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# ETUCE

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## ETUCE's views on European Democracy Action Plan

(adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 30 July 2020)

Following the call for '[A new push for European Democracy](#)' announced by European Commission President Von der Leyen in Political Guidelines and considering the serious challenges to democratic values in Europe posed by the COVID-19 crisis, the European Commission announced the preparation of the European Democracy Action Plan. With the view to collect the views of European citizens and a wide range of stakeholders on the key issues outlined in the Action Plan's roadmap, the European Commission launched a [public consultation](#).

ETUCE\* welcomes the proposal of the European Democracy Action Plan to strengthen and protect European democracy and '*to ensure that citizens are able to participate in the democratic system through informed decision-making*'. However, the proposal seems to focus more on external threats and '*unlawful interference and manipulation*' instead of promoting such common values as **tolerance, non-discrimination, equality, solidarity, and respect for human dignity and diversity** which are the basis for a democratic society in which **every citizen's voice is heard and respected and in which every person feels included**. ETUCE believes that the focus of the Action Plan should be rather on promoting these values while taking into account the variety of political, historical, and socio-economic national contexts in Europe, and countering the spread of populism, radicalisation, xenophobia, stereotypes and extremist attacks that are on the rise in today's Europe. It is also important to address the increasing sense of isolation and disconnection that many people in Europe experience today. The main threat to political systems in Europe is not the external manipulation and interference, but rather citizens' distrust in governments, socio-economic inequalities, in particular, unequal access to education, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and a prevailing individualistic approach at the expense of a collective one.

ETUCE believes that **education plays a crucial role in preparing open-minded, critical-thinking, reflective and active citizens who care about their society, the world and environment they live in, and future generations**.<sup>1</sup> Education is also key to **providing a sense of belonging and opportunities for active participation for all learners, especially for those disadvantaged, marginalised or have special needs**. Therefore, while we appreciate the fact that education for active citizenship and media literacy is mentioned in the roadmap of the European Democracy Action Plan, we believe that **education should take a much more prominent and multi-dimensional place** in the future European strategy on strengthening and promoting democracy. The education system is where both students and teachers can experience democracy first hand.

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<sup>1</sup> More proposals regarding promoting democratic citizenship and EU common values through education can be found in the [Joint ETUCE, EFEE and ESHA Statement on Citizenship Education and EU Common Values](#) (2018).

Even though the roadmap for the European Democracy Action Plan puts forward the support for civil society regarding '*shaping the agenda and in concrete action*', it omits highlighting the importance of **involving social partners in developing and implementing the democratic structures**. Social partners play a crucial role in society and at workplaces which governments, authorities and employers must take into account and listen to. The European Democracy Action Plan will remain a mere declaration of ideas unless the European Commission **clearly supports the role of social partners** in its implementation and monitoring at all levels and in all relevant sectors, including education.

The following statement provides ETUCE's views on the role of education in regard to democratic citizenship and EU common values and important points that should be included in the European Democracy Action Plan.

1. A truly democratic society is based on the rule of law, equality and non-discrimination, respect for human dignity, diversity and human rights, tolerance, solidarity, and inclusion of every person regardless of his/her background. It functions only when its members are informed, responsible and open-minded citizens, who are aware of their rights and know that they can actively shape and change their society, and who have tools, skills, and opportunities to participate in the democratic life of their society. To prepare for this, citizens need **high quality inclusive public education that is accessible for everyone and entails as the main focus of education the integration and active participation of every person in a socially and economically diverse world**. Therefore, ETUCE demands to include a **holistic perspective on education systems** as one of the key points of the European Democracy Action Plan, while linking it to the European **Education and Training Strategy**.

2. Inclusion and equality are inherent elements of a functioning democratic society, and we are surprised to see that the roadmap of the Action Plan mentions them only in regard to access to media and gender equality. The COVID-19 crisis revealed the existing inequalities in access to quality education (e.g. digital divide, lack of assistance for students with special needs), employment (e.g. migrant workers in precarious conditions), health (e.g. gap between urban and rural areas), and many other areas. ETUCE finds it absolutely necessary to **insert inclusion and equality as one of the main dimensions of the European Democracy Action Plan**, while linking them as cross-cutting issues to other European policies including **not only the European Gender Equality Strategy but also the European Disability Strategy, the European Pact on Asylum and Migration, the European Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, the EU Framework on Roma Equality and Inclusion Strategies, and others**. Furthermore, strengthening international, national and regional programmes relating to **mobility and exchange of teachers, academics and students** is vital to help them experience different articulations of common values such as democracy, freedom and tolerance in other learning environments and in other EU Member States.

3. A common definition and shared relevance of democratic citizenship and EU common values is particularly challenging due to the **variety of political, historical, cultural, economic, social, and linguistic national contexts in Europe**. The EU Democracy Action Plan should take into

account these various perspectives and instead of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach call for recognising particular challenges that exist in local communities in regard to these topics with the view to **addressing the needs and concerns of the local communities**. In the case of education, that means increasing attention to **community-based learning** taking into account that learning institutions are an integral part of local communities which can provide students with the **opportunities to practice their acquired social, civic and intercultural skills and find solutions that would support their communities**. It also means **respecting the academic freedom and professional autonomy** for teachers, academics and other education personnel as they are the ones who know the best the needs and challenges of their students.

4. The roadmap for the European Democracy Action Plan proposes an '*enhanced support to education for active citizenship*' which is long overdue as found by the recent [research](#) on 'Challenges and good practices related to promoting citizenship and values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education' in the framework of the ETUCE, EFEE, and ESHA [project EU CONVINC](#). **Supporting policy frameworks on democratic citizenship education do not exist in many European countries, and where they do exist, they still lack adequate resources (time, staff, financial, technical) to allow meaningful implementation.** The implementation of such policy frameworks also requires a **full commitment of all stakeholders, including education employers and school leaders** in taking up responsibilities to face the challenges identified throughout the implementation of the holistic approach to education.

5. Furthermore, **active citizenship is a transversal dimension in education** which cannot be taught only in a few subjects (e.g. only history or social sciences). It requires a clear vision of the whole education institution community, based on **democratic culture and democratic governance, safe and open learning and teaching environment, dialogue and constructive discussions, respect for the freedoms of opinion and expression, and on participatory approaches among all education actors**, including teachers, academics, other education personnel, school leaders, parents, student associations, etc. Young citizens should have opportunities to start practising their acquired social, civic, and intercultural competences in the education institutions and their local communities, to become active and responsible citizens of a democratic Europe. Education institutions need to be supported to become democratic institutions where teachers, students and other members of the school community play an active role in decision-making within their own education institution.

6. Promoting democracy and preparing active and responsible citizens through education requires well-trained and sufficiently supported teachers, academics, and other education personnel. [Studies](#) show that **education staff feel unprepared** to deliver democratic citizenship education as teaching critical thinking, dealing with controversial and sensitive issues, creating a positive and safe learning environment, and raising awareness about diversity (including diversity of opinions) are not sufficiently addressed in their initial and continuous professional development. Furthermore, despite the wide availability of materials regarding citizenship education developed by various international organisations (e.g. [Council of Europe](#)), there is a **significant lack of research-based clear guidelines, comprehensive curricula, pedagogical**

**approaches, methods and practices, and assessment frameworks** for promoting, teaching, and practicing democratic values and human rights, civic engagement, critical thinking, and a responsible use of new technologies for all teachers, academics, and other education personnel, especially at national, regional and local level. Therefore, ETUCE finds it crucial that the European Democracy Action Plan demands concrete steps from Member States in ‘enhancing support to education for active citizenship’ including the **provision of sufficient and sustainable investment in teacher initial and continuous professional development** on the variety of issues linked to democratic citizenship education, and ensuring **sufficient and up-to-date guidelines** (including competences and skills), **frameworks, and materials on democratic citizenship and human rights education**, as well as **sufficient time within the schedule and relevant professional support** for teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

7. The roadmap for the European Democracy Action Plan highlights the importance of strengthening media literacy and critical thinking. However, according to the [Eurydice report on citizenship education](#), **critical thinking does not feature very prominently in educational curricula** across educational levels in schools in Europe and therefore, requires much stronger efforts and comprehensive approach to its integration in education systems than simply ‘strengthening’. Both critical thinking and media literacy together with e-safety are parts of a more complex concept of “**digital citizenship**”, which encompasses a range of competences that harness the benefits and opportunities of the online world while building resilience to potential harms. ETUCE suggests that the European Democracy Action Plan should take into account the **large disparities in degree and relevance in digital access, media literacy, and social contexts** across European countries. Furthermore, as highlighted in the [ETUCE Statement on the EU Digital Education Action Plan](#), implementation of “digital citizenship” and ensuring that all teachers and learners benefit from digital and ICT development for their teaching and learning requires **specific training** for education workers, both initial and continuous, and the provision of the necessary **public investment for secure, quality, digital infrastructure in education institutions**.

8. We are surprised to see that the roadmap for the European Democracy Action Plan does not make any reference to **sustainable development and environmental issues**, as working in solidarity towards a more sustainable and green way of living is a significant chapter in the development of a democratic society. **Education is one of the best tools** for creating responsible and critically-thinking citizens with **awareness and understanding of the causes and consequences of climate emergency and other environmental challenges**, as well as developing the knowledge and skills needed to work on solutions for a more sustainable future. Students also need to build resilience through a digital competencies and citizenship to counteract and resist fake news regarding environmental issues.

*\*The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 132 Education Trade Unions and 11 million teachers in 51 countries of Europe. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of education trade unions.*