

ECAS welcomes the proposal for a European Agency for Citizenship Education

A New Push for European Democracy can be successful only if the “pushers” have the capacities, abilities and capabilities to push in the right direction – towards strengthening Democracy. This is why citizenship education is so important, in its entirety and with a special emphasis on its European dimension.

ECAS believes in an inclusive, transparent, citizen-centric and democratic European Union in which citizens’ rights are at the heart of decision making at all levels and in which citizens are informed, consulted and active participants.

ECAS’ Call to EU stakeholders (2020 – 2023) includes eight proposals for initiatives to strengthen citizens' rights and foster participatory democracy, one of which asks *“the EU and national governments to invest in **formal and informal civic education** on active citizenship, democracy, European and national competencies, populism, online disinformation, EU fundamental rights and values and, especially, respect for minorities and their role in an inclusive democratic society, which is being undermined by populists”*.

With this call in mind, ECAS welcomes the proposal for an European Agency for Citizenship Education (EACE).

The following ten reasons support this call:

1. Populist Movements challenge the democratic doctrine and fundamentals of the European project.

Importance for Citizens: Many citizens lack trust in democratic systems. Consequently, some are tempted to seek “easier solutions” or to cast a “protest vote” in order to demonstrate disappointment and frustration. The results, however, could be devastating in terms of human rights’ standards, freedom of expression and other basic democratic values (examples: Hungary, Poland, USA).

The EACE could strengthen citizens’ trust in democratic systems throughout the EU.

2. The re-nationalisation of EU policies

Importance for Citizens: Decisions agreed collectively among the EU 27 are not always implemented at a national level, damaging citizens’ trust in the capacities of those who take decisions to follow up on them (for example: EU asylum and migration policy). Citizens are regularly confronted with contradictory messages at EU level and at home regarding the same issue. It is difficult to figure out what is wrong and what is right; especially if citizens do not have in-depth knowledge of how decisions are taken at the EU level and who by.

The EACE could enhance citizens’ understanding of the interplay between the EU and the member states’ roles in the EU decision-making process.

3. A general lack of knowledge about what the EU project delivers to the everyday lives of EU citizens (especially those that do not exercise their right of free movement).

Importance for Citizens: Many citizens take the achievements of the EU project for granted while only perceiving problems “created by Brussels”. BREXIT is the ultimate example of this. For the first time, many British citizens now understand that the EU is much more than a single market and that it has secured many citizens’ rights, such as consumer, passenger, environmental rights etc.

The EACE could nurture public awareness about the benefits of being a EU citizen.

4. A general lack of understanding of EU decision-making processes among many citizens.

Importance for Citizens: This has a direct impact on the expectations of citizens in terms of responsibilities and accountability. If citizens do not know who is responsible for which policies (at EU level), it may be easier for populists to successfully “blame Brussels” for joint EU decisions. The result is likely to favour populists or politicians seeking short-term gains by exploiting their fears.

The EACE could contribute to improving public awareness of how (EU) public policies are made.

5. A widespread sense that “Brussels” is too distant from the everyday concerns of EU citizens

Importance for citizens: In order to close the gap between citizens and the EU, citizens should have a much stronger sense of co-creation of EU policies and ownership over European solutions.

The EACE could raise awareness about innovative ways of citizens’ participation in EU decision-making and facilitate co-creation of policy solutions by decision-makers and citizens.

6. The fragmentation of society resulting in isolation of individuals, hostile and xenophobic attitudes towards those who live or think in a different way.

Importance for Citizens: The rule of law and the respect of minorities are fundamental principles of democratic open societies: societies that can successfully manage to integrate diversity in whatever form it comes. This is especially important for Europe in view of its demographic challenges but also in terms of value-based solidarity.

The EACE could support safeguarding the rule of law, minority rights in Europe and the values of an open society.

7. A general disappointment with democratic processes as currently practiced

Importance for Citizens: Many people have unrealistic expectations from decision-makers. Better understanding of the individual responsibilities related to active citizenship could prevent rising support for populist and anti-establishment movements.

The EACE could foster a better understanding of individual responsibilities in politics.

8. A lack of interest in traditional politics and means of participation among youth

Importance for Citizens: As a consequence, many (young) citizens refrain from established ways of political engagement and civic participation. This contributes to a wider gap between the expectations of both political leaders and young people and the political reality.

The EACE could reinforce the willingness of youth to further engage in public life by promoting innovative and novel ways of political representation and participation.

9. Selective listening and post-truth news absorption

Importance for Citizens: The so-called echo-chambers (or information bubbles) on social media create a picture of the world that the individual wants to see - one designed based on individual interests and personal choices alone. This is especially detrimental to young people for whom the primary source of information is social media.

The EACE could improve digital competencies and social media literacy among citizens.

10. Fake news: critical thinking and media literacy

Importance for Citizens: Unless recognised as such, fake news as part of propaganda can create a perception of the world which has nothing to do with reality. This feeds into the agendas of populists and extremists by increasing their support among disillusioned citizens.

The EACE could strengthen critical media consumption.