

# ENHANCING CITIZENSHIP COMPETENCES IN THE EU

online conference



# REPORT

***On 20 April 2021, ECAS and Values Unite co-hosted the online conference 'Enhancing citizenship competences in the EU'. The event served as a first step to trigger an exchange between relevant stakeholders in the field of civic education at the European level. Prior to the conference, ECAS endorsed Value Unite's mission to set up a European Agency for Citizenship Education. You can access the recording of the conference [here](#).***

**Susanne Zels**, Co-Founder and Manager of Values Unite, opened the conference and she highlighted the necessity of citizens becoming agents of European values on the ground. According to Ms Zels, actions that go against such values threaten democracy and freedom in the EU. The keynote speaker, **Themis Christophidou**, Director-General European Commission - DG for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, elaborated on the tools that the EU has at its disposal to foster citizenship competences. The keynote was followed by a panel discussion, moderated by **Assya Kavrakova**, Executive Director - ECAS. The speakers discussed how an EU value-based citizenship education could look like and they touched upon the underlying question of how EU values must be ensured: with a top-down or a bottom-up approach.

The keynote speaker, **Themis Christophidou**, stated that the European Commission is a "real partner" on the issue of civic education. She emphasised the steps that the EU has taken in this field. Ms Christophidou highlighted the timeliness of the discussion, taking place one day after the launch of the online participation platform for the Conference on the Future of Europe.

*"Education should serve as the foundation of active citizenship and democratic participation in Europe".*

Themis Christophidou



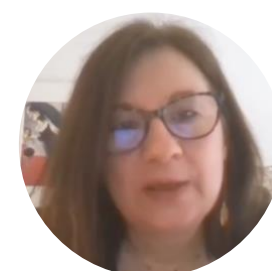
Her intervention focused on the three main actions that the EU is currently undertaking to ensure citizenship education: (1) enhancing competences of young people, (2) triggering support for the EU generally and (3) offering space for young people to act.

On the first step, she highlighted that knowledge and competences must be developed amongst European citizens. They should be able to have access to more information about the EU and how its institutions work. In this context, teacher training via Jean-Monnet actions is important to support the establishment of curricula on the EU in schools.

As a second step, she explained that citizenship education goes beyond providing information. Experiences are very important too and mobility is a great tool for promoting European integration. She pointed at the successes of the Erasmus+ program for students, but also highlighted the initiatives for schools and youth work (e.g., e-twinning).

As a third step, the speaker mentioned the importance to create spaces for young people to engage in their communities. The EU Youth Strategy aims at empowering young people to produce a positive change on the ground. Finally, Ms Christophidou remarked the importance of the EU Solidarity Corps as a key component of this strategy.

After the keynote speech, **Assya Kavrakova** took the floor as a moderator of the panel discussion. She emphasised on the importance of citizens being active and well informed. According to Ms Kavrakova, the fragmentation of societies is one of the



Assya Kavrakova

biggest challenges faced nowadays. She highlighted that European values must be universally applicable and owned by all European citizens on a daily basis.

The first panel speaker, **Domènec Ruiz Devesa**, MEP - S&D, questioned the approach to see citizenship education as a bottom-up or top-down question. He noted that, instead, both ways are needed and that unfortunately, many citizens only see the European Union as a provider of funding for projects. For this reason, he called for a change of narrative that highlights the shared values as the basis for the Union.

*“The European institutions are more legitimate to do a strong policy initiative in order to be well understood and to provide the skills to be an active citizen in the European dimension of politics and citizenship”.*

Domènec Ruiz Devesa



Mr Ruiz Devesa, shared the idea of writing a common European curriculum of citizenship education. He remarked that nothing prevents the Commission from compiling a demonstrative curriculum that could be adopted on a voluntary basis by the Member States. Finally, he called for a change of paradigm: from an exchange of best practices towards more systemic interventions. He advocates for more confidence by actors that work on this cause.

**Loránt Vincze**, MEP - EPP, opened his statement by highlighting that many Europeans did not know how to vote for European elections. A lot of young people have gaps in fundamental knowledge on political processes. According to Mr Vincze, this is a worrying trend since it makes those citizens more likely to vote for extremist parties. At the same time, citizen engagement must be taken seriously, and people must be enabled to actually trigger political change. As an example of such engagement not being rewarded, Mr Vincze pointed at the limited impact of European citizens' initiatives. He noted that the Conference on the Future of Europe must have a meaningful outcome if democracy on the EU level is to be strengthened.

*“Otherwise, we will not be able to prove to the citizens that this top-down approach that will lead the conference meets the bottom-up approach and the requests coming directly from citizens”.*

Loránt Vincze

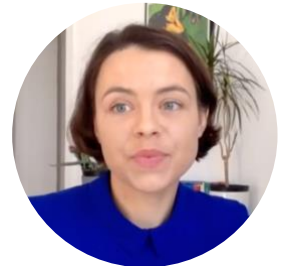


He underlined the different perspectives towards the European project in the different Member States. According to Mr Vincze, this makes the discussion on European values difficult. He explained that this there is the need of clearer explanations of European values even in the Treaties. For this reason, in his view, a clearer wording is needed in relation to the Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union as currently and the text lacks clarity.

**Susanne Zels** promoted the idea that Values Unite has put forward: the foundation of a European agency (or platform) that focuses on citizenship education. The goal would be to set up one single place that reaches out to citizens and teachers, amongst others. According to Ms Zels, equal access to citizenship education translates to equal opportunities for citizens throughout the EU.

*“But even if we have diversity, we need equality when it comes to opportunities to education and especially to citizenship education.”*

Susanne Zels



Ms Zels explained that such a platform should support and supplement what national institutions are already doing and advocated also to strengthen local initiatives. She observed that at the local level, European resources and funding for grassroots projects are important as currently, there are great differences when it comes to such opportunities between Member States.

As a final speaker on the panel, **Petar Markovic**, Policy Leader Fellow - School of Transnational Governance EUI, noted the limitations of the EU treaty on the topic as the EU has only limited competences in the area of education policy. However, there could be ways to base some actions on the current legal framework. He also pointed out that the current infrastructure of EU institutions and organisations on the ground is good and for this reason, he proposed to strengthen the existing structures.

*“The dots are there but we need to connect the dots. And I think this is the role of the agency or platform that has been envisaged.”*

Petar Markovic



As an example, he mentioned the Salto-Youth network. The initiative collects outputs and tools developed under Erasmus+ and showcases best practices. According to him, this is a great initiative. However, citizens need to be aware of the existence of similar projects to make use them. Mr Markovic concluded that we need to rethink how the existing infrastructure and resources interact and take a step away from purely top-down approaches.

Susanne Zels closed the conference mentioning how the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe could allow a wider discussion on the matter in the upcoming months.

***You can access the recording of the conference [here](#).***

## AGENDA

10.00 - 10.10

### Welcoming

Susanne Zels, Co-Founder and Manager (Values Unite)

10.10 – 10.20

### Keynote: EU citizenship education toolbox

Themis Christophidou, Director-General (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture)

10.20 – 10.25

### Opening words & introduction of the Panel

Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director (ECAS)

10.25 – 10.55

### Panel Discussion: Promoting European values: top-down or bottom-up?

*How can the EU ensure citizen ownership of European values on the local level & coherence of their interpretation all over the union through education?*

Moderation: Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director (ECAS)

- Domenec Ruiz Devesa, MEP (S&D)
- Lorànt Vincze, MEP (EPP)
- Susanne Zels, Co-Founder and Manager (Values Unite)
- Petar Markovic, Policy Leader Fellow (School of Transnational Governance, EUI)

10.55 – 11.10

### Q&A

11.10 - 11.15

### Closing

Susanne Zels, Co-Founder and Manager (Values Unite)

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## Conference Report

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