Economy*. They consider the subject in its current form to be overly theoretical, boring, and disconnected from real life. They express a desire to learn about these topics through practical experience and everyday examples. They listed numerous topics, methods, and activities they would like to see more often in class, and all emphasized the need for lessons that include discussions, simulations, meetings with decision-makers, and other forms of active learning. For example, some students believe that civic education should include practical life skills functional after graduation, such as writing CVs and cover letters, as well as job search skills. Others think civic education should involve field trips—such as visits to institutions like Parliament or meetings with politicians. In general, students feel that school focuses too much on the past and not enough on topics oriented toward the future and the practical aspects connected to their vocational training.

Since the respondents were students from vocational schools, it was exciting to explore their knowledge and attitudes regarding workers' rights and trade unions. Most students reported that trade unions are rarely addressed during their education. While many had heard of unions as organizations, their knowledge of specific activities remains limited. Some students recognize that unions are involved in protecting workers' rights and organizing strikes, while others are unsure about what these organizations do. Students also expressed a desire for union representatives to visit schools and share information about their rights with employers.

Among students, there is no unified opinion regarding the balance between general education and vocational subjects, nor about the organization of practical training. While some believe that the current ratio of general and vocational content is satisfactory, others would like to see an increase in the number of general education subjects. Opinions on practical training also vary. Some students express satisfaction with the current organization and their relationships with mentors. In contrast, others report that they spend most of their time on their phones during practice because they are not given enough work or tasks to complete.

[3]     We had also intended for our study to include education authorities, namely representatives of ministries of education and agencies responsible for vocational education. The idea was to gather their views and opinions on the current status of civic education in vocational schools, as well as on the activities they are undertaking in this area. Unfortunately, despite repeated attempts, the education authorities did not respond to our invitation, nor did they provide any explanation for their unwillingness to participate in our research. Perhaps this, too, is an indicator of their understanding of the importance of civic education in vocational schools.

### 3.1.3.2.
### Teachers' Perspective

To understand the attitudes of vocational schoolteachers toward civic education, we conducted focus groups in four Croatian cities: Daruvar, Rijeka, Varaždin, and Zagreb. In each city, one focus group was organized, each consisting of seven teachers. The teachers taught various general education subjects, most commonly *Politics and Economy*, *History*, *Croatian Language*, economic subjects, and foreign languages.

Teachers predominantly understand civic education as a component of schooling aimed at fostering political, financial, and media literacy, and most importantly, critical thinking. They believe that civic education should encourage students to actively participate in their communities and develop a sense of civic responsibility. Some teachers emphasize that this type of education should particularly promote acceptance of pluralism and respect for differing opinions. The teachers involved in the study implement civic education not only through their subject lessons but also through fieldwork and extracurricular activities. They particularly highlight the use of election simulations, film screenings, organizing humanitarian initiatives, and visits to institutions and businesses.

Almost all teachers who participated in the focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with the current status of civic education in vocational schools, particularly criticizing the cross-curricular implementation model. In vocational schools, this model is carried out without systematic support from the Ministry or relevant agencies, making it dependent on the personal initiative of enthusiastic teachers. As a result, many teachers formally include civic education topics in teaching documentation, although these activities are rarely, if ever, implemented in practice. Civic education, therefore, often exists in vocational schools only "on paper," while its actual presence is minimal.

In addition to the issues with the cross-curricular approach, nearly all teachers highlighted numerous other challenges in implementing civic education in vocational schools. The key shortcoming they identified is the absence of structured time allocated explicitly for civic education. Teachers emphasized that within the framework of their subjects, they do not have enough time to systematically and effectively address civic education topics. This is further compounded by the lack of teaching materials, especially textbooks, that teachers could use. Some of the challenges are also related to the students themselves, many of whom are not motivated to engage in civic education topics and tend to show disinterest in politics and political processes. Some students believe that this content is not relevant to them because they are eager to enter the labor market as soon as possible and start earning a salary. Additionally, teachers reported that some students, clearly influenced by other socialization agents, express xenophobic and racist attitudes.

Furthermore, teachers note that in vocational schools, there is a prevailing attitude among students—and even among some teachers—that social sciences and humanities subjects are less important and should not receive too much attention. Some teachers emphasize that future research should also include vocational subject teachers to gain insight into their views on civic education. Teachers who currently implement civic education also highlight the issue of insufficient financial resources for organizing field trips and extracurricular activities. Some teachers commented on the upcoming vocational curriculum reform, expressing concern about the reduction in time allocated to general education content. They believe that the goal of such reform is to accelerate students' entry into the labor market, at the expense of the socio-cultural function of education as well as the quality of vocational training. According to some teachers, this reflects a fundamentally flawed educational paradigm—one that exclusively promotes the ethic of individual achievement among students while neglecting the values of active community participation and solidarity.

Although they acknowledged that most students are not particularly interested in civic education, some teachers noted that students respond more positively when the content is presented in an interactive and life-relevant way. They especially emphasized the importance of connecting civic education topics with students' everyday experiences, as this encourages greater engagement in the classroom.

Teachers provided numerous suggestions and recommendations for improving the quality of civic education implementation in vocational schools. Almost all agreed that a separate subject should be introduced, with clearly defined goals, content, and teaching materials. Furthermore, continuous support for teacher professional development is essential, both in terms of content and pedagogical approaches. It is essential to consider the unique characteristics of vocational schools and develop methods that make civic education relevant to their students. Teachers particularly emphasize the importance of practical work and linking topics to students' real-life situations. School-based civic education should be rooted in the local community, that is, connected with the activities of public institutions as well as civil society organizations. The primary goal of all these efforts, according to the teachers, is to foster critical thinking.

Some teachers point out that, due to the lack of support from educational authorities for continuous professional development, they participate in training sessions organized by civil society organizations.

### 3.1.3.3.
### Youth Workers' Perspective

One of the groups of participants included in our study comprises educators, mostly from civil society organizations, who provide informal civic education programs for youth. We conducted a focus group and interviews with a total of nine such educators from various associations. These youth workers have worked with students from vocational schools, and an interesting initial finding is that students from those schools often demonstrate greater enthusiasm than their peers from other types of schools. The educators attribute this to the fact that these students have significantly fewer opportunities to participate in informal civic education programs.

Based on their experience, the educators identified several topics that particularly stimulate youth interest and engagement, as well as elements that trigger resistance to the training. Topics related to human rights, especially when approached using the *living library* method and incorporating personal narratives, are especially motivating. Ecology and climate change, volunteering, and political themes introduced through simulation methods also generate high levels of enthusiasm. They emphasize that situations where students themselves design and carry out activities in their community are particularly empowering. In contrast, the educators note that traditional, lecture-based approaches frequently provoke resistance and disinterest among young participants.

Almost all educators collaborated with schools during the implementation of their programs, most often through project partnerships or direct invitations from teachers. Through this cooperation, they identified several challenges hindering more effective collaboration, which appear on three levels: students, teachers, and the education system. Among some students, there is a reluctance to engage in open and critical discussions on specific controversial topics, such as mental health or sexual orientation. As for teachers, some exhibit insufficient content knowledge, as well as limited didactic competence, when working with civic education topics. Additionally, some teachers avoid addressing sensitive issues out of fear that they might provoke dissatisfaction among parents or other staff members. At the system level, educators emphasize the complete lack of support from educational authorities, which means that civic education projects often depend on the individual enthusiasm of certain teachers. They also point out that cooperation between schools and civil society organizations is hampered by excessive bureaucratization, which discourages the development of high-quality projects and programs.

Most youth workers believe that despite the challenges described earlier, their civic programs consistently yield significant and lasting positive impact. They provide examples of students who, after participating in informal programs, have become active members or volunteers in various civil society organizations.

Youth workers believe there is significant room for improving cooperation between schools and civil society. As a key recommendation, they emphasize the need to systematically integrate civil society organizations into the public education system, particularly in civic education, to establish a permanent framework for ongoing collaboration. They argue that civil society organizations would bring more practical and participatory teaching methods into the classroom. However, they stress that such a shift first requires formal recognition of the importance of civic education by educational authorities. Interestingly, some educators note that the term *građanski odgoj (civic education)* carries significant political and ideological weight in the Croatian context, being predominantly associated with left-wing political ideologies. For this reason, they suggest it may be necessary to consider using a different name to denote this educational field.

### 3.1.3.4.
### Experts' Perspective

One of the perspectives we decided to include was that of experts, so we conducted structured interviews with four experts. Three of them are academics from universities and research institutes who have conducted numerous studies in the field of civic education and youth participation and have published both academic and professional works on the topic. Additionally, all three have been involved in implementing formal and informal civic education programs for young people. The fourth expert works for a trade union that represents workers in the private sector, focusing on adult education and labor market issues.

All experts agree that civic education is a critical area of the educational system, through which students should internalize the values of active citizenship, solidarity, and a willingness to address societal problems collaboratively. They also believe that civic education should be a key element in modernizing the Croatian education system by linking it to current social and political developments. An essential component of such education would also be preparing students to navigate the labor market, particularly by helping them understand their rights and opportunities as future workers.

All interviewed experts are familiar with the current cross-curricular model of civic education implementation in Croatian schools and simultaneously express the view that civic education exists primarily on a declarative level. In fact, it is rarely practiced. They assess the situation in vocational schools particularly negatively. Some of the challenges—such as insufficient class time, lack of teaching materials, and limited institutional support—are shared with other types of secondary schools, but vocational schools face additional difficulties. For instance, most teachers expected to deliver civic education in vocational schools did not have any exposure to these topics during their initial university education and therefore do not feel sufficiently competent to teach them. Furthermore, the experts note that civic education is often perceived in vocational schools as less valuable or even unimportant. One expert noted

that a significant number of vocational school principals do not consider civic education necessary or relevant for their students. Some principals view civic education as a potentially controversial topic that could lead to ideological conflicts and therefore see it as an unnecessary burden.

All the issues mentioned lead to a situation in which vocational school students are being prepared more to become obedient workers rather than active citizens. Vocational schools tend to foster a culture of submissiveness and compliance, rather than a democratic political culture grounded in civic participation and critical reflection on social and political processes. One expert emphasized that Croatian vocational schools today are primarily sites for the 'production' of workers, not citizens.

The recently adopted vocational education reforms are viewed by experts as poorly prepared, as trade unions were excluded from the process. At the same time, the leading voices came from employers' and artisans' associations. The expert employed by a trade union emphasizes that students know very little about trade unions and workers' rights. She notes that trade unions have developed educational workshops and materials, but neither the educational authorities nor the schools themselves have shown interest in integrating them into the curriculum. According to her, the reform was a missed opportunity to incorporate the topic of workers' rights into vocational school curricula.

All interviewed experts are highly skeptical—at least in the short- and medium-term perspective. They agree that the fundamental precondition for meaningful progress is the existence of a political leadership that recognizes the importance of civic education and actively supports its effective implementation. If such a government were to emerge, the first step would be to clearly define the goals and model of civic education and implement it as a standalone subject in all vocational schools. At the same time, it would be necessary to ensure high-quality initial teacher education and ongoing professional development. Experts particularly emphasize the importance of the methods used in vocational schools, stressing that civic education must be closely connected to students' current challenges, problems, and frustrations, that is, to their real lives. The goal of civic education is not merely to cover theoretical topics, but to demonstrate to students that concrete problems can be addressed through thoughtful social and political engagement.

## 3.2.

# ROMANIA

### 3.2.1.
### THE HISTORY OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education plays a crucial role in shaping active, informed, and responsible citizens within a democratic society. In Romania, the development of civic education has been closely linked to the transition from a communist regime to democracy, which began in the 1990s. We will trace the evolution of civic education within the public education system, from the early stages of the democratic transition to the present day, examining its implementation at both primary and secondary levels of education.

### 3.2.1.1.
### *Pre-1990 and 1990*

During the communist regime, civic education was constructed as a form of ideological education and served as a tool for mass indoctrination. At least three subjects included in the Romanian communist schooling curriculum were exclusively ideologically based, namely *Constitution* (in the 7th grade), *Social-Political Education* (in the 10th grade), and *Political Education* (one hour every two weeks, for all students ranging from 5th to 12th grades). Consequently, after the 1989 revolution, the approach to teaching civics had to be updated to correspond to and support the country's transition to a democratic regime (Paunescu & Alexandrescu, 2009).

Following the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship and the collapse of the communist regime, the ideological content rooted in communism was removed from the Romanian education system. Beginning as early as February 1990, subjects such as *Civic education, Economics, Socio-political studies, Political economy*, and *Philosophy* were replaced with courses focused on democratic culture, which served as an introduction to the principles and challenges of a democratic political system (Bunescu et al., 1999).

However, for several years after the 1989 regime change, old communist-era history textbooks continued to be used, albeit with overtly political content removed. *Civic education* was formally introduced in primary and secondary schools in 1992, mainly due to pressure from anticommunist civil society. These groups advocated for the democratic education of young people, aiming to shape a generation of citizens capable of distancing themselves from the communist legacy that still loomed over Romanian society. Despite the inclusion of civic education in the curriculum, there were initially no dedicated textbooks (Rusu, 2019).

### 3.2.1.2.
### *1995-1998*

Following the passage of a new *Law of Education* in 1995, Romania's educational reforms were in full swing. One of the aims of the reform was to educate young people by fostering respect for human rights and freedoms, cultivating a sense of dignity and tolerance, promoting free exchange of opinions, and developing sensitivity to human problems, as well as ethical, civic, and religious values (Bunescu et al., 1999).

*Civic education* became a formal part of the compulsory eight-year curriculum in 1997, being introduced to primary education as well. It is now taught in grades 3-4 and 7-8, with one hour per week (36 hours per year). The content focused on democratic institutions and principles, including rights and responsibilities, the functions of government branches, public administration, and the legal system. Core concepts included national identity, public welfare, patriotism, and Romanian unity (Cosma, 1994, p. 83). However, teaching methods often prioritize cognitive objectives and expository techniques, with limited focus on emotional or ethical development. (Bunescu et al., 1999).

In 1998, a comprehensive education reform further restructured the national curriculum and liberalized the schoolbook market by introducing alternative textbooks (Ministerul Educației Naționale, 1998). As a result, civic education could gradually move away from the remnants of communist-era ideology and adopt content that emphasized critical thinking, active citizenship, and democratic participation.

*Civic education* under this reform aimed to contribute to students' holistic development as active citizens, equipping them with the morals and values of a democratic society and fostering agency in their development. However, there were noticeable differences between the conceptualization and implementation of these concepts. Traditional teaching strategies still predominated over more modern ones, negatively impacting curriculum implementation. Teachers were not sufficiently prepared for the new approach, which led to the subject of *Civic education* maintaining a relatively

low status. Consequently, it was sometimes taught by teachers from other specializations to fulfill their teaching hours (Sava, Fartusnic, and Iacobescu, 2022).

### 3.2.1.3.
### 2007 - present

Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 also marked a significant shift in the approach to civic education. European integration aspirations compelled authorities to comply with European standards in all areas of interest, including education. A key development was the passing of *Ministerial Order no. 1529* on July 18, 2007, known as the *Diversity Order*, which required the inclusion of diversity-sensitive criteria in the curriculum and textbook approval protocol (Szakacs, 2016).

In 2011, the enactment of *Law No. 1/2011 on National Education* brought with it the formal adoption of eight key competencies recommended by the European Commission. Romania became one of the few EU countries to embed these competences cohesively into the national curriculum (Sava, Fartusnic, and Iacobescu, 2022). To that end, the 2011 law explicitly addressed the recognition and extension of cultural minority rights within the education system. Notably, a statement requiring schools to cultivate "love of country, the historical past and traditions of the Romanian people" was removed from the school mission statement, suggesting a move towards a more inclusive, globalizing rhetoric (Szakacs, 2016).

The year 2013 marked the initiation of the second major curriculum reform in Romania. This reform aimed to ensure competence-based education, aligning the Romanian system with evolving European developments in competence-based teaching and learning. The implementation of these changes began gradually, starting with primary education in the 2013/2014 school year.

As part of this transformation, a new framework plan for primary education was developed in 2013, employing an integrative teaching approach that focuses on achieving specific learning outcomes and developing competencies. Although the time allocated to civic education in primary school remained one hour per week under the new curriculum, the learning outcomes were significantly changed to promote this new competence-based model. (Sava, Fartusnic, and Iacobescu, 2022).

The secondary education curriculum underwent significant change starting in 2017, with disciplines related to social education being introduced to all students in grades 5 through 8. This marked a shift where, following primary education that incorporated civic education, the lower secondary level would reunite different subjects under the umbrella *Social Education* (which replaced the previous *Civic Culture* subject), aimed at consolidating social and civic competencies as part of the compulsory core curriculum. This reform embraced a broader, more differentiated, and integrative approach to civic and social competencies, aligning with the competence-based curriculum model. Within this new structure, each year of lower secondary education gained a specific thematic focus: *Critical Thinking and Human Rights* in the 5th grade, *Intercultural Education* in the 6th grade, *Education for Democratic Citizenship* in the 7th grade, and *Economic and Financial Education* in the 8th grade (Sava, Fartusnic, and Iacobescu, 2022).

### 3.2.2.
### CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: THE CURRENT SITUATION

The Romanian public education system, structured under the new *Pre-University and Higher Education Laws* (July 2023), encompasses early childhood, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, post-secondary, and higher education. Within upper secondary education, students can pursue theoretical, technological, or vocational pathways. The technological track encompasses a range of profiles, spanning electromechanics and agriculture to the food industry and media production, designed to equip students with both general and specialized skills.

Students enrolled in technological high schools represent a substantial portion of the total high school population, ranging from 40% to 46% in recent years. Meanwhile, vocational schools account for a smaller share, ranging from 6.92% to 9.31% of students.

In Romanian technological high schools, the curriculum gradually shifts focus from general theoretical education to specialized technical training. In the 9th grade, approximately 60% of classes are theoretical, covering subjects like Romanian language, mathematics, and sciences, while technical education is just beginning. By the 12th grade, technical classes account for approximately 70% of the educational content, reflecting an intensive focus on practical and specialized instruction relevant to students' chosen fields.

Despite these robust structures for technical and professional formation, the integration of civic education within vocational education is less clear-cut and often sporadic.

### 3.2.2.1.
### *Primary and Lower Secondary Levels*

*Civic education* is introduced early in the Romanian school system. At the primary school level (grades 3 and 4), it is a mandatory weekly subject focused on instilling fundamental moral and civic behaviors. Students learn about kindness, honesty, cooperation, responsibility, and respect through themes such as personal identity, social belonging, and moral values. In lower secondary education (grades V-VIII), civic education transitions into a broader social education framework. The initial years focus on social dynamics, cooperation, and societal norms. At the same time, upper grades introduce key concepts from political science and constitutional law, including the separation of powers, voting systems, and civic responsibilities. These foundational elements are crucial in cultivating democratic literacy and social responsibility among students.

### 3.2.2.2.
### *Upper Secondary Education: Gaps and Variations*

In high school, however, *Civic education* is no longer a mandatory component of the core curriculum. Instead, it becomes optional and dependent on a school's educational offer. Where implemented, the subject is usually titled *Human and Society* and allocated one hour per week. Its pedagogical aims include developing students' understanding of democracy, political institutions, civil society, and active citizenship. Teaching methods listed in the official curriculum, such as role-play, simulation, cooperative learning, and community-based activities, are highly suitable for engaging students in real-world civic issues.

Nonetheless, the application of civic education in upper secondary schools is highly inconsistent. Whether a vocational school includes *Human and Society* in its curriculum depends largely on local decisions made by school administrations and teaching staff.

### 3.2.2.3.
### *Structural Challenges in Vocational Schools*

The orientation of vocational and technological education toward practical and technical outcomes has direct implications for the presence of civic education. Given the emphasis on professional qualifications and specialized training, general education subjects—including those in the social sciences—receive progressively less curricular time from the 9th to the 12th grade. In the final year of technical education, technical subjects can account for up to 70% of the timetable, further marginalizing general disciplines, such as civic education. Moreover, the practice-oriented nature of dual education—a growing model that includes contracts between students, educational institutions, and employers—reinforces this trend. In dual education, 24 weeks of practical training are distributed across three years, with increasing intensity in the final years (up to 72% in year three).

Another important structural barrier relates to the availability and qualifications of teaching staff. Official data on the background and specialization of civic education teachers is not publicly available. However, it is a known regulatory requirement that secondary-level educators must hold specific qualifications to teach certain subjects. Consequently, a teacher certified for middle school may not legally teach the same subject at the high school level.

In practice, this leads to a system where civic education classes, when offered, may depend more on staff availability and individual school needs rather than a coherent strategy for civic development. Teachers often juggle multiple subjects and institutions to meet teaching quotas, which can further dilute the quality and consistency of instruction in civic education.

Despite these challenges, Romanian schools do provide structured avenues for student participation in governance, which serve as an experiential form of civic education. The Student Council operates at school, county, and national levels, offering elected student representatives the opportunity to engage in dialogue with school authorities and influence decision-making.

These mechanisms provide meaningful platforms for student voice and advocacy, promoting a culture of participation and representation. However, it is important to note that the Student Council has a consultative rather than decisive role. This means that while students are invited to express opinions and make recommendations, they do not hold formal voting power or the authority to determine outcomes. A consultative role allows for dialogue and the sharing of perspectives, whereas a decisive role implies the ability to shape or make binding decisions directly. As a result, the effectiveness of these councils in fostering civic competence depends not only on the enthusiasm of students but also on the willingness of school management to consider and act upon their input in a meaningful way.

The current state of civic education in vocational schools can be characterized by three interlinked shortcomings: limited curricular presence, inconsistent implementation, and low systemic prioritization. Although the Romanian educational framework theoretically allows for civic education in upper secondary education, its presence in vocational schools is neither guaranteed nor widespread. The inclusion of the subject depends on school-level decisions, resulting in substantial disparities in access to civic education across the nation. This is particularly concerning for vocational students, who are less likely to encounter civic or social science content elsewhere in their program. The decentralized and teacher-dependent implementation of civic education exacerbates inequalities. While some vocational high schools may offer high-quality civic instruction using modern pedagogical methods, others may omit the subject entirely. Even where civic education is offered, its quality can vary greatly depending on the training and availability of teaching staff. Finally, the structural prioritization of professional and technical training over general education, especially in the context of dual education, diminishes the visibility and perceived value of civic education. Without a national mandate or more substantial policy incentives, schools often allocate time and resources elsewhere. This weakens the long-term democratic competence of vocational school graduates, many of whom enter the workforce directly after graduation and may not have the opportunity to benefit from civic learning in higher education.

### 3.2.3.
### IMPLEMENTATION OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS, TEACHERS, YOUTH WORKERS, AND EXPERTS

For this case study, we conducted discussions with students and teachers from vocational, technological, and professional schools, as well as with youth workers and domain experts.

### 3.2.3.1.
### *Students' Perspective*

For this case study, we conducted a focus group and administered online surveys to 55 students from vocational schools. The views expressed by students reveal a strong desire for civic education that is practical, relevant, and engaging. Rather than focusing on abstract theory, students want to learn how society works, what their rights and responsibilities are, and how they can actively contribute to their communities. They associate civic education with everyday life skills, such as financial literacy, ethical behavior, and critical thinking, and emphasize the need for interactive methods, real-world examples, and relatable teaching. Their responses suggest that civic education, when designed meaningfully, can empower young people to become informed, responsible, and proactive citizens.

More than half of the students interviewed believed they could influence decisions. They stated they could do so at the school or community level, primarily through the student council or by engaging in discussions with teachers. Some also mentioned online petitions, surveys, and participation in debates or youth-focused events as ways to make their voices heard. Others felt they could influence the opinions of those around them, provided there was openness to dialogue.

When asked what it means to be an active citizen, students highlighted the importance of involvement in the community and the desire to bring about change, as well as staying informed about current events and applying critical thinking. They also emphasized the value of volunteering and participating in projects and respecting the rights of others. Some also mentioned living ethically and sustainably, as well as exercising their right to vote. A few students added that being an active citizen means working and fulfilling one's daily responsibilities.

To students, civic education means acquiring a wide range of knowledge and skills. These include learning about the environment, thinking critically and responsibly, understanding financial responsibility, and being kinder and more attentive in everyday life. However, most students stated that civic education primarily involves understanding how society functions, their role within it, and their rights and responsibilities. They also associate it with learning about democracy, democratic values, and the law. Based on their responses, we can conclude that students tend to view civic education as a means to acquire practical knowledge and essential values for citizenship, rather than as a source of theoretical insights into public administration.

When asked about the main topics covered by civic education in school, more than half of the students said they could not recall the last time they studied the subject, or that it had been so long ago they no longer remembered what they had learned. Some recalled topics such as rights and responsibilities, state institutions, the Constitution, the environment, and the labor market. Several students noted that civic education was either absent from their curriculum or given low priority.

When asked what they would like to learn in a civic education class, the most common responses included financial literacy, appropriate social behavior, employee rights or labor law, and citizens' rights and obligations. Some students offered more specific ideas: one wanted to learn about online safety and data protection, while another was interested in learning how to plan and implement community projects. Two students believed that civic education should incorporate elements of critical thinking and media literacy to combat disinformation. Other suggested topics include feminism, sexual education, discrimination against minorities, extremism, voting procedures, and bullying.

Most students believe that civic education can help prepare them for the labor market—but not in the way it is currently taught in schools. Those who responded positively felt that skills such as responsibility, critical thinking, communication, understanding rights and obligations, and teamwork are valuable and necessary for employment. However, both these students and those who believed that civic education only partially—or not at all—prepares them for the labor market stressed

the need to include content on labor rights and financial responsibility better to equip them for their future roles as employees.

The majority of students were unfamiliar with the role of trade unions in protecting workers' rights but said they would have liked this topic to be explained in school. Those who were aware of trade unions described them as essential for defending employee rights and improving working conditions.

When asked how civic education could be made more attractive and relevant, students offered a wide range of thoughtful suggestions. While the proposals varied in form, they shared a common theme: a focus on real-life issues and the use of interactive learning methods. Examples of such activities included mock elections, debates, and visits to public institutions. Students also expressed interest in discussing current social issues and real-life challenges. Another idea was to organize talks with guest speakers from the media, NGOs, public administration, and trade unions. Some students suggested incorporating volunteering outside of schools, such as at animal shelters, orphanages, nursing homes, or care centers for people with disabilities. Students emphasized the importance of using real-world examples in civic education.

### 3.2.3.2.
### Teachers' Perspective

For this case study, we conducted a focus group with seven teachers and received responses from ten others through an online questionnaire. The participating teachers teach a range of subjects, including *Romanian language and literature*, *English, Art and design*, *Social studies*, *Computer science*, *Commerce*, *Marketing*, *Business administration*, *Economics*, *Mathematics*, and *Social sciences*. While the perspectives gathered are highly valuable and relevant, we acknowledge the possibility that the teachers who chose to respond may be those who are already more engaged in extracurricular activities and more interested in the topic. As such, the findings may not offer a comprehensive view of all teachers' perspectives.

When asked about their views on civic education, most teachers agreed that it is essential for shaping responsible, informed citizens, particularly in vocational schools. They highlighted its role in developing students' critical thinking, social awareness, and understanding of democratic values. Some considered that civic education is already sufficiently addressed through other subjects, such as literature or socio-human sciences. In contrast, others argued that, although necessary, it should be offered as an optional subject rather than a compulsory one.

Teachers also noted that civic education is currently underrepresented in the curriculum and often relies on individual initiative. They observed that students tend to focus on their rights while neglecting responsibilities, and stressed the need for interactive, real-life approaches that can make civic education more relevant and engaging.

Most teachers reported that they integrate civic education into their classes through discussions, debates, group projects, and volunteering activities. These approaches help students explore civic values, media literacy, rights and responsibilities, and ethical behavior. Examples include organizing debates on current topics, analyzing case studies, encouraging community involvement, and connecting literary texts to contemporary social issues.

Most teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of civic education in vocational schools. They described it as superficial, underprioritized, and lacking practical application. Many felt that the subject is treated as secondary and disconnected from students' everyday lives, with outdated materials and few interactive methods. Several respondents noted that civic education is often limited to theory, with insufficient attention paid to rights, responsibilities, and genuine civic engagement. Some also noted that students are poorly prepared and show low civic interest, which they linked to both systemic shortcomings and social media misinformation.

Several teachers highlighted that the lack of training and motivation among educators contributes to this weak implementation. While a few acknowledged isolated good practices, such as debates or volunteer activities, most felt that civic education remains underdeveloped and inconsistently delivered.

Most teachers reported that they had not received formal training in civic education, especially within the vocational track. Some had participated in media literacy courses or used resources from NGOs, but these were often accessed individually, outside the school setting. Teachers expressed a strong need for relevant training opportunities, ideally tailored to the vocational context and accompanied by practical tools.

To better integrate civic education into their teaching, teachers said they would benefit from structured lesson plans, adaptable classroom materials, examples of exercises, and interactive digital resources. They also emphasized the importance of access to participatory teaching methods (debates, simulations, project work), as well as collaboration with NGOs and public institutions. A flexible curriculum and better promotion of existing resources were also mentioned as ways to support implementation.

Teachers reported mixed experiences regarding participation in non-formal civic education projects. While several had been involved in initiatives such as Erasmus+

programs, NGO-led workshops, or civic education projects focused on human rights, others stated they had not participated but expressed interest in doing so. However, many teachers noted a lack of opportunities or institutional support for engaging in such programs.

Teachers identified several challenges in integrating civic education into their classes. The most frequently mentioned were students' lack of interest, limited background knowledge, and low motivation to engage with abstract or sensitive topics. Many students struggle to connect civic education to their daily lives, especially in vocational schools where the focus is placed on practical skills. Teachers also cited family influence, prejudices, and exposure to misinformation as barriers that shape students' attitudes and hinder critical thinking. Other challenges include outdated materials, lack of time, and difficulty in adapting content to students' diverse levels. Several teachers felt constrained by the need to remain politically neutral, noting that current regulations make them hesitant to address real-world issues, such as corruption, discrimination, or social inequality, even when these are relevant to democratic understanding.

When asked about students' reactions to civic education topics, teachers reported mixed responses. Some students are curious, engaged, and interested in issues such as human rights, freedoms, equality, and the spread of fake news. In contrast, others tend to be skeptical, passive, or resistant to ideas that challenge their beliefs learned at home. Teachers observed that students' interest increases when topics are presented interactively and linked to their personal lives – through case studies, role-playing, hands-on projects, or multimedia materials.

Teachers suggested that civic education could be significantly more relevant to students in vocational and technological schools if its content and methods were better aligned with their social, personal, and professional realities. Many emphasized the importance of connecting civic topics to students' future careers, for example, through lessons on employment rights, labor contracts, workplace ethics, safety, and the role of trade unions. Practical exercises (e.g., filing a complaint, requesting a public audience, or using civic portals) and simulations (e.g., conflict resolution, voting procedures, or budget debates) were identified as effective methods.

### 3.2.3.3.
### Youth Workers' Perspective

For this case study, we interviewed three youth workers with direct experience in delivering non-formal civic education activities, including in vocational and technological schools. Their insights highlight both the potential and the challenges of engaging students from vocational schools in civic learning processes.

All three youth workers strongly emphasized the importance of civic education in vocational schools. They noted that these students often have fewer opportunities for civic engagement and require tailored, accessible approaches that align with their backgrounds and needs. Civic education, in their view, should not be limited to formal instruction but integrated into a variety of disciplines and project-based learning formats. One youth worker emphasized that civic education should be a mandatory subject, arguing that, based on their experience, students—or young people in general — tend not to show interest in such topics until they actively participate in activities and discover their relevance.

Youth workers have implemented a diverse range of civic education activities, including debates, Kahoot quizzes, simulations, awareness campaigns, and interactive workshops on European institutions, disinformation, and youth participation. These activities often took place in the context of larger programs such as the *European Parliament Ambassador Schools (EPAS) initiative* or the *Digital Civic Incubator*.

Collaborations between youth workers and schools were described as both essential and challenging. While teachers and students are generally receptive, collaboration often depends on individual initiative and the availability of motivated school staff. Time constraints and limited human resources were among the primary barriers, as the same teachers frequently coordinated all extracurricular activities. Despite this, youth workers describe a growing openness from schools and increasing interest from students once activities are embedded into school life.

The impact of civic education initiatives was evaluated both formally and informally. Interviewees cited improvements in students' communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Some students participated in national or European competitions with civic project proposals (e.g., learning spaces, online campaigns, or immersive virtual tools), receiving awards and developing valuable skills. These experiences were seen not just as educational achievements, but also as exercises in civic agency and self-efficacy.

When asked about challenges, youth workers identified a lack of sustainable funding and institutional support as key issues. Most activities rely on voluntary effort or limited external support. Although helpful resources exist—such as those provided by Europe Direct or online platforms like learningcorner.eu—there is little structured or long-term provision for civic education in the vocational system.

To make civic education more effective, youth workers recommended increasing direct engagement between students and decision-makers (e.g., local authorities or Members of the European Parliament), which can give civic learning a stronger sense of purpose. They also emphasized the value of multidisciplinary, cross-subject approaches that integrate civic content into foreign languages, literature, science, or entrepreneurship. According to them, topics such as sustainability or active citizenship should be explored not only through traditional lessons but also through civic projects, simulations, and public events.

Interviewees also stressed the need for stronger collaboration between schools and youth organizations. Initiatives that begin with teacher training and continue with hands-on student workshops were cited as effective models. Such partnerships help bridge the gap between formal and non-formal education, reinforcing civic skills in a participatory and meaningful way.

### 3.2.3.4.
### Experts' Perspective

For this case study, we interviewed three experts with diverse backgrounds in education, public policy, and civic engagement. Their combined experience encompasses research, teaching, curriculum design, and the coordination of educational initiatives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the systemic and pedagogical challenges in civic education.

All three experts strongly emphasized the critical importance of civic education, particularly in vocational and technological schools. One expert noted that vocational students often lack meaningful exposure to civic topics, and as a result, risk being left behind in democratic participation. They described civic education as a cornerstone of a healthy democracy, essential for equipping young people with the ability to navigate adulthood, understand their rights and responsibilities, and contribute constructively to society. According to one expert, civic education should not be reduced to theoretical knowledge of institutions. However, it should aim to shape attitudes, values, and civic behaviors, especially among students who may not have access to such learning at home.

Regarding the current state of civic education, experts have identified several structural limitations. They pointed out that civic education is not included in the high school curriculum as a standalone subject, particularly in the vocational pathway. Instead, students are expected to acquire civic competencies either through a transversal approach—by integrating such themes into other subjects—or informally through teachers' attitudes and the school culture. However, as one expert highlighted, this approach is insufficient and inconsistent, especially given that civic education is often viewed as a "soft" discipline with little institutional priority.

When asked about the barriers to effective civic education, the experts identified several key issues: a lack of institutional commitment, rigid and overloaded curricula, undertrained educators, and limited access to relevant teaching materials. One expert noted that civic education often exists only when a motivated teacher makes the effort to include it, while the system itself does not incentivize or support such efforts. They also expressed concern over the quality of teaching practices, particularly in disadvantaged schools where students may already struggle with basic competencies and where civic learning is often not prioritized.

All three experts agreed that civic education should be made more relevant to the realities of vocational students. They advocated for content that addresses employment rights, workplace ethics, discrimination, financial literacy, and access to public services. One expert recommended that civic education activities simulate real-life scenarios—such as conflict resolution, community projects, or engagement with local authorities—to foster students' sense of agency. The need to connect civic topics to students' life contexts and social environments was viewed as essential.

Several suggestions were made to improve the implementation of civic education in vocational schools. Experts recommended:

- the introduction of a flexible, modular civic education curriculum tailored to the vocational context;

- investment in teacher training programs specifically focused on civic competence development;

- the promotion of school—community partnerships with NGOs, youth centers, and local government actors;

- the inclusion of participatory tools and multimedia resources that can engage students at varying levels of academic ability.

## 3.3.

# THURINGIA, GERMANY

### 3.3.1.
### THE HISTORY OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education – commonly used to describe *Politische Bildung* in German – is a fundamental component and a foundation of functioning democratic societies. According to the German *Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, or BPB),* civic education initiates and organizes educational processes that aim to help individuals understand and define their relationship to political structures and processes. The BPB was established to educate citizens about democratic principles and safeguard society against the resurgence of totalitarian ideologies. This mission aligns with the central purposes of civic education: to strengthen democracy, foster political participation, encourage critical thinking, and promote a culture of tolerance and respect.

In Germany, civic education is provided by a wide array of institutions with diverse ideological orientations, reflecting the pluralistic nature of a democratic society. While schools play a key role in the formal education system, civil society organizations have also emerged as influential actors in the field. Since the 1990s, there has been a notable increase in non-formal civic education programs, many of which are designed to engage youth, support educators, or empower marginalized groups. These programs often use interactive, participatory methods to complement the school curriculum and broaden democratic learning beyond the classroom. Together, both formal and non-formal approaches form a dynamic and evolving civic education landscape that continues to shape Germany's democratic culture.

### 3.3.1.1.
### Historical Development of Civic Education in Germany

Understanding Germany's historical context is crucial to comprehending the significance of civic education today. Following World War II, Germany was divided into two separate states: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the West and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East. The Allied powers agreed that establishing a democratic system was a fundamental objective of the occupation, although their interpretations of democracy varied.

Initially, all schools in Germany were closed, and before resuming education, teachers, curricula, and teaching materials underwent a process of denazification. Given that a significant number of teachers were members of the Nazi Party or its affiliates, this posed substantial organizational challenges. A thorough implementation of denazification would have rendered the operation of schools nearly impossible for an extended period.

Until Germany's reunification in 1990, the FRG and GDR maintained distinct education systems. Following reunification, Germany faced the challenge of harmonizing these diverse educational philosophies. The FRG had a federal, decentralized structure with a strong tradition of civic education rooted in democratic principles and critical thinking. In contrast, the GDR operated a centralized system where a socialist ideological framework shaped civic education.

This period marked a critical turning point, as reunification required a comprehensive transformation on the educational structure and curricula in the East, where the *Federal Agency for Civic Education* began to operate immediately —removing ideological content and introducing democratic citizenship education aligned with the pluralistic approach of the West, while educating the population in the new *Länder*— (Mitter & Weiß, 1993). The development of civic education in Germany since the democratic transition following reunification in the 1990s reflects an increasing emphasis on democratic values, political participation, and human rights across all levels of the education system. During this time, BPB developed new activities and services for the entire German population. Civic education was now called upon to inform and educate both parts of the population about each other, organize standard learning processes, and create a greater understanding.

Today, Germany's federal structure assigns educational responsibilities to its sixteen federal states (*Länder*), resulting in diverse curricula and education laws. Despite this diversity, the *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK)* facilitates cooperation among the states to ensure equivalent educational standards. In 2003 and 2004, the KMK aimed to standardize the federal education system by unifying competence descriptions and national standards, which are reviewed annually. These standards are subject to regular review and updates to maintain consistency and quality nationwide (Weisseno, 2016).

A cornerstone of civic education in Germany is the *Beutelsbach Consensus of 1976,* which outlines three key principles: prohibiting the overwhelming of students with opinions, ensuring controversial issues are presented as such, and empowering students to analyze political situations and influence them. This consensus continues to guide civic education, promoting critical thinking and democratic engagement.

### 3.3.1.2.
### Civic Education in the School System

Currently, Germany's education system is structured into multiple levels, beginning with early childhood education, followed by primary education (*Grundschule*), and then secondary education, which branches into various tracks, including *Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium,* and *Gesamtschule*. After completing secondary school, students can continue their education in tertiary institutions (such as universities or universities of applied science) or enter vocational education and training pathways. This multi-tiered structure has its roots in the 19th century but was firmly institutionalized in the 20th century, particularly during the development of the West German education model after World War II. The system is designed to offer differentiated educational paths based on students' interests, abilities, and career aspirations. Each level offers distinct opportunities for integrating civic education, tailored to students' age and developmental stage.

At the primary and secondary levels, civic education has long been integrated into subjects such as *Sozialkunde (Social studies), Politik (Politics),* and *Gemeinschaftskunde (Civic studies),* with variations depending on the federal state. Over time, federal education frameworks have placed increasing emphasis on the importance of developing students' democratic competencies, critical thinking, and media literacy. Particularly since the early 2000s, concerns about right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and political apathy have led to a stronger push for civic education initiatives within schools. Programs focusing on political tolerance, anti-discrimination, and democratic participation were incorporated into classroom teaching, often supported by state-level education ministries. However, according to a survey conducted by Gökbudak et al. (2022), the main subject of civic and citizenship education is not compulsory throughout lower and upper secondary education in any federal state. Whether political education is taught as a standalone subject or in combination with history, economics, law, or geography varies depending on the federal state and type of school.

In vocational education and training, civic education is more subtly integrated. However, it remains a key concern, as these types of schools often prioritize the development of practical skills associated with the focal vocation. In contrast, political education is usually associated with concepts and theory (Rossvall & Nylund, 2022). The *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)* has issued several resolutions emphasizing the responsibility of vocational schools to foster democratic awareness and social responsibility among trainees. In many vocational schools, civic education is incorporated through the subject of *Politik* or *Sozialkunde*. However, the actual implementation varies by region and institution, and it is usually limited to one hour per week. In recent years, growing attention has been paid to developing digital competences and democratic resilience among young people in vocational schools, particularly in the context of political misinformation and social polarization.

### 3.3.1.3.
### Role of Civil Society and NGOs in Civic Education

In addition to formal education, there are other informal settings where political education occurs and involves young people. Within these settings, unplanned educational and learning processes occur and are stimulated as part of self-directed learning in organizations and institutions, as well as in life contexts and activities. These include not only peer groups, clubs, or associations, but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Particularly, NGOs have played a pivotal role in advancing civic education in Germany, primarily through non-formal and extracurricular initiatives targeting youth. These organizations offer flexible, innovative programs that often reach marginalized or disengaged youth, addressing gaps in the formal education system.

One prominent example is *Schüler Helfen Leben* (SHL), Germany's largest youth-led aid organization. Established in 1992, SHL is recognized for organizing the annual *Social Day (Sozialer Tag)*, during which students across Germany work for a day and donate their earnings to support social and educational projects, particularly in Southeastern Europe and Jordan. This initiative not only fosters social responsibility and engagement among students but also provides them with practical experience of civic participation.

Moreover, recent years have seen an expansion of project-based, participatory, and experiential approaches to civic education, both within and outside schools. Initiatives focused on simulation games (e.g., youth parliaments), peer education, and digital democracy have gained traction, offering innovative ways to engage young people in civic life. These programs complement the formal education system by engaging young people in participatory and values-based learning experiences that enhance democratic resilience.

### 3.3.1.4.
### Ongoing Challenges and Recent Trends

In recent years, civic education in Germany has faced several challenges and undergone significant transformations to address the evolving socio-political landscape.

First, the resurgence of right-wing extremism and the proliferation of fake news have raised concerns about the resilience of democratic values among youth. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2018 report highlights that a significant portion of young people exhibit limited trust in democratic institutions, making them susceptible to extremist ideologies. According to the BPB, right-wing extremists have garnered increasing voter support, particularly in the eastern *Länder*. In contrast, support for right-wing extremist opinions appears to be growing within the general population, too. This underscores the urgent need to enhance media literacy within civic education, empowering students to assess information sources and resist manipulative content critically.

Another challenge is that the integration of digital tools has revolutionized civic education, introducing participatory methods such as simulation games, youth parliaments, and podcasts. These approaches foster active engagement and deepen understanding of democratic processes. The *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs* (KMK) has advocated for the incorporation of digital competencies into curricula, recognizing their role in preparing students for active citizenship in a digital age.

Lastly, Germany's increasingly diverse student population necessitates inclusive teaching strategies that address the unique experiences of migrant youth, which is a long-term priority of the BPB. Tailoring civic education to reflect diverse perspectives ensures that all students feel represented and engaged. Programs focusing on intercultural dialogue and anti-discrimination are vital in promoting social cohesion and democratic participation among all demographic groups.

**3.3.2.**
**CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS:**
**THE CURRENT SITUATION**

This section offers an overview of the current situation of civic education in vocational schools in Germany. First, it outlines the key policy framework and curricular structures that define how civic education is officially embedded in vocational training. It then examines the implementation status on the ground, drawing on recent empirical studies and reports. The chapter also identifies central barriers and challenges facing civic education in this field.

**3.3.2.1.**
*Policy and Curriculum*
*Framework*

The *Kultusministerkonferenz* (KMK) established foundational guidelines for civic education in vocational schools through its 2008 resolution. This framework requires vocational schools to incorporate civic education within the subject area of *Wirtschafts- und Sozialkunde (Economic and Social Studies),* emphasizing the development of students' abilities to participate responsibly in a democratic society. The curriculum is designed to cover topics such as economic systems, social structures, and political processes, to foster critical thinking and informed decision-making among students. In 2021, the KMK further refined this framework by introducing a competence-oriented qualification profile for the subject, emphasizing the development of students' abilities to act responsibly in both professional and societal contexts.

Education in vocational schools can be organized as either full-time or part-time courses. Full-time training in vocational schools may be supplemented with part-time training in companies or internships, providing a blend of theoretical and practical learning experiences. In contrast, part-time courses entail a consistent amount of practical work during the week, following a fixed schedule. While different professions follow distinct curricula and regulations, company-based training typically comprises approximately 60% on-the-job training. Some professions include complete school-based training in *Berufsfachschulen,* complemented by regular internships and additional practical experience.

In 2022, over 2.2 million pupils attended vocational schools nationwide, while slightly more than 900,000 pupils attended general secondary schools (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2024). This data indicates that students in vocational education constitute more than twice the number of students in general secondary schools, highlighting the significance of vocational education in Germany's educational landscape.

While the KMK provides overarching guidelines, individual federal states in Germany possess the autonomy to develop and implement their curricula. In Thuringia, this autonomy has been exercised to place significant emphasis on civic education within vocational schools. The state's educational portal provides detailed curricula for vocational institutions, aligning with the KMK's recommendations and incorporating civic education components that emphasize political structures, societal participation, and ethical considerations in professional contexts.

Political education holds a prominent position in Thuringian schools, as it is anchored in the *Thuringian School Act (Thüringer Schulgesetz)* as a fundamental democratic principle of the educational and instructional mandate. This legal foundation manifests in daily school life through a democratic teaching culture, active student participation, and diverse forms of co-determination. Students are encouraged to engage in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of responsibility and understanding of democratic principles.

### 3.3.2.2.
### Implementation in Practice and Challenges

In vocational schools, civic education is often integrated into broader subjects such as *Wirtschafts und Sozialkunde (Economic and Social Studies).* While this integration seeks to contextualize political education within the economic and societal frameworks relevant to students' professional development, it often results in the marginalization of civic topics. When economic competences are prioritized – due to their perceived relevance to the labor market – civic education may receive less attention in both curriculum design and classroom practice.

The extent and depth of civic education coverage vary significantly between institutions, mainly depending on the initiative, qualifications, and engagement of individual teachers. This variance is exacerbated by a range of systematic barriers that hinder effective implementation. These obstacles are structural, pedagogical, and ideological, and often intersect, reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

One major issue is time constraints: vocational curricula are typically tightly scheduled with a strong focus on practical and technical subjects, leaving limited room for courses perceived as "non-essential", such as political education. Then, instead of fostering democratic competencies such as critical thinking, political debate, and engagement with current events, civic education in vocational schools often focuses on value-neutral or *safe* competencies, including punctuality, responsibility, and teamwork. While these skills are important for employability, they fall short of the democratic goals outlined in policy frameworks. The pressure to avoid political controversy, particularly in politically polarized or multicultural classrooms, can lead teachers to frame civic education in vague, uncontroversial terms, thereby stripping it of its critical and participatory potential (Besand, 2014; Achour, 2019).

A second challenge involves resource limitations and structural inequality. There is often a lack of up-to-date and pedagogically relevant teaching materials explicitly tailored for vocational students. This results in a gap between the lived realities of vocational students and the civic content presented in classrooms. Teaching materials sometimes fail to address the socio-economic and political contexts familiar to these students, reducing the relevance and engagement potential of the lessons. Additionally, research consistently indicates that vocational schools serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds often offer weaker forms of civic education (Achour, 2019). In other words, schools that already possess strong resources and engaged students are more likely to offer robust civic education. In contrast, schools with fewer resources and more socioeconomically marginalized students often fail to compensate for these deficits. This reproduces rather than mitigates social inequality, as students who most need civic empowerment receive the least support.

Thirdly, insufficient teacher training is a recurring problem. Many teachers responsible for delivering civic education in vocational schools lack specialized training in political science, civic education, or related fields. This impacts the quality and depth of instruction. Moreover, many vocational educators report feeling unprepared to teach political topics, especially in ways that encourage debate, controversy, or political pluralism (Besand, 2014). In Thuringia, for example, only the University of Erfurt offers a Master of Education program designed explicitly for vocational schoolteachers. Students entering this program are expected to have already specialized in a professional area (e.g., Electrical Engineering) and ideally a general educational subject (e.g., Social Studies) during their bachelor's studies. The master's degree then focuses on didactics and educational science. While this model seeks to enhance civic education training, the program remains limited in scale and availability.

A study by Savage and Becker (2021) on vocational tracking and civic outcomes in Germany found that individuals who completed vocational education are generally less politically engaged than their peers in academic tracks. They are less likely to express interest in political issues and participate in democratic processes such as voting. This suggests a direct link between the quality of civic education and democratic participation among vocational school graduates.

### 3.3.3.
### IMPLEMENTATION OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS, TEACHERS, YOUTH WORKERS, AND EXPERTS

Understanding the implementation of civic education in vocational schools requires not only the analysis of curricula, policies, and institutional structures, but also the voices of those directly involved in or affected by these educational processes. This chapter presents insights from 12 qualitative interviews conducted with youth, adult workers, and teachers, 6 of whom hold multiple roles in areas such as NGO expertise, freelance non-formal education, and educator training. Additionally, a separate panel discussion during a conference was attended by five academic experts, who discussed the issue of political education in vocational schools. A focus discussion with four teachers, supported by an online survey (15 responses from teachers), offers a grounded perspective on the current conditions, challenges, and potentials of civic learning within the vocational education and training context. The interviews highlight the fragmentation between formal and non-formal approaches, the reliance on individual teacher initiative, and the limitations of current curricula that often fail to connect with students' lived realities, which we gathered through an online survey (26 responses from students)[4].

The perspectives of the participants provide a nuanced view of how civic education is understood, experienced, and delivered across different settings, as well as the systemic factors that enable or hinder its effective implementation. Although we had planned to include students and a broader range of professionals, time constraints made this difficult. We would have liked to incorporate more perspectives, especially those most directly affected, but engaging with them proved challenging, a difficulty that may itself reflect the current situation in vocational schools and a broader lack of interest or engagement with this topic. Including these voices remains an important goal for future research.

### 3.3.3.1.
### *Students' Perspective*

This section presents key findings from a survey conducted among students enrolled in vocational education and training programs across Thuringia. The survey aimed to assess students' perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding civic education in the context of their vocational and social realities. The findings reveal both the value students place on civic education and significant gaps in its implementation. Civic education that is contextual, participatory, and reflective of students' lived experiences appears to hold the most significant potential for impact.

Most vocational students demonstrated an understanding of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, access to education, and the right to assembly. However, gaps emerged in the knowledge of specific rights relevant to vocational training, workplace conditions, and EU citizenship. A notable number of students admitted to uncertainty, indicating that rights-based education is not sufficiently contextualized in their everyday or professional lives. Although many students believe they have some ability to influence decisions—mainly through voting, classroom representation, or informal feedback channels—there is widespread skepticism about their voices being heard in institutional contexts, particularly where hierarchical or unresponsive structures dominate. Students' understanding of active citizenship often encompasses community involvement, voting, advocating for justice, and staying informed; however, students from migrant backgrounds or those with experiences of discrimination also expressed emotional hesitation or self-doubt when engaging in political discourse.

Civic education is viewed positively when linked to practical knowledge, such as workplace rights, democratic values, or current events. However, several students voiced frustration with lessons that felt abstract or outdated. In some cases, students dismissed civic education as irrelevant, which may reflect broader disengagement from formal educational structures. While curricula often focus on the structure of political

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4    We had also intended for our study to include education authorities, namely representatives of ministries of education and agencies responsible for vocational education. The idea was to gather their views and opinions on the status of civic education in vocational schools, as well as on the activities they are undertaking in this area. Unfortunately, despite repeated attempts, the education authorities did not respond to our invitation, nor did they provide any explanation for their unwillingness to participate in our research. Perhaps this, too, is an indicator of their understanding of the importance of civic education in vocational schools.

institutions—such as the Bundestag, the EU, or electoral systems—students expressed a strong interest in including topics that directly affect their lives. These include labor rights, anti-discrimination policies, mental health awareness, taxation, and legal contracts, as well as accessible pathways to political participation.

Students expressed mixed opinions on whether civic education prepares them for the labor market. While some appreciated insights into labor law and democratic processes, others criticized the lack of practical application and called for a greater focus on critical thinking and real-world relevance. In terms of trade unions, most students had heard of them but lacked a deeper understanding of their role and function. They suggested clearer, more professional-specific education on this topic, ideally delivered through guest talks or role-playing exercises.

The school climate, as reported by students, was varied. While some felt respected and safe, others noted emotional distance, bullying (including from teachers), or a lack of openness toward diversity and critical discussion. Students offered several recommendations for improving civic education. These included the use of interactive, informal formats such as workshops, debates, and guest speakers; anchoring political discussion in real-life experience; granting students greater input into curricular design; and forging stronger links between civic education and professional identity.

Overall, students emphasized that civic education is most effective when it is relevant, participatory, and embedded in the realities of everyday life and work. Disconnection from students' identities or aspirations leads to disengagement. However, the findings also underscore the transformative potential of civic education as a tool of empowerment—particularly for students from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds—when it is aligned with the vocational and social challenges they face.

### 3.3.3.2.
### Teachers' Perspective

This section presents findings from recent qualitative data on the state of civic and political education within vocational schools in Germany. The analysis identifies significant gaps in teacher training, pedagogical approaches, and institutional support structures.

Teachers are often under-equipped, under-supported, and operating without a clear framework, despite recognizing the urgency—especially considering the rise of democratic backsliding, polarization, and disinformation. Political education in vocational schools should be reframed as a core democratic responsibility, rather than an optional add-on. This requires policy reform, structural investment, and a cultural shift within the vocational system.

Most teachers view civic and political education as fundamental to democratic development, equipping students to engage responsibly with society and the workplace. However, political education is often treated as a *soft* or supplementary subject, lacking straightforward curricular integration, fixed time slots, or institutional priority. Its implementation heavily depends on the personal commitment of individual teachers, not on a unified school-wide or policy-driven strategy. Teachers have observed that political education often feels too theoretical and disconnected from students' everyday lives and career aspirations.

Moreover, topics such as democracy and political systems are seen as important, but they need to be linked to vocational contexts (e.g., labor rights, union roles, social justice in professions). Students respond better when political topics are tied to their reality, such as employment rights, workplace ethics, or current issues in their industries.

Civic education is sometimes perceived by students as *re-education* or moralizing, especially when teachers are politically active. The rigid, efficiency-focused structure of vocational schools (described as having a *conveyor belt* logic) limit participatory, creative learning formats. A lack of student participation in school governance was identified as a significant

democratic deficit in vocational schools. Many teachers are cautious about discussing political or polarizing topics due to concerns about violating neutrality and the risk of complaints from parents, students, or political actors. Many teachers also mentioned a lack of resources, including a shortage of age-appropriate, vocational-relevant, and digital teaching materials. Additionally, there is unequal student engagement, where teachers face both highly politicized and completely disinterested students, making classroom dynamics challenging.

Despite the central role teachers play in fostering democratic competence, most educators in vocational settings report minimal formal preparation in civic education. Training opportunities—where they exist—are often voluntary, generic, and non-recurring. These gaps not only affect teacher confidence but also limit the capacity to respond to the real-world concerns of students.

Students in vocational schools display significantly greater engagement when civic topics are grounded in everyday relevance. Lessons that address lived experiences—such as wage regulations, rental rights, workplace discrimination, or digital freedoms—resonate more deeply than abstract political theories.

Barriers to engagement persist when political content is overly theoretical or fails to address students' perceived realities. Many students express a detachment from politics, which is exacerbated by limited attention spans and the prevalence of entertainment-driven digital platforms, such as TikTok and ChatGPT. There is a broad spectrum of political interest and knowledge among students, ranging from highly engaged student parliament participants to individuals who are unaware of current events, such as the Ukraine war. This discrepancy poses a significant challenge for inclusive classroom engagement and demands varied instructional strategies.

While some professional development in civic education exists, it is voluntary and lacks systemic

implementation. One teacher emphasizes the inefficacy of mandatory workshops for disinterested staff and advocates for building a motivated core team of educators. He shares real incidents of far-right symbolism among students, revealing institutional complacency and the difficulty of enforcing democratic norms.

In summary, teachers identified a clear roadmap for improving civic education in VET schools:

- *Structural integration:* Civic education must be embedded across the curriculum—not confined to *Sozialkunde (Social studies).* Themes such as democratic participation, sustainability, and workplace ethics should intersect with vocational content;

- *Vocational relevance*: Draw explicit connections between civic engagement and vocational identity, e.g., linking workplace democracy to labor rights or discussing sustainability in industry-specific contexts;

- *Empowering teachers*:
  - Provide protected time and professional development opportunities.
  - Clarify legal boundaries around neutrality and value-based education.
  - Cultivate peer learning and communities of practice;

- *Innovative pedagogies:*
  - Utilize culturally relevant digital formats, including influencer videos, memes, simulations, and case studies.
  - Leverage hybrid and online tools for flexibility and accessibility;

- *Cross-sector partnerships:*
  - Establish collaborations with NGOs, youth workers, and political foundations for co-teaching, learning labs, and project-based civic initiatives.
  - Encourage institutional partnerships with civil society organizations, guided by school leadership and supported with dedicated coordination resources.

**3.3.3.3.**
*Youth and Adult Workers' and*
*NGO Experts' Perspectives*

Youth workers and civic education facilitators also play a critical role in complementing formal civic education in vocational schools. While vocational schools often lack flexibility or depth in democratic education, non-formal educators introduce participatory formats, experiential learning, and engagement opportunities that are otherwise missing from students' everyday schooling. The interviews with youth workers and trainers offer an in-depth look into the challenges and transformative potential of non-formal civic education, particularly as it relates to vocational schools.

A recurring concern among interviewees was the difficulty of accessing vocational schools and establishing sustained cooperation. Collaboration frequently depends on a single contact person within the school — often a teacher or a social worker — who is motivated and available. However, this gateway is not always open: inquiries sometimes go unanswered, and institutional gatekeeping can prevent meaningful engagement.

The rigid structure and time constraints of vocational schools were also emphasized as significant challenges. Facilitators observed that school schedules leave little room for civic engagement and are perceived by school staff as peripheral subjects. This perception often results in workshops or visits being scheduled only when there is leftover time, such as during project weeks.

Despite these barriers, facilitators reported success with project-based and interactive methods that engage students more directly and personally. Simulation games, role-plays, outdoor pedagogy, and community-oriented workshops were highlighted as practical tools for bringing abstract civic concepts to life.

One expert described running mock crisis negotiations in which students were assigned political and institutional roles. By debating real-world problems and negotiating collective decisions, students were encouraged to understand and empathize with perspectives different from their own. Others pointed to the value of experiential learning outside the classroom.

Nature-based team-building exercises and creative workshops enabled students to foster group cohesion, develop essential soft skills, and engage in reflective practice. Long-term youth work initiatives were also described as effective, particularly those that support students in implementing small-scale civic projects.

Furthermore, interviewees emphasized that civic education should extend beyond teaching formal political knowledge to encompass personal empowerment, social engagement, and identity development. Students are not just future voters; in fact, they are already social actors with lived experiences of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion. Civic education, when done meaningfully, should reflect and address these realities. One facilitator recounted a situation where a student expressed feeling like "a furniture piece" in an event organized by the school for civic education — a token presence rather than an active participant. In contrast, civic education programs rooted in dialogue and recognition helped such students feel seen and valued. Safe, inclusive spaces created through non-formal education allowed for the expression of personal stories and identities that are often marginalized in traditional classroom settings.

The interviews also revealed ongoing tensions between non-formal educational methods and the structure of formal schooling. Facilitators frequently expressed frustration with the rigidity of vocational schools and the high emphasis placed on academic performance and grades. Students often carry anxieties into workshops, shaped by years of schooling that prioritize correctness over exploration and experimentation. This makes them hesitant to take risks or express uncertainty —even in open, non-graded settings.

All facilitators shared concerns about the precarious and short-term nature of their work. Most non-formal civic education initiatives rely on temporary project funding, often through EU programs such as Erasmus+, or on support from local governments and foundations.

These projects may last only a few weeks or months, limiting their ability to foster long-term change.

Additionally, facilitators are often freelance educators or work for small NGOs with limited administrative capacity. They must continually reapply for funding, adapt to shifting priorities, and manage programs with minimal financial or institutional support. The absence of follow-up or continuity was cited as a significant issue. While some schools welcome return visits, many lack the staff, interest, or funding to maintain relationships with external educators. Without a clear institutional framework, non-formal civic education remains fragmented and fragile.

In conclusion, the perspectives of youth workers and facilitators illuminate both the value and vulnerability of civic education outside traditional schooling. These educators employ dynamic methods, foster inclusive environments, and provide students with practical experiences of democratic life. However, their efforts are often constrained by limited access, lack of funding, and systemic incompatibility with the structures of vocational education.

### 3.3.3.4.
### Experts' Perspective

During the panel discussion, academic experts emphasized that political education in vocational schools is urgently needed and currently underdeveloped. The experts frame this through four key deficit perspectives, each pointing to systemic gaps in curriculum, teacher training, and implementation.

*Political education as a firefighting measure.* In many vocational and secondary schools, political education is often treated as a reactive tool, implemented only when problematic behaviors such as right-wing extremism or anti-democratic expressions emerge. Schools tend to respond with isolated workshops or short-term interventions, expecting immediate resolution of deeply rooted issues. This approach is fundamentally insufficient. Short-term interventions may raise awareness temporarily, but do not equip schools or students with the competencies needed for long-term democratic engagement. There is a critical need for political education to be integrated into a school's long-term organizational development strategy. Policy frameworks must support schools in building inclusive cultures, encouraging student participation, and reinforcing democratic values continuously, rather than reacting to them.

*False separation of political and professional education.* In the landscape of vocational education and training, a long-standing myth persists that vocational and political education are distinct and separable domains. This perception underestimates the inherent political dimensions of professional life and training. Contrary to this separation, professional identity is profoundly shaped by political, societal, and ethical contexts. For instance, a car mechanic's role today increasingly intersects with environmental legislation, sustainability standards, and regulatory compliance—clearly, these are political and societal issues. Thus, vocational tasks are not politically neutral; they are embedded in broader policy frameworks that govern working conditions, industry norms, and civic responsibilities. Although policy documents, such as those issued by the *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)*, explicitly advocate for the integration of civic education into vocational curricula, the reality within classrooms often falls short of these ambitions. Learning materials and teaching methodologies largely neglect this holistic integration, treating political education as a separate or optional add-on rather than a core component of professional competence. Bridging the false divide between vocational and political education is essential to preparing socially responsible professionals. Proper integration requires not only policy support but also curricular innovation, teacher training, and the development of interdisciplinary teaching materials that align political learning with vocational realities.

*Lack of expertise and resources for implementation.* A persistent barrier to effective political education in vocational schools is the lack of subject-specific expertise and pedagogical confidence among teaching staff. Many educators, particularly those teaching outside their primary discipline, resort to general knowledge sources—such as news media—rather than structured, didactic approaches. This results in a superficial treatment of political content, undermining the depth and relevance of civic learning.

*Misconception that vocational students are not interested in politics.* A prevailing misconception in educational discourse is that students in vocational education and training lack interest in politics. However, empirical research contradicts this narrative, indicating that young adults—particularly male students in vocational settings—often exhibit heightened political curiosity during key transitional periods, such as entering the workforce. Sociological frameworks, including role theory and developmental psychology, underscore this stage as pivotal for political socialization. Therefore, civic education in vocational schools serves not only a formative but also a compensatory function, aiming to address systemic inequalities and foster democratic engagement among students who are frequently marginalized in institutional settings. Crucially, failure to engage this demographic during their vocational training risks missing the last effective window for political education, potentially reinforcing long-term democratic disengagement.

**4**

# DISCUSSION

In this section, we first summarize the key insights from the three case studies. We are particularly interested in the insights of key stakeholders — students, teachers, youth workers, and experts — regarding the state of civic education in vocational schools in the countries we have analyzed.

We begin with Croatia, presenting several key insights. Overall, the analysis reveals a systemic gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Across all groups, there is a consensus that civic education is of high importance for fostering active citizenship and critical thinking; yet its current implementation remains largely nominal, fragmented, and dependent on the initiative of individual educators.

In addition to this general assessment, we also provide several more specific insights. First, all stakeholders, including students, view the primary goal of civic education as the promotion and development of critical thinking skills and political participation. Second, teachers, experts, and youth workers believe that civic education is critical, both for the personal development of students and for building a democratic political culture, which is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of democracy. Third, although civic education formally exists in vocational schools, it is rarely implemented in practice. Experts deliver the most critical assessment, warning that vocational schools are increasingly oriented toward producing compliant workers rather than active citizens. They view recent vocational education reforms as a missed opportunity to embed civic competencies and workplace rights into the curriculum. Fourth, students' attitudes toward civic education are not uniform. On the one hand, they are dissatisfied with its current implementation, noting that the cross-curricular approach is unfamiliar to them and that the subject of *Politics and Economy* is unengaging. However, students simultaneously express interest in a form of civic education that would be grounded in their real-life experiences. Additionally, they show interest in learning concrete methods of collective action through civic education. Many also emphasize the importance of integrating practical skills relevant to the labor market, including workers' rights, trade union functions, and employment preparation. Fifth, almost all teachers, experts, and youth workers believe that systematic reform is necessary to improve civic education within the education system, particularly in vocational schools. These stakeholders also emphasize that the existence of political will is a fundamental prerequisite for such a reform. Among

specific recommendations, they emphasize that civic education should be implemented as a standalone subject, with clearly defined goals, a well-defined curriculum, and ongoing teacher training. Sixth, alongside the systematic introduction of civic education, it is necessary to establish a high-quality system of initial teacher education, as well as a system of continuous professional development for teachers who will deliver civic education. Finally, all stakeholders emphasized the importance of using participatory teaching methods, also highlighting the need for a more systematic involvement of civil society organizations in implementing school-based civic education.

Overall, the Croatian case underscores that without a clearly defined, well-supported, and mandatory civic education program—rooted in the realities of vocational students and linked to their social and professional futures—efforts to promote democratic participation and civic responsibility will remain superficial. The alignment of political commitment, teacher preparation, and participatory pedagogies emerges as the central condition for meaningful reform.

The analysis of civic education in Romanian vocational schools reveals a consistent call for a more practical, engaging, and systematically integrated approach to civic education. Across all four target groups, a common and widely agreed-upon conclusion emerged: civic education is essential—not only in academic high schools, but equally within the vocational schools. Across all groups, there is a consensus that the current provision is insufficient—both in terms of frequency and depth—and that its potential to prepare students for active democratic participation and the labor market remains largely unrealized.

Students express a strong desire for civic education that goes beyond abstract theory, focusing instead on real-life applications such as financial literacy, labor rights, ethical conduct, critical thinking, and community involvement. They value interactive formats—such as debates, simulations, mock elections, and guest talks—and want the curriculum to reflect pressing social issues, including sustainability, online safety, and media literacy. Many associate civic education with empowerment and

the ability to influence decisions in school and local communities. Teachers acknowledge the importance of civic education for fostering informed, responsible citizens, yet describe its current implementation as fragmented, superficial, and often reliant on individual initiative. They point to systemic challenges—overloaded curricula, lack of dedicated time, outdated materials, and insufficient training—as well as students' limited motivation and exposure to misinformation. Many recommend aligning civic content with vocational realities, integrating workplace rights, ethics, and participatory skills, supported by accessible teaching resources and stronger institutional backing. Youth workers emphasize the transformative potential of non-formal approaches, particularly for vocational students who often have limited opportunities for civic engagement. They report that hands-on activities, school–NGO partnerships, and exposure to real decision-making processes build confidence, communication skills, and a sense of agency. However, they also note that such initiatives depend on motivated staff, external funding, and institutional openness—factors that are not consistently present. Experts reinforce these observations, emphasizing that the absence of a dedicated civic education subject in the vocational track perpetuates inequality in democratic readiness. They argue for a modular, vocationally tailored curriculum; systematic teacher training; participatory pedagogies; and sustained collaboration between schools, communities, and civil society.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on the need to transform civic education in Romanian vocational schools from an underprioritized, peripheral activity into a structured, relevant, and participatory learning experience. Such reform would not only enhance students' civic competence but also contribute to social cohesion, democratic resilience, and better preparedness for both citizenship and employment in a rapidly changing society.

The analysis of civic education implementation in vocational schools in Thuringia (Germany) reveals a complex and often ambivalent picture. On one hand, civic education is formally mandated by federal and state-level frameworks, and there is a growing

recognition of its importance in preparing young people for democratic life. On the other hand, the practical realization of these goals remains precarious and uneven across institutions and regions. The perspectives gathered from students, teachers, youth workers, and experts in Thuringia reveal a civic education landscape in vocational schools marked by both untapped potential and persistent structural shortcomings. Across all stakeholder groups, there is a shared recognition of the importance of civic and political education for preparing young people to navigate not only the labor market but also their roles as active, responsible citizens. However, implementation remains inconsistent, only partly supported by the school's structure, heavily dependent on individual initiative, and too often confined to reactive, short-term measures.

Students in Thuringia generally understand core democratic rights and values; however, there are significant knowledge gaps in areas directly relevant to their vocational and professional futures, such as labor rights, anti-discrimination protections, and workplace democracy. Many express skepticisms toward institutional responsiveness, citing hierarchical structures that limit their ability to voice their concerns. They advocate for civic education to be more practical, participatory, and closely connected to real-life experiences, with a greater focus on issues such as workplace ethics, sustainability, and social justice. When such relevance is achieved, engagement rises; when absent, disconnect and disinterest set in. Teachers broadly share the view that civic and political education is essential but lament its marginal status within the vocational school curriculum. The absence of fixed time slots, relevant teaching materials, and systematic training leaves educators underprepared and over-reliant on personal motivation. Many avoid controversial topics due to perceived neutrality constraints or fear of backlash. Moreover, the prevailing *conveyor belt* logic of vocational schooling—with its emphasis on efficiency and professional output—often leaves little space for participatory, discussion-based learning. Youth workers and NGO educators fill some of these gaps through experiential, inclusive, and dialogic approaches. However, their impact is constrained by limited access to schools, rigid timetables, and precarious project-based funding. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate that when students are invited to actively shape civic initiatives—through simulations, community projects, or creative workshops—they engage more deeply and develop a stronger sense of agency. Experts warn that political education in vocational schools is too often treated as a *firefighting* measure—introduced only in response to extremism or democratic crises—rather than as a continuous, embedded part of school culture. They stress the need to dismantle the false divide between vocational and political education, integrate civic learning into professional training, and address systemic barriers such as teacher underqualification and the misconception that vocational students are politically apathetic.

In sum, civic education in Thuringia's vocational schools stands at a crossroads: its transformative potential is clear, but without systemic reform, structural integration, and sustained support for both teachers and non-formal educators, it risks remaining fragmented and marginal, missing a critical opportunity to empower a key segment of the next generation.

What are the main differences and similarities in the implementation of civic education in vocational schools across the three countries? The analysis reveals a striking convergence in challenges, despite differences in national education systems, political cultures, and institutional frameworks. In all three contexts, civic education is widely recognized by stakeholders as essential for fostering democratic competence, preparing students for active citizenship, and linking education to real-world socio-political realities. However, in each country, civic education in vocational schools remains underdeveloped, inconsistently implemented, and structurally marginal.

Across the three cases, the most consistent weakness lies in the absence of a dedicated curricular space for civic education. In Croatia and Romania, the cross-curricular model yields fragmented and superficial coverage, largely dependent on the initiative of individual teachers. In Thuringia, while *Sozialkunde* or related subjects may exist, their civic content is neither systematically integrated into vocational training nor prioritized institutionally. Teachers in all three contexts report a lack of dedicated time, relevant teaching materials, and clear pedagogical guidance. This structural marginalization often leads to civic education existing *on paper* but not in practice.

Teacher preparedness emerges as another shared barrier. In all three cases, educators often lack formal training in civic or political education, frequently feeling underqualified to address complex or sensitive topics. Professional development opportunities are sporadic, voluntary, and rarely tailored to vocational school contexts. As a result, much civic instruction relies on personal motivation rather than systemic support.

A further commonality is the vulnerability of non-formal civic education initiatives. Youth workers and NGO educators play an important complementary role—introducing participatory, experiential methods—but face similar obstacles in all three contexts: limited and irregular access to schools, rigid scheduling, bureaucratic hurdles, and precarious project-based funding. Their contributions, while often impactful, lack continuity and institutional embedding.

Students in all three countries value civic education when it is relevant, practical, and connected to their own experiences. They express interest in topics such as labor rights, anti-discrimination policies, environmental issues, and workplace democracy—areas that link civic competence with vocational identity. Conversely, overly abstract and theoretical lessons can generate disengagement. A shared theme is the perception among many students that they have limited political influence, accompanied by a distrust of political institutions. However, when civic education adopts participatory methods, such as debates, simulations, and meetings with decision-makers, students respond with greater enthusiasm and begin to see themselves as active agents. Knowledge of trade unions and workers' rights is limited across all three contexts, with students calling for more explicit, professional-specific education on these topics. In Croatia and Romania, unions are rarely addressed in school, while in Thuringia, students have only a superficial understanding of their roles.

While similarities dominate, each case presents distinct features. In Croatia, civic education faces ideological polarization, with the term itself carrying political connotations that can deter school leaders from embracing it. In Romania, civic education is often overshadowed by broader systemic challenges in the vocational sector, including outdated curricula and weak links between schools and local communities. In Thuringia, there is a notable *false separation* between vocational and political education, with experts stressing that professional training is inherently political and should not be treated as a neutral, apolitical sphere.

In Croatia, Romania, and Thuringia alike, vocational schools risk reproducing passive, compliant workers rather than cultivating active, critically engaged citizens. However, the research also demonstrates the transformative potential of civic education when it is participatory, vocationally relevant, and institutionally supported. Bridging the gap between recognition of its importance and the reality of its delivery requires systemic reform, sustained investment, and a cultural shift that places democratic competence at the heart of vocational education. Without such change, an essential opportunity to empower a significant segment of the next generation will remain unrealized.

**5**

CONCLUSION:

# FROM THE WORKSHOP TO THE BALLOT BOX: RETHINKING CIVIC EDUCATION FOR VOCATIONAL STUDENTS

This study examined the state of civic education in vocational schools across three European contexts – Croatia, Romania, and the German federal state of Thuringia – through a comparative analysis based on the insights of key stakeholders, including students, teachers, youth workers, and experts. This study aims to expand upon the analytical foundations laid in our previous study (Šalaj, 2024) by humanizing the data and foregrounding everyday experiences. The narratives reflect the complexities of implementing civic education in institutional environments shaped by time constraints, varying resource availability, and unequal access to opportunities.

The research begins with the premise that civic education is essential for cultivating active citizenship, critical thinking, and social responsibility among young people, with a particular focus on the specific challenges and opportunities within vocational education settings. The comparative examination of the three case studies reveals several recurring patterns that transcend national contexts and reflect systemic challenges in implementing civic education within vocational schools. Although civic education is formally embedded in curricula, its presence is often nominal. In practice, its delivery frequently relies on the personal dedication of individual teachers rather than on robust institutional frameworks or binding policy mandates. A further commonality is the predominance of a theoretical orientation in civic education content. Lessons frequently emphasize abstract political concepts and institutional structures, while failing to sufficiently connect these topics to the everyday experiences, social realities, and vocational contexts of students. As a result, students often struggle to perceive the relevance of civic education to their personal and professional lives, which in turn reduces their engagement and limits the transformative potential of the subject. The relationship between formal and non-formal educational sectors also emerges as a critical point of weakness. Youth workers and non-formal educators often bring dynamic, participatory, and contextually relevant methods into the civic education space, yet institutional barriers frequently constrain their capacity to contribute. Finally, across all contexts, actors identify persistent deficits in resources and teacher training. Professional development opportunities, where they exist, are often ad hoc, voluntary, and insufficiently tailored to the specific demands of civic education in vocational settings. There is a clear call for systematic, continuous, and vocationally relevant training that equips educators not only with subject knowledge but also with the pedagogical skills to make civic education engaging, participatory, and impactful.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenges facing civic education in vocational schools are deeply structural, requiring coordinated interventions at the policy, institutional, and classroom levels.

These cross-cutting challenges highlight the need for a reimagined approach to civic education in vocational schools—one that transcends symbolic inclusion in curricula toward a fully integrated, participatory, and contextually grounded practice. Addressing the identified gaps will require not only structural reforms and sustained policy commitment, but also cultural change within educational institutions to value civic education as a core component of vocational training.

Here, we present recommendations based on the insights and suggestions provided by the stakeholders involved in the research. The findings from all three countries point toward a shared set of recommendations.

First, *structural integration.* Civic education must move beyond its current peripheral status. Either as a standalone subject or through robust integration across disciplines, it requires dedicated time within the timetable, explicit learning objectives, and a coherent framework linking it to vocational competences. Curricular reforms should explicitly position civic education as a pillar of vocational training, not a competing priority.

Second, *teacher empowerment.* Teachers play a central role in the quality of civic education. A systemic approach should include initial teacher education modules on civic and political literacy, participatory methods, and conflict-sensitive facilitation. Continuous professional development should be mandatory, well-funded, and tailored to the realities of vocational schools. Peer learning networks and communities of practice can enhance sustainability and reduce isolation among motivated educators.

Third, *vocational relevance.* Civic topics should be deliberately linked to professional contexts. For example, discussions on democratic participation can be anchored in workplace decision-making, labor rights, and sustainability practices within specific industries. Partnerships with trade unions, employers, and regulatory bodies can help co-develop relevant materials and scenarios.

Fourth, *participatory methods.* Traditional lectures should be complemented with methods that foster active engagement, such as debates, role-plays, simulations, problem-solving projects, and student-led

initiatives. Field visits to institutions and opportunities to interact with decision-makers can make democratic processes tangible.

Fifth, *sustainable partnerships with civil society.* Collaboration with non-governmental organizations and youth workers should be formalized through policy frameworks and stable funding streams. Such partnerships can enrich school-based civic education with innovative methodologies and broaden students' exposure to diverse perspectives.

Sixth, *inclusion and equity.* Civic education must proactively address the needs of marginalized groups, including students from migrant or disadvantaged backgrounds. This involves creating safe spaces for dialogue, acknowledging diverse identities, and combating discrimination through both curriculum content and school culture.

Seventh, *long-term institutional commitment.* Finally, civic education should be embedded in the long-term strategic development of vocational schools and protected from political volatility. Rather than reactive *firefighting* responses, schools should cultivate a sustained democratic ethos that pervades teaching, governance, and student life.

Suppose vocational schools are to prepare young people not only for the labor market but also for democratic life. In that case, civic education must move from the margins to the very heart of vocational training. Bridging the gap between policy and practice in civic education is not just an educational challenge - it is a democratic imperative. Only through empowered teachers, engaged students, and strong cross-sector partnerships can civic education in vocational schools evolve from a nominal subject into a transformative force that equips future generations to participate fully, critically, and confidently in a democratic society.

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