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Towards a European Space for Citizenship Education

Sustaining democracy through quality citizenship education

Conference Report

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Bečići, Montenegro
Hotel Mediteran

The event is organised by the Council of Europe and co-funded by Germany
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1. Executive summary

The Council of Europe, with the support of the Federal Republic of Germany, organised the conference “*Towards a European Space for Citizenship Education – Sustaining democracy through quality citizenship education*”. The event took place on 13–14 October 2025 in Bečići, Montenegro, gathering more than 60 participants from across Europe, including policymakers, educators, researchers, teacher trainers, school leaders, students, and representatives of civil society and international organisations. The Council of Europe Secretariat was represented by Villano Qiriaz, Sarah Keating, Salvador Sala, and Lejla Dervišagić.

The conference marked an important step in the *co-creation process* of the *European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE)*, a flagship initiative launched by the 46 ministers of education of the Council of Europe member States. The ESCE Working Groups presented the core components of the initiative:

1. Codification of principles of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) in a coherent, practice-oriented framework;
2. Quality assurance framework to support reflection, self-evaluation, and improvement across education systems;
3. Promotion of partnerships among policymakers, educators, and learners to translate democratic values into everyday practice.

During the thematic workshops, a diverse and representative group of participants from across Europe reviewed draft documents on the codification of principles and the framework for quality assurance. The discussions confirmed broad support for the initiative while calling for clearer language, stronger human rights references, and more practical examples in the codification framework. The quality assurance framework was welcomed as a *reflective tool* rather than an evaluative mechanism, and the need of coherence with the codification principles and feasibility of implementation was pointed out.

The second day focused on learning democracy in practice, featuring research evidence and practitioner insights. Discussions emphasised that democracy is best learned through participation, dialogue, and collaboration within schools and communities.

The conference concluded with a strong sense of shared purpose. Participants agreed that the European Space for Citizenship Education is not just a framework, but a *community of practice* grounded in cooperation, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Amid current global crises, it stands as a collective act of hope, reaffirming that the future of democracy will be shaped not only in parliaments but in classrooms, where democratic values are taught, lived, and renewed.

2. Welcome remarks

Opening the conference, Lejla **Dervišagić**, Head of the Council of Europe Programme Office in Podgorica, welcomed participants and underlined the role of the Office in putting the Council of Europe policy standards in practice and reaching out to citizens, including young people, across Montenegro.

Anđela Jakšić-Stojanović, Minister of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro, highlighted that “*democracy does not begin in parliaments but in classrooms,*” stressing that education is no longer an education policy, but our common moral and cultural project to address current challenges such as wars, disinformation, deepening inequalities and climate change.

In his address, Villano Qiriazzi, Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe, expressed appreciation to the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro for its support and to the German authorities for their continuous contribution to building the European Space for Citizenship Education. He emphasised the Council of Europe long-standing commitment to Education for Democratic Citizenship, that should be learned and practiced from an early age and informed participants that the EDC/HRE Charter and the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture serve as cornerstones for the European Space. He also introduced a new mission, not only to practice, but to innovate democracy, as the answer to the numerous crises in Europe, the decline of democratic institutions, values and principles. He introduced the aims of the ESCE and welcomed representatives from the teacher community, as they play a key role to put it in practice.

Peter Felten, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Montenegro, confirmed Germany’s support for the initiative, noting that the project is timely. He confirmed the need for a new democratic pact for Europe and the role of the Council of Europe as the leader in Europe of 75 years in democracy and human rights. Drawing on his country’s history, he underscored the importance of “*understanding how democracy works*”, and expressed confidence that the ESCE will offer guidance and common standards to strengthen democracy.

3. Introduction to the ESCE and to the conference

Opening the first thematic session, Sarah Keating, Head of the Formal and Non-Formal Education Division of the Education Department in the Council of Europe welcomed participants and expressed her appreciation for their commitment to the shared democratic mission. She emphasised that *democracy is at risk* – challenged by erosion from within, artificial intelligence, and disinformation. These factors, she underlined, have created a pressing need for renewed commitment to democratic values and education that fosters resilience, empathy, and critical thinking.

Citing recent data, Ms Keating noted that fewer than 60% of young people aged 16-26 believe that democracy is the best form of government, and that there are worrying gender differences, with more young men drawn toward extremist movements. In response, she highlighted the Council of Europe's call for a new *Democratic Pact for Europe*, which aims to shape innovative policies for a renewed democratic culture, in which education plays a decisive role.

She reminded participants that the most recent Ministerial Conference of Education Ministers adopted a forward-looking strategy on democracy through education, and pointed to the upcoming *Forum for Democracies* as a space where this dialogue would continue. "*We need to create a new narrative for Education for Democratic Citizenship*," she said, stressing that education must equip children and young people for an unpredictable future.

Salvador Sala, Head of the European Space for Citizenship Education Unit at the Education Department of the Council of Europe continued the introduction by outlining the purpose and design of the ESCE, describing it as *the new instrument* through which the Council of Europe intends to renew the democratic mission of education. "*To counter all the challenges that were mentioned*," he said, "*we need a tool that brings together principles, quality, and partnerships. This is the European Space*." He explained that the ESCE will focus on three core areas:

1. Codifying principles of education for EDC/HRE into a single, coherent framework that covers all learning contexts: formal, non-formal, vocational and early childhood;
2. Developing a framework for quality assurance to guide and support education systems in implementing these principles;
3. Promoting partnerships and cooperation, ensuring that all education actors, from policymakers to teachers and learners, can take ownership of the process.

Mr Sala highlighted that the ESCE will not simply compile existing instruments but will also introduce new principles that reflect the evolving realities of education in Europe, including the growing role of artificial intelligence, the agency of young learners, and the need to strengthen teacher empowerment, among others.

Mr Sala underlined that the ESCE aims not to compare countries or measure individuals, but to identify and share effective practices. "*Our goal is to promote plurality of experiences, self-reflection, and learning from one another*," he explained. He concluded by stressing that the next Ministerial Conference, to be held under Montenegro's Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, will focus on teachers and the renewal of their mission in democratic education. The ESCE will be formally presented there, with the ambition that it will be adopted as the new common framework for quality citizenship education across Europe.

Introducing the thematic workshops, Mr Sala noted that these sessions would be a moment to engage directly with the substance of the ESCE. He invited participants to discuss two key working documents prepared by the expert groups.

4. Thematic workshops

The procedure of the revision of both documents was planned according to the same logic. Short presentations preceded collaborative discussions organised in three parallel groups. Members of the codification and quality assurance working groups shared the roles of moderators and rapporteur. The purpose of the workshops was to gather feedback on draft documents which form the conceptual foundation of the ESCE.

4.1. Codification of principles

The first round of revisions concerned the codification of principles, which describe the Council of Europe's extensive legacy in education for democratic citizenship in a concise, coherent, and practice-oriented set of guiding principles.

Professor Gert Biesta presented the draft document and outlined its conceptual underpinnings. *"We have tried to capture what the Council of Europe has been doing for decades,"* he said, and *"to bring it together in a form that speaks to the new urgency of our times."*

The document, still in development, consists of 10 principles and combines three layers: a thematic focus, a principle statement, and a brief explanatory text. The principles are intended to be accessible and meaningful for both policymakers and practitioners. The ten principles form a complete and coherent whole, *"not a pick-and-mix menu"* but a *"package requiring collective commitment"*. *"It is a political decision to adopt them together,"* *"because together they capture the essence of democratic education."* The principles are designed to function at multiple levels:

- as support for practitioners implementing EDC in diverse educational settings;
- as a means to legitimise their work by connecting it to European democratic standards;
- as a way to protect this work in contexts where democratic education may be challenged.

Professor Biesta invited participants to reflect on key questions for the revision process:

1. Are the principles comprehensive? Do they capture what is essential, or is something missing?
2. Are they clear and usable for different audiences?
3. Are they relevant and future-proof, given the rapid technological, social, and environmental changes shaping Europe's democracies?

He asked for critical feedback to ensure that the document truly serves educators and learners across the member states and invited participants to recommend how the principles can foster plurality without fragmentation, stressing that the European Space is *"not about a single European curriculum, but about a European space where many different democratic practices can coexist."*

Participants of the workshops began with micro-discussions in groups of three to reflect on the questions before working in bigger facilitated sub-groups to develop their collective feedback. The discussions were facilitated by Nino Revishvili (Sub-group 1), Gert Biesta (Sub-group 2) and Sofia Almeida Santos (Sub-group 3).

Specific suggestions were collected in 3 working groups by Catalina Ulrich Hygum (Sub-group 1), Valeria Damiani (Sub-group 2) and Lena Gray (Sub-group 3).

Six common themes can be highlighted from the feedback:

1. Clarity of Values: The framework should explicitly reference the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its normative foundation.
2. Inclusion and Belonging: Inclusion was described as both a moral imperative and the precondition for learning democracy.
3. Educator Agency and Protection: The principles should recognise teachers as agents of democracy and ensure that education systems protect their ability to teach freely.
4. Connection to Practice: Participants called for examples, models, and narratives that illustrate how the principles translate into real educational settings.
5. Comprehensiveness and Balance: While the principles were broadly supported, participants advised simplifying and integrating some to enhance usability.
6. Plurality and Contextual Adaptation: The framework should remain flexible, allowing for diverse democratic traditions and practices while maintaining a shared foundation.

While the overall framework was considered to be timely and necessary, language was seen as accessible for policy contexts, but less so for educators and young people. Participants urged *“It is time to say that this is a right of every learner, and an obligation for every educator”*. As one participant, Liz Moorse, concluded: *“Education for democratic citizenship must mirror and match democratic life itself. Learners experience democracy when they see it, live it, and feel they belong.”*

4.2. Quality assurance

The second round of revisions concerned the Framework of Quality Assurance, which is intended to become a tool for schools, organisations and education systems to understand what is happening in their context, to reflect, and to improve.

In the introduction to the workshop, Mr Sala described the process leading to the framework's design that included revision of existing quality assurance documents, complemented by interviews with experts who had previously conducted assessments for the Council of Europe in various countries.

The resulting draft framework proposes a self-evaluation approach structured around a set of indicators. Its main purpose is not to assess student achievement, but to encourage educators

and institutions to reflect on their own practices, track progress, and share learning experiences. *“Quality assurance in EDC should work as a mirror, helping systems to see themselves, not to judge or rank, but to understand and evolve.”* Mr Sala invited participants to reflect on whether this expanded scope was feasible and realistic for member states, or whether it risked becoming too demanding. “Our aim,” he said, “is to build a process that is rigorous but achievable, meaningful but not overwhelming.”

Professor Valeria Damiani introduced the methodological tools that include questionnaires, templates for collecting good practices, focus group guides, and interview scripts. Together, they form a flexible toolkit that can be adapted to the needs and capacities of each participating country.

She explained that initial consultations with members of the Education Policy Advisors Network (EPAN) suggested allowing countries to select one level of evaluation, depending on their priorities and available resources. This flexibility would ensure broader participation, though it may lead to variations in the type and depth of information collected.

Professor Damiani acknowledged that this approach has certain limitations. The data collected will be descriptive rather than statistical, reflecting the specific contexts of each country rather than producing homogeneous or comparable results. Nevertheless, she emphasised that the process would “give voice to those directly engaged in democratic education” and generate valuable insights that could inspire and inform others. She also noted a potential risk that countries might choose to highlight only examples of excellence. While this could limit representativeness, it would still provide positive case studies for peer learning across the ESCE.

To guide the workshops, participants were invited to reflect on the key questions:

1. Is the proposed methodology feasible and appropriate for national and institutional use?
2. Are the indicators relevant for promoting self-evaluation and reflection?
3. Is anything missing?
4. What is the best way to showcase good practices? What kind of information or format would make them most useful for educators and policymakers?

Critical feedback was encouraged and the participants started with discussions in micro-groups, followed by exchange in bigger sub-groups to develop their collective feedback. The discussions were facilitated by Catalina Ulrich Hygum (Sub-group 1), Valeria Damiani (Sub-group 2) and Lena Gray (Sub-group 3).

The feedback was recorded by Gert Biesta (Sub-group 1), Nino Revishvili (Sub-group 2) and Sofia Almeida Santos (Sub-group 3). The feedback reaffirmed the value of establishing systematic mechanisms to reflect on quality in ESCE, while also pointing to key challenges in feasibility and design.

Participants agreed that evaluation criteria should directly reflect the codified principles to ensure consistency and coherence across the ESCE. At the same time, they warned that excessive flexibility could weaken the framework.

Concerns were also raised about the practical implementation of the Quality Assurance process: who would collect the data, how legitimate those actors would be, and how deep the data collection should go. Some noted that the proposed process could be time-consuming, and must remain manageable and clearly structured.

It was agreed that indicators should mirror the everyday realities of teachers, shifting from a top-down model to a bottom-up approach that captures experiences in classrooms, schools, and communities. The framework should also allow space to share not only inspiring examples but also imperfect attempts that contribute to learning and innovation.

A practical proposal was made to organise data collection on a rotating three-year cycle, with different countries starting their evaluations at different times. This would help reduce competition and foster peer learning among member states.

Participants also called for more clear and accessible language in the Quality Assurance documentation, ensuring that teachers and school leaders can readily understand and apply it in their professional contexts.

Several concrete proposals emerged from the plenary exchange:

1. Maintain coherence between principles and quality assurance.
2. Avoid excessive flexibility to prevent selective reporting.
3. Engage students and parents by inviting them to reinterpret or rewrite the principles as part of a whole-school approach.
4. Highlight the role of school leadership, encouraging management cultures that support dialogue, inclusion, and teacher agency.
5. Develop stronger communication strategies to ensure that schools, policymakers, and the wider public understand the aims and benefits of the European Space.

The discussion concluded with broad agreement that the Quality Assurance Framework should act as both a mirror and a bridge: a mirror for systems to reflect on their progress, and a bridge for renewed cooperation among member states. The next steps will involve refining the methodology, validating indicators with EPAN members, and piloting the approach in selected contexts before its formal integration into the ESCE.

5. Summary of the workshop discussions

The first day of the conference concluded with a joint plenary discussion bringing together insights from the two parallel workshops on Codification of Principles for Education for

Democratic Citizenship and Framework of Quality Assurance. Workshop rapporteurs presented highlights from their group discussions, followed by a collective exchange among participants on the main findings and next steps in shaping the ESCE. The feedback gathered during this process will inform the next revision cycle of the draft documents. Participants were invited to provide written comments to complement the oral discussions, ensuring that the final version reflects a broad range of perspectives and remains both visionary and practical.

By the end of the first day, a shared understanding was emerging of what the ESCE could represent: a collaborative, systemic effort to strengthen democratic education across Europe. Participants acknowledged that while significant work remains to communicate and refine the framework, the direction is clear. As one participant concluded: *“We are moving from ideas to systems, and this is exactly the right moment to do so.”*

6. Learning Democracy in Practice

The second day of the conference turned the focus from frameworks and principles to practice: how democracy is learned and lived in classrooms and communities. The sessions explored the ways in which educators and learners can co-create democratic experiences, moving from theory to action. It was a day rich in ideas, examples, and engaging discussions.

6.1. Insights from research and practice

The morning session opened with a presentation by Pontus Wallin, researcher and project manager at the Swedish Institute for Educational Research, who shared findings from a comprehensive systematic review on how students learn democracy. Mr Wallin combined research evidence with vivid examples from schools, demonstrating that while teachers across Europe recognise the importance of democratic education, many remain uncertain about *what* and *how* to teach. Despite the abundance of existing materials and recommendations, the translation of principles into practice remains a challenge.

Drawing from a broad evidence base, he highlighted that discussion and group work, simulations of decision-making processes, the use of current news, collaboration with local communities, and the creation of a positive classroom climate are among the most effective approaches to foster democratic learning. These methods, he noted, nurture self-efficacy, empathy, and critical reflection, which are essential competences for sustaining democracy in schools.

The presentation offered not only an analytical lens but also a source of motivation for educators, showing that if teaching is participatory and inclusive, democratic learning is possible even in constrained environments.

6.2. Responding to today's challenges

The first session was followed by a dynamic panel discussion exploring how the ESCE can respond to current priorities, expectations, and challenges. Moderated by Natia Natsvlashvili, the discussion brought together two teachers: Bryden Joy and Mirjam Haj Younes, and two students: Lauren Bond and Arno Schrooyen, who participated in a stimulating exchange of perspectives across generations. Introducing the debate, Ms Natsvlashvili referred to the ongoing discussion on current “*pluri-crisis*”, capturing the complex and interconnected challenges faced by educators and learners alike. She invited panellists to share how they navigate these realities in their daily work and studies.

The teachers reflected on the persistent tension between policy and practice. Even when sound policies exist, they noted, educators still need concrete guidance and support to know *how* to teach democracy effectively. They underlined that collaboration and learner-centred approaches are essential for meaningful and lasting democratic learning. Panellists also discussed the growing role of digital technologies and the urgent need to equip teachers with competences that help learners engage critically and safely in online spaces. Digital literacy, they agreed, has become an inseparable part of citizenship education.

The students expressed disappointment with the current state of democratic education in schools, describing it as *fragmented* or, in many cases, *absent*. Their personal engagement with democracy, they explained, began only when they joined non-formal learning initiatives and student movements, where they discovered participation, agency, and belonging. Arno Schrooyen raised a particularly poignant concern: meaningful participation often requires financial stability. For many young people, active civic engagement remains a “*luxury*” they cannot afford. This observation resonated with the teachers on the panel, who acknowledged that effective democratic education also requires time, resources, and institutional support.

The discussion that followed brought to light one of the central dilemmas for the ESCE: how to empower and protect teachers while engaging learners who may feel disappointed by democracy or focused mainly on technical or economic success.

Panellists agreed that the most effective response lies in mutual support and cooperation. As one teacher summarised, “*Collaboration does not come with a manual. It must be co-created and practiced.*” Learning from one another, the panellists concluded, remains the most powerful tool available to educators and learners alike. This conclusion strongly reaffirmed the third pillar of the ESCE – building partnerships.

The practical component of the conference ended with a shared recognition that sustaining democracy through education depends not only on frameworks and policies but on everyday practices of cooperation, reflection, and courage within schools and communities across Europe.

7. Conclusions

The conference *“Towards a European Space for Citizenship Education. Sustaining democracy through quality citizenship education”* concluded with a strong sense of shared purpose and renewed commitment. Over two days, participants examined both the conceptual foundations and the practical dimensions of democratic education, from defining common principles and quality standards to exploring the realities of teaching and learning democracy in schools.

Participants agreed that the European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE) has the potential to become not merely a policy document or a new framework, but a community of practice and a collaborative effort of educators, policymakers, and learners committed to sustaining and innovating democracy across Europe. The process of building the ESCE reflects the very principles it promotes: cooperation, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

As one of the closing reflections emphasised, it would be easy to argue that creating a European Space for Citizenship Education is impossible in times of multiple crises and polarisation. Yet, precisely because of these challenges, it becomes more necessary than ever. The ESCE represents a collective act of hope and an affirmation that democratic education can still unite, empower, and inspire.

The conference also highlighted the crucial role of teacher courage: the willingness to teach democratic values even when it is difficult, contested, or politically sensitive. Education for Democratic Citizenship remains one of the most powerful tools to sustain democracy in schools and societies.

As the event closed, participants were reminded that the future of democracy is shaped not only in parliaments but in classrooms, youth groups, and communities. As the young speaker, Lauren Bond, observed: *“If we do not teach democracy in the classroom, it will be taught on YouTube or TikTok.”* This message captured the spirit of the conference – a call to action for all those who believe that democracy must be learned, lived, and renewed, together.