

# The Influence of Citizenship Education on National Identity in the EU

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<https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.net20250103>

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationship between citizenship education and national identity within the European Union (EU), focusing on the role of education as a key agent of political socialization. Citizenship education serves a dual function: it fosters a balanced sense of national belonging grounded in democratic values, and it acts as a safeguard against extreme forms of nationalism. In an era marked by globalization, migration, and rising populist movements, citizenship education equips young people with the knowledge, skills, and civic awareness necessary to navigate both national and European identities responsibly. The research underscores the compatibility of national and pan-European identity, highlighting that individuals can simultaneously identify with their cultural heritage and shared European values such as democracy, pluralism, and human rights. This dual identification contributes to social cohesion and intercultural understanding across the EU. Citizenship education is positioned as a proactive tool in countering polarization, xenophobia, and authoritarian populism, helping learners develop critical thinking, civic responsibility, and respect for diversity. Referring to EU policy frameworks and educational practices, the paper demonstrates that effective citizenship education can mitigate societal fragmentation and foster a politically literate and engaged civil society. It provides insights into how national and European dimensions of identity can be harmonized through inclusive, values-based education. The findings aim to support educators and policymakers in enhancing citizenship education's capacity to reinforce democratic culture and sustain identity in the European context.

**Keywords:** identity, citizenship, nations and nationalism, education, EU, politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Education and educational institutions play a central role in political socialization by shaping the perception of values, ideas, and symbols, institutionalizing political roles, and contributing to the development of political culture, public opinion, and behavioral patterns in democratic societies. Within the framework of citizenship education, a key objective is the preservation and transmission of national identity - particularly in the context of the European Union, where maintaining a balance between national and European identity is of critical importance. Citizenship education not only cultivates an understanding of democratic principles and civic responsibilities, but also strengthens the sense of belonging to both the nation-state and the European community. National and European

identities need not be seen as contradictory; rather, they can be complementary, as individuals may simultaneously identify with their national heritage while embracing shared European values such as democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity. In this context, learners take their first significant steps toward civic and political participation - an outcome that can be regarded as one of the fundamental achievements of modern political culture.

This study **aims** to examine the role of education as a fundamental channel of political socialization, with a particular focus on citizenship education as a mechanism for the formation and affirmation of national identity. The analysis highlights the *dual nature* of citizenship education: on one hand, it contributes to *fostering a constructive and inclusive sense of national belonging* grounded in democratic values, civic responsibility, and social cohesion; on the other hand, it functions as a *preventive tool against the rise of extreme nationalist manifestations*, such as chauvinism, xenophobia and even neo-fascism. Situated within the broader context of European integration, the study also addresses *the compatibility and potential synergy between national and European identity*, and explores how citizenship education can promote intercultural understanding, respect for diversity, and the principles of democratic coexistence. This leads to the **sub-objectives** of the research to contribute to the ongoing discourse on identity in the EU, the importance of citizenship and to provide recommendations for educators and policymakers to enhance citizenship education in promoting harmonious identities within the EU framework. Given the evolving dynamics of national and European identities, it is imperative to examine the influence of citizenship education on national identity within the EU. Sustaining the main objective, the research investigates the role of citizenship education in shaping national identity, considering the balance between national and European dimensions, as well as it seeks to provide insights into how citizenship education can effectively navigate and contribute to the complex landscape of identity in the European Union.

National identity, characterized by shared culture, language, history, and values, plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and a sense of belonging among citizens. However, the EU's unique supranational structure introduces complexities in balancing national identities with a collective European identity. This duality presents both opportunities and challenges for citizenship education, as it must address the coexistence and potential tensions between these identities.

Citizenship education has emerged as a pivotal component of educational policies within the European Union, aiming to cultivate individuals who are not only aware of their rights and responsibilities but also actively engaged in societal and political processes. This educational focus seeks to equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and contribute to both national and European contexts (De Coster, I., et al., 2012). The Eurydice report on citizenship education reveals that EU countries incorporate citizenship education into their curricula, either as a standalone subject, part of another subject, or as a cross-curricular theme (De Coster, I., et al., 2012, p. 2).

Citizenship in liberal democracies encourages tolerance towards differing points of view, regarding it as a "defining virtue" (Fukuyama, 1992, 122, 160, 215). *Tolerance* is a fundamental human principle and right (United Nations, 1948, 1948) (European Union Charter, 2012, Art. 21, 22), and a fundamental value of the EU, along with the *pluralism* (European Union, 1992, Art. 2) enshrined in the European Union's legal and political framework. The principles of tolerance and pluralism, fundamental to democracy and European values, present challenges when interacting with civilizations that hold differing views, especially in the context of migration flows into Europe. This interaction has contributed to the resurgence of extreme nationalist sentiments within Europe over the past two decades. Such developments pose obstacles to the processes of enlargement and integration, as well as to the effective implementation of European policies. (Popova, 2016).



In the era of globalization, the nation-state is positioned at the center of contradictory processes. On one hand, it faces increasing pressure from global forces and processes, while on the other, it is called upon to meet the growing expectations of its citizens. Contemporary societies are witnessing dynamic transformations that challenge traditional models of the nation-state. Globalization, regional integration, migration crises, climate change, and the rise of nationalism and euroscepticism are simply some of the factors shaping the new challenges confronting the nation-state and national identity, as well as their interaction with the international community. This suggests examining whether education has the capacity to sustain democratic values as a means of addressing the alienation among young citizens.

The interplay between citizenship education and national identity has garnered significant attention in academic and policy-making circles. Research indicates that citizenship education can influence students' perceptions of their national identity, particularly in multicultural societies where diverse backgrounds contribute to the national fabric. For instance, studies in Sweden have explored how citizenship education addresses national identity in the context of increasing cultural diversity (Ljunggren, 2014). The NESET<sup>1</sup> report emphasizes the growing importance of the connection between identity, active citizenship, and education in EU policy discussions. Initiatives like the 2015 Paris Declaration and EU Council Recommendations aim to promote common values, inclusive education, and a European dimension in teaching (NESET, n.d.). Moreover, the EU has prioritized citizenship education as a means to foster a European dimension in national curricula, aiming to promote a sense of European identity alongside national identities. This initiative reflects the EU's commitment to encouraging active citizenship and democratic participation across member states.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of National Identity

The right of every nation to self-determination, first articulated in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (National Assembly of France, 1789, Art. 3), and later enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945, Art.1), stands as a fundamental principle of contemporary international public law. Recognizing territorial boundaries, as well as respecting the sovereignty and equality of nations as foundational tenets that preclude domination, are essential conditions for peaceful and free existence, and cooperation among nations. Nations develop as stable and enduring communities of people who share a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1991, p. 14). On this basis, national solidarity is built, along with the awareness of common national interest and identification, distinguishing each nation from other nations (Aleksandrov, 2001, pp. 264-265).

*Nationality* and *national affiliation* are typically viewed in two ways. The first represents the "objective" approach, which sees nationality as a natural fact for individuals, consisting of elements such as language, origin, etc. The second is the "subjective" approach, which regards nationality as a psychological and consciously experienced phenomenon (Blackwell, 1997, pp. 331-333). The topic of national identity concerns *national consciousness*, as for national identity to exist, it must be consciously recognized by individuals. National consciousness can be considered as a shared sense and emotional attitude among a group of people regarding their belonging to a particular nation. It is one of the first and fundamental factors in the creation of a nation and the manifestation of

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<sup>1</sup> Network of Experts working on the social dimension of Education and Training.

nationalism. National symbols, common territory and culture, shared language, history and traditions, later on strong political and educational institutions, social solidarity etc., play a particularly important role in the emergence and development of national consciousness. All these elements contribute to the formation of collective consciousness and a sense of belonging to the nation. These symbols create a feeling of “us” versus “the others”, which strengthens internal unity, fosters a sense of community and continuity, and deepens the sense of national belonging. *Provided that the national consciousness of the members of a nation weakens, the strength of the nation itself also diminishes.* National consciousness may not be an innate trait but rather something that is acquired. National identity can also be acquired, which links it to the psychological disposition of individuals.

Among all the forms of collective identity that people share today, national identity is perhaps the most fundamental and comprehensive. National identity is a driving force for both the pursuit of sovereignty and democracy, as well as authoritarian, totalitarian, and tyrannical regimes. Other forms of collective identity - such as class, gender, race, or religion - may overlap with or complement national identity, but they rarely surpass it in significance, although they are capable of influencing its direction (Smith, 2000, p. 193).

The formation of national identity is significantly influenced by factors such as the development of the printing industry, the population’s level of literacy, culture, national symbols and traditions, living conditions, and the social opportunities and prospects that the nation presents to individuals. Anthony Smith defines the core elements that shape national identity as follows: 1) A historic territory or homeland; 2) Common myths and historical memories; 3) A shared mass public culture; 4) Common legal rights and duties for all members; 5) A common economy and territorial mobility (Smith, 1991, p. 14). Citizenship education is closely linked to national identity, as it helps individuals understand the key elements that shape their nation. It promotes knowledge of the nation’s history, territory, and cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging. It also teaches the rights and responsibilities of citizens, emphasizing legal duties, economic participation, and the importance of engaging in public life. *Through this, citizenship education strengthens national identity and encourages responsible participation in society.*

The examination of national identity unavoidably leads to an analysis of its connection with nationalism, as national consciousness often serves as the foundation for nationalist ideas, movements, and manifestations. *Nationalism* can be defined as one of the most widespread modern ideologies. It is a key phenomenon in the contemporary world, largely because of the global scope of its manifestations (Popova et al., 2019). According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (n.d.) nationalism, as a concept, is defined as “devotion to one’s country, national spirit or aspirations, desire for national unity, independence, or prosperity” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). It can be regarded as a political ideology, political philosophy, or political doctrine. On the other hand, it is a phenomenon that materializes in practice through political parties, nationalist movements (which are not registered as political parties), national liberation struggles, etc. The sense of national belonging is often reinforced in response to external threats or conflicts. It is a key element in distinguishing individuals in contemporary reality. It can also be explained as a psychological and emotional disposition (Miscovic, 2023) of individuals. The ideology of nationalism addresses fundamental questions concerning its main functions related to the nation and national identity, encompassing unifying and integrative roles; public mobilization and defense functions. However, it also possesses divisive, exclusionary, and radicalizing aspects, capable of generating social tensions, interethnic conflicts, and extreme forms of nationalist aggression

In the context of the provision of nation’s sustainability, maintaining a sense of national identity must be a continuous process, even if it requires for the national identity to be “invented”

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(Anderson, 1983). One of the mechanisms for this is *education*, including the teaching of a common language and shared history in schools, the organization of public events and cultural activities, the elevation and reference to national heroes, the honoring of national symbols and holidays, and the homogenization of culture. In this sense, one of the key functions of education is to instill patriotism. The role of the school, therefore, extends beyond fostering national and patriotic sentiments to also promoting unity among members of the nation. Since the 19th century, the expansion of education has fundamentally contributed in shaping national consciousness (Guibernau, 1996, p. 69). A shared identity has largely been constructed through the promotion of a common language and culture within schools, as well as through the influence of the printing industry. The education system, along with the system of national symbols, holds some of the most effective means for shaping and reinforcing perceptions of the nation - and the nation itself. These systems have the potential to function effectively even within nations composed of members from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

*In summary of this discussion*, as it has been outlined, *national identity* refers to a sense of belonging to a nation, shaped by shared elements such as culture, language, history, values, and traditions. It is primarily a psychological and cultural construct that helps individuals situate themselves within a broader social community. *Nationalism*, on the other hand, is a political ideology or movement that builds on national identity, often advocating for the interests, unity, and sometimes superiority of a particular nation. It can manifest in both inclusive and exclusive forms - ranging from civic nationalism, which emphasizes shared political values and citizenship, to ethnic nationalism, which centers on shared ancestry or heritage. *In short*, national identity provides the emotional and cultural foundation upon which nationalism is constructed. While national identity is more personal and descriptive, nationalism can be considered as collective and prescriptive, often mobilizing national identity for political aims. Education is the channel for direct engagement with future generations; It facilitates the “invention of tradition” (Anderson, 1983) of the nation, emphasizing its “glorious” or “tragic” past. This process fosters an early sense of national identity, unity, belonging, and attachment in young citizens, thereby reinforcing the collective sense of “We”.

### **Citizenship Education: An Overview**

Citizenship education is crucially involved in the proper and sustainable development of democratic societies. The importance of citizenship education stems from the complexity, dynamic nature, and other characteristics inherent in modern societies. In order to understand the foundational concepts and significance of citizenship education in shaping informed and active members of society, it is essential to delve into the definition of citizenship. The *citizen* is a “member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership” (Leydet, 2023). The term *citizenship* is often associated with the “status, rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a citizen” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Considering citizenship, Hoskins (2020) refers to the legal rights and obligations states grant to their citizens, typically designated by their nationality. Marshall (1973) asserts citizenship is “a status bestowed on all those who are full members of a community. All who possess this status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed.” This legal definition emphasizes the crucial relationship between the citizen and the state, as well as the rights granted by the state to the individual (Hoskins, 2020). Other than the legal status, citizenship implies the role of citizens as political agents actively engaged in state’s political institutions and a third dimension refers to citizenship as “membership in a political community that provides a distinct source of identity”; it is also referred to as a “psychological” dimension of citizenship (Leydet, 2023). Understanding the significance of this relationship and the complex

interactions between society and state is directly related to comprehending the essence of *citizenship education*.

As a concept and subject area, citizenship education aims to promote harmonious co-existence and foster the mutually beneficial development of individuals and the communities in which they live (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023 p.1). De Coster and Sigalas (2017) argue that within democratic systems, citizenship education helps learners develop into “active, informed and responsible citizens who are prepared to take responsibility for their own future as well as for the well-being of their communities at the national, European, and international levels” (European Commission, 2017). Citizenship education can also function to uphold the rule of law and justice by fostering legal awareness and promoting an understanding of the importance of legal order and justice in society (Dimitrova, 2025).

Citizenship education can be categorized into three main types, each with distinct characteristics and goals: *traditional*, *critical* and *transformational* citizenship education. *Traditional citizenship education* (also known as civics education) focuses on transmitting knowledge about political systems, government structures, and legal frameworks. It aiming to create informed and loyal national citizens. It concentrates on national citizenship and developing loyalty, commitment, and allegiance to the nation-state. *Critical citizenship education* goes further by empowering learners to question societal inequalities and power dynamics, fostering critical thinking and active civic engagement. *Transformative citizenship education* emphasizes collective action for social justice and global change, encouraging learners to challenge unjust systems and advocate for a more equitable world. Additionally, scholars distinguish between *minimal* and *maximal citizenship education*. Minimal citizenship education is content-heavy and teacher-led, presenting citizenship as a legal status, while maximal citizenship education promotes student participation, skill development, and experiential learning, viewing citizenship as an active, lived process. Effective citizenship education also includes *non-formal* and *informal approaches*, such as *service-learning*, which links academic learning with community-based engagement to develop democratic competencies, responsibility, and real-world problem-solving skills (European Commission, 2023, pp. 14-15).

The Bulgarian Ordinance No. 13 of September 21, 2016, on Citizenship, Health, Environmental, and Intercultural Education defines the institutional policies supporting citizenship education, aimed at the formation of active and responsible citizens. As stated in Article 3, paragraph 2 of the Ordinance № 13, *citizenship education* is aimed at fostering civic awareness and civic virtues. It is related to knowledge about the structure of a democratic society, the rights and duties of citizens, as well as skills and willingness for responsible civic behavior. The desired outcomes as specified in the Ordinance include development of an autonomous and active individuals who understand and uphold universal human values, the principles of democracy, and human rights; who participate in civic, political, and social life in a manner that is responsible and effective both for themselves and for society; and who are also familiar with the institutions, structures, and procedures of democratic society, as well as the economic and political realities of the globalizing world. The Ordinance also emphasizes the importance of respecting each individual’s identity within the diversity of their personal, cultural, and national backgrounds, recognizing the right and value of differences, and accepting the equality of all in shared social spaces. It also fosters an awareness and appreciation of one’s own cultural identity (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2016, Article 4). This is directly related to the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the individual’s identification of their national identity, patriotic education and the development of national self-esteem, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue. Among the desired results of citizenship education stipulated in the Ordinance’ regulations, students are expected to acquire the knowledge,

skills, and attitudes necessary to understand their identity as both “citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria” and “citizens of the European Union” through shared civic values and cultural traditions. (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2016, Appendix № 1).

The defined general and specific objectives of citizenship education vary across each EU member state, depending on the national context, traditions, cultural heritage, and the selected curriculum approach. Regardless of the specific goals, they are aimed at addressing the challenges<sup>2</sup> of contemporary liberal democracy in Europe (Popova, 2024).

### **Citizenship Education and the EU: National and European Identities**

One of the functions of education is to “teach” individuals of patriotism. In this context, schools not only focus on cultivating national and patriotic sentiments but also on fostering unity among the members of a nation that has long been divided by religion, culture, language, and social divisions. Since the 19th century, the expansion of education has played a foundational role in shaping national consciousness (Guibernau, 1996, p. 69). Citizenship education, traditionally, has often been linked to the fostering of national identity (European Commission, 2017). Historically, citizenship education was integrated into national education systems and curricula to shape citizens according to national ideals. It has been and continues to serve as a tool for nation-building, used by governments to promote specific civic norms, including patriotic and/or nationalistic values (Hoskins, 2020, p. 1).

In the past decade, Europe has witnessed a rise in extremism, terrorist attacks, and various threats that endanger not only the safety of European citizens but also the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, equality, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and dignity. These challenges pose a significant threat to national identity, as they instill fear among Europeans, which can, in turn, intensify nationalistic sentiments. These events contradict the vision of a European society based on modern democratic values, characterized by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and gender equality. In this regard, and more specifically as a reaction to the terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015, the education ministers of the EU member states adopted in Paris the Paris Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance, and Non-Discrimination through Education in 2015. The declaration emphasizes the need to promote active citizenship and sets out common goals for member states, along with four overarching priorities for cooperation and the exchange of ideas and best practices at the EU level:

- Ensuring that children and young people acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, by promoting democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and nondiscrimination, as well as active citizenship;
- Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of the Internet and social media, so as to develop resistance to all forms of discrimination and indoctrination;
- Fostering the education of disadvantaged children and young people, by ensuring that our education and training systems address their needs;
- Promoting intercultural dialogue through all forms of learning in cooperation with other relevant policies and stakeholders. (European Commission & Eurydice, 2016)

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<sup>2</sup> These include: populism, extreme nationalism and Euroscepticism; polarization of public opinions and attitudes; distrust in national and European institutions; a decline in voter turnout; apathy towards socio-political processes; apoliticism; immigration; disinformation and manipulation of public opinion; fake news; public reactions against ethnic and cultural diversity, characteristic of the modern globalized world, especially within the EU; the crisis in political leadership, and others.

The integration of citizenship education into the educational institutions of EU member states has been influenced by the distinctive characteristics of the 21st century. Notably, the adoption of the Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance, and Non-Discrimination through Education, together with the Recommendations on Education for Democratic Citizenship adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2002), contributed significantly to this development. These recommendations emphasize the multidisciplinary nature of citizenship education, highlighting that it encompasses not only the study of content but also the development of attitudes and skills. This approach aims to empower students to actively participate in society and underscores the importance of such education in fostering democratic societies. As defined in these recommendations, education for democratic citizenship includes specific disciplines and various cross-curricular areas of study within member states, tailored to each country's unique characteristics and traditional educational approaches (Council of Europe: 2002). The contemporary challenges that democratic societies are facing can be regarded as potential obstacles in integrating national identity themes within citizenship education curricula.

The 20th century was marked by the active engagement of the international community in the protection of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, influenced numerous other fundamental and key international agreements in this field. The Council of Europe, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have been key contributors in formulating and establishing mechanisms for the protection of human rights under international law. The EU became directly committed to human rights protection with the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on December 1, 2009. At that time, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was annexed to the Treaty of Lisbon, making it legally binding for all member states. The Charter encompasses civil, political, social, and economic rights, organizing them into six main categories: *dignity, freedoms, equality, solidarity, citizen's rights, and justice* (European Union, 2012, Title I-VI). All of this underscores the necessity of citizenship education and an understanding of democracy to address the key challenges facing contemporary society. What is more, the *six titles* of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU are deeply connected to *national identity*, as they *both protect the fundamental values of EU member states and shape the way national identities are expressed and safeguarded within the European legal and political framework*. The principles enshrined in the Charter not only uphold fundamental rights but also reflect and interact with national identities, which are shaped by historical, legal, and cultural traditions across member states. National identity is deeply intertwined with the values and rights outlined in the Charter, as these principles stem from the constitutional and legal traditions of EU member states. As stipulated in the Charter, the EU helps sustain and cultivate the shared principles and values “while respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe as well as the national identities of the Member States and the organisation of their public authorities at national, regional and local levels” (European Union, 2012); The Union also “seeks to promote balanced and sustainable development and ensures free movement of persons, services, goods and capital, and the freedom of establishment” (European Union, 2012). The concept of *dignity*, as protected in the Charter, is rooted in the historical and philosophical traditions of European nations, influencing their national identities and legal frameworks. The *freedom* of expression, religious liberty, and the right to education are not only fundamental rights but also essential components of national identity, shaping cultural and political traditions within EU member states. The Charter's commitment to *equality*, including the recognition of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, ensures that national identities are protected and respected within the EU framework. By prohibiting discrimination, this title ensures that national and regional identities coexist within a shared European space without being marginalized. The rights to **political participation** and free movement outlined

in the Charter challenge traditional notions of national identity while fostering a complementary European identity. The legal protections under the Charter draw heavily from national legal traditions, demonstrating how justice systems contribute to shaping national identity while ensuring adherence to common European values. These principles illustrate how national and European identities are not mutually exclusive but rather coexisting and evolving in a complementary framework, both contributing to a shared yet diverse political and cultural space. The Charter of Fundamental Rights illustrates the commitment of the EU in preserving national identities while fostering a European identity, ensuring that fundamental rights are upheld across diverse legal, political, and cultural traditions within the EU.

*Citizenship competence* has been defined by the EU as “the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability”. This also includes an understanding of European common values, knowledge of contemporary events, and a critical understanding of the main developments in national, European and world history (European Commission, 2023, p. 3). Promoting the development of competences, including citizenship competence, is one of the key objectives towards the creation of a European Education Area. Citizenship education is an integral part of this framework, aiming to “harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for ... active citizenship as well as means to experience European identity in all its diversity”, as stipulated in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.

Recognized as a core competence for lifelong learning, active citizenship is understood by the European Union as the capacity to engage responsibly and effectively in civic and social life, grounded in knowledge of socio-economic, legal, and political concepts and structures. The Council Recommendation highlights citizenship competence as essential not only for democratic participation and social inclusion, but also for developing critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving abilities, and personal resilience - skills increasingly vital for navigating the complexities of contemporary society (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The deepening of European integration and the ongoing process of globalization, along with the contemporary threads and crises require a generation of Europeans with increasing engagement in political processes at multiple levels. This engagement should be grounded in an understanding of both European and national identities, ensuring that individuals organize their lives while upholding the principles of diversity and respecting their national heritage. The importance of education in these processes is emphasized in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states: “Everyone has the right to access quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning, in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to fully participate in society and successfully transition in the labor market” (European Commission, 2021, Principle 1). Through education, individuals not only gain the competencies necessary for civic participation but also develop a deeper connection to their national identity, which remains a vital component of their social and political engagement.

*To summarize* the key points discussed above, citizenship education holds the potential to equip individuals with the knowledge and self-confidence, necessary to effectively address contemporary challenges European societies face nowadays, thereby preventing extreme behaviors and fostering social cohesion. By promoting critical thinking, a sense of belonging and reinforcing a shared commitment to democratic principles, citizenship education can serve as a vital tool in countering radicalization and strengthening democratic values.

## DISCUSSION

The literature review analysis has revealed that within EU institutions, education has been regarded as a central element of policies and practices aimed at fostering active citizenship. The European Union's commitment to citizenship education can be considered as a *pillar of democracy*. It is necessary that citizens engage in civic and political life to uphold state accountability and reinforce the legitimacy of democracy.

It is reasonable to suggest that the collective identity is largely constructed through the imposition of a common language and culture in schools. The education system, alongside the system of national symbols, provide some of the most effective means of provoking and shaping national identity, as well as the nation itself. These systems could function effectively even within nations composed of members from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Direct engagement with future generations of the nation within educational institutions facilitates the "invention of tradition" (Anderson, 1983). In this way, a sense of national belonging, unity, and attachment is instilled in the younger generations from an early age, thereby reinforcing the collective "We". In this framework, while individuals may identify with various social groups as already has been stated, in the context of citizenship education, national identity is the one that unites citizens and guides the nation's political and cultural direction.

Scholars have postulated that young people tend not to have already developed enduring beliefs and are therefore open to be influenced by external factors (Schulz et al., 2023, p. 3). In addition to that, it can be argued that intergenerational continuity is disrupted, and the connections between generations and historical periods are neglected (Pachkova, 2024) which can be an obstacle to national identification. That is why it is important to reinforce the sense of identity and foster critical thinking, which can help isolate external influences that pose a potential threat of extreme behaviors among young people.

While national identity remains a central pillar of individual and collective belonging, the development of the EU and the emergence of European identity introduces a *broader, supranational dimension that reshapes traditional understandings of identity* within the EU context. European identity and its characteristics, as well as the extent to which people recognize their belonging to the EU, have been the subject of extensive and diverse discussions in recent years. Some perspectives reflect the belief that national and European identities can coexist positively (Verhaegen, 2018, p. 1), while others argue that national identification is an obstacle to effective European integration. According to the findings of the Special Eurobarometer 508 on values and identities of EU citizens, a majority of EU citizens identify with their nationality (Becuwe & Baneth, 2021, p. 71). However, this issue is not placed on a particular research focus of the current paper as it is a subject of a more thorough analysis. The role of education in these processes is rather the focus. EU policies and studies underscore the essential role of citizenship education in shaping national and European identities and some of these findings are discussed below. By promoting democratic values and active participation, it strengthens citizens' connection to both their nation-state and the broader European community.

Surveys consistently indicate that younger individuals are more inclined to identify with multiple articulated identities beyond their national identity (IEA, 2023, p. 33). It can be observed that students with higher levels of trust in civic institutions expressed a stronger sense of European identity (IEA, 2023, p. 5). (Verhaegen, 2018, p. 1) Studies reveal the significant role of schools when analyzing student involvement in politics, as Barber et al. relate classroom environment to the enhanced student interest in politics, their trust in civic institutions and willingness for citizenship participation (IEA, 2023, p. 72). The observed correlation between higher levels of trust in civic institutions and a stronger sense of European identity among students can be understood through the

lens of citizenship education, which plays a pivotal role in shaping both civic trust and European identity. Educational initiatives that promote democratic values and civic engagement such as the citizenship education not only strengthen trust in institutions but also reinforce a multifaceted identity that includes both national and European dimensions. This dual identification enriches individuals' sense of belonging and supports the cohesion of the European community.

Citizenship education is usually related to the notion of nation-states. However, the development of a supranational institution like the European Union, the deepening of European integration and the ongoing process of globalization, issues with growing migration etc., have shaped the notions of “European” and “global” citizenship. These current challenges confronting democratic societies present potential barriers to incorporating national identity into the citizenship education curricula. To illustrate, due to the growing linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms, teachers may face challenges in addressing nuanced discussions on controversial topics and in raising issues that might be particularly sensitive for students from certain communities. At the same time, this diversity offers valuable opportunities for enriched learning experiences (European Commission, 2023, p. 24). Citizenship education can address these challenges by *promoting inclusive dialogue and democratic values*, and *intercultural competence*. It equips students with critical thinking skills and fosters empathy and respect for others. Additionally, it supports teachers through culturally responsive pedagogy, enabling them to navigate sensitive issues and create inclusive learning environments. Through these mechanisms, citizenship education strengthens social cohesion and sustains a shared sense of belonging in diverse societies.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), through its *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2022* and the published *Report on the Views and Engagement of Young Citizens in a Changing Europe*, addresses issues such as the rise of populist movements, authoritarian governance practices, as well as challenges related to climate change and environmental protection. The Report indicates that the greater number of students across participating countries identified themselves as European, “being proud to live in Europe and feeling part of Europe” (Damiani et al., 2025, p. 5). The study also examines the relationship between *civic knowledge, competences, and attitudes among students* and issues related to *tolerance*, including gender equality, equal rights for immigrants and different ethnic groups in society, and students' support for environmental cooperation as well. The findings indicate *students with higher levels of civic awareness score significantly higher* on the scale measuring support for these societal aspects (Schulz et al., 2025, p. 123).

In the context of citizenship education and the formation of national identity, it is essential to theoretically substantiate and systematize knowledge. As Ivo Minkov (2024) argues, “the need for theorizing knowledge, its systematization and theoretical assimilation, structuring, methodologizing, and subsequent operationalization arises” (p. 51 [translated by author]). This underscores the importance of a structured approach in studying these key concepts, forming the foundation for their effective application in educational practice, particularly in teaching and internalizing concepts such as citizenship responsibility and national identity. By employing contemporary and interactive teaching methods and techniques, it becomes possible to develop comprehensive social and citizenship competencies among learners. This includes the ability to create *informed opinions* on issues of public concern (such as environmental well-being), defend personal rights and freedoms, fulfil civic responsibilities, make informed decisions regarding their civil rights, liberties, and obligations, and understand the relationships and interconnections between the state and society. Additionally, it fosters an understanding of how society and state institutions function and encourages critical analysis of socio-political processes (Ministry of Education). *By investing time and resources*

*in building fundamental political literacy among the younger population, the state, as a political entity, lays the foundation for a strong and educated civil society. Awareness and understanding - knowledge of the specifics of social processes - enhance citizens' confidence and ability to engage with their own and collective rights. In other words, the more an individual understands the interrelations between the state and society, the more they will recognize their role in shaping various social processes.*

*In democratic societies, every citizen has their social and political roles. A stable democratic society requires the engagement of citizens and an active civil society, which is expressed not only when exercising their active and passive suffrage. In this sense, it is essential for young people to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to fulfill these social and political responsibilities as full-fledged citizens (European Commission, 2017).*

Citizenship education has some important *functions* that are discussed below, indicating the role of education institutions as socializing agents transmitting political culture and a sense of national identity. Democratic systems are also characterized by the presence of a specific *political culture*. It is important to highlight the connection between political culture and its components and functions related to citizenship education. Culture is defined by UNESCO as a set of “distinct spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features characterizing a society” (UNESCO, 2001). It encompasses aspects of art and literature, but also embodies a way of life, value systems, traditions, and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001). In other words, culture is the fundamental human characteristic that expresses the nature of individuals as conscious social beings, guiding their behavior (Hague, Harrop, 2010, p. 121). There are different types of culture, and the one most directly related to the state and its citizens is the *political culture*. The concept of political culture was introduced by Gabriel Almond (1956). The concept aims to explain how individuals influence the political system and vice versa. Ernest Gellner develops the cultural approach to the concept of the nation by emphasizing the pivotal role of cultural factors in its formation and highlighting the significance of high levels of literacy and education (Gellner, 1999, p. 77). *Political culture is both an aspect of politics and a comprehensive approach to political science.* The term refers to the overall model of beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, practices, and values in society regarding the political system. It reflects ways of thinking and feelings, sometimes more emotional than rational. It may include moral judgments, political myths, elements of history, and tradition. All these elements are related when shaping the political behavior of citizens. The presence of political culture is crucial for understanding the processes occurring in a society. The political cultures of separate countries differ in characteristics, which can explain how and why their political systems are organized in a certain way; what is the nature of the challenges they face, and also the status of their relations with citizens and international partners (Popova, 2024).

The process of introducing individuals to political culture is *political socialization*. It represents the learning process through which political norms and behaviors, considered acceptable at a particular moment for a changing political system, are transmitted from generation to generation. Political socialization affects the processes through which values, ideas, and symbols are adopted, and political roles are institutionalized. According to Almond and Coleman, it is necessary for people to learn their political behavior early enough and to defend it properly in order to maintain order and prevent the emergence of chaos (Tanev, 2001, 213). Political socialization is carried out by various socializing agents such as family, educational institutions, political parties, peers, mass media, and others. States have mechanisms for shaping political culture and public opinion, and one of the key mechanisms as already stated, is education. Schools are among the main institutions for *acquiring behavioral attributes* among students. In the context of citizenship education and the formation and expression of attitudes toward the functioning of the state as a political entity, learners take their first

serious steps toward engaging in *civic and political participation*, which can be considered one of the characteristic achievements of contemporary Western political culture.

*Political participation* refers to the various ways people can influence the current state of society or the policies or decisions made by the government. In a liberal democracy, individuals can choose whether to participate in politics, to what extent, and through which channels. Active and effective political participation by citizens depends on the political resources that the state provides to its citizens (education, communication skills, social status, etc.) and the political interest of the citizens. The more educated a society is and the more developed communication skills are, owing to state's mechanisms, the greater the interest of its citizens will be in the ongoing political processes and crises in society. The level of communication skills is directly related to individual's ability to clearly formulate their views and standpoints and to express them in society - through public debates or by participating in elections at national and European levels. Education itself is a source of information - citizenship education provides a systematic approach to information that relates to the functioning of the state, its relationships with civil society, and political processes both domestically and internationally (Hague, Harrop, 2010: 161, 163). Building upon this discussion, and in combination with the teaching approaches, citizenship education should aim to develop fundamental skills for interpreting political information. If contemporary representative governance allows forms of control by citizens over state institutions and the ruling political elite, citizenship education can be seen as a tool for shaping societies that not only exercise political control but also nurture a strong sense of national belonging. By cultivating a developed political culture and active participation, it empowers citizens to contribute to the preservation and development of national identity while ensuring democratic engagement and accountability within the state.

The Analytic Report researching on Participatory Citizenship in the European Union Institute of Education indicates that embedding citizenship education within authentic, real-world contexts significantly enhances all aspects of participatory citizenship. This approach, known as situated learning, involves conducting educational activities in environments directly related to the subject matter (Hoskins, B. & Kerr, 2012, p. 5). The citizenship curriculum can provide a platform for school settings, thus entailing an engagement of students in genuine civic experiences, such as participating in school governance or community projects. In this manner, they develop a deeper connection to their nation's values, traditions, and societal norms. This active involvement helps inculcate a sense of belonging and responsibility towards their community in the first place, and consequently their country. By understanding and practicing their roles as citizens in meaningful settings, students internalize the principles that define their national identity, thereby contributing to its preservation and evolution. Such engagement also fosters a generation of informed and active citizens committed to the principles of democracy and communal well-being. By acquiring knowledge about political systems, legal frameworks, and societal structures, students gain a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that govern their communities.

Another clear linkage between citizenship education and national identity is evident through the political process, political institutions, and political systems, as nationalism continues to shape political dynamics across Europe. A key example of this is the results of the elections for the European Parliament, where nationalist parties have been increasing their support. In the previous parliamentary term (2019-2024), nationalist and far-right parties made significant electoral gains, reflecting a broader trend across EU member states. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, far-right parties increased their representation, with the Patriots for Europe (PfE) securing 84 seats and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) obtaining 78 seats (European Parliament, 2024). This trend reflects a broader shift in the European political landscape, as nationalist parties continue to

gain influence across the continent. These parties, which advocate for sovereignty, stricter immigration policies, and the protection of national identity, have influenced political debates at both the national and European levels. Their growing presence in the European Parliament underscores the role of citizenship education in fostering awareness of democratic processes, political ideologies, and the implications of nationalist movements on European integration. There exists however a potential threat that initiatives focused on promoting national identity might veer toward nationalism or even be co-opted by far-right and extreme movements, especially when national identity is framed in a way that excludes certain groups or emphasizes superiority over others. When national identity is portrayed as something fixed, ethnocentric, or tied to ethnic or racial purity, it can easily turn into an ideology of exclusion, fueling division and intolerance. These types of movements may use the concept of national identity to justify xenophobia, racism, and anti-immigrant sentiment, which can be harmful in multicultural societies.

The research findings emphasize the importance of the *dual nature* of citizenship education as an educational pillar for fostering national identity and recognizing the alarming consequences of its extreme manifestations. Rather than that, citizenship education can emphasize on this characteristic and view of the national identity that it is not about excluding others but about shared values, rights, and responsibilities, promoting the so-called *inclusive nationalism* (Seneca Learning, n.d.). This is also related to the *promotion of awareness of rights and responsibilities* citizens have toward their community and the broader society, thus contributing to the rule of law and social justice. Development of *critical thinking and reflection* is another primary function of citizenship education. By exploring both the positive and negative aspects of national identity, students can develop a more nuanced understanding and avoid being swept up in extreme ideologies that promise easy answers but often lead to division, polarization and conflicts. Citizenship education can *teach and emphasize the democratic values* that underpin a healthy national identity - such as equality, freedom, human rights, and respect for diversity. Educating citizens about the historical context of national identity and nationalism can help them recognize when national identity is being manipulated for harmful purposes. Understanding extreme movements allows citizens to differentiate between the sense of belonging as a patriotic pride and harmful nationalism that threatens social cohesion and is destructive. Citizenship education can also encourage dialogues about appreciating differences and solving common challenges. This can involve addressing questions of how national identity coexists with global identities in a multicultural world, promoting respect, tolerance, and cooperation over division and exclusion. Citizenship education aims to *encourage* individuals to *engage and participate in democratic processes*, such as voting, decision-making, advocating for policies or reforms, volunteering etc. It fosters active citizenship by teaching the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. Citizenship education *helps individuals recognize* their role in building a harmonious society, despite differences in background, culture, and beliefs. It emphasizes shared values, such as tolerance, respect, and equality, to *foster social cohesion* within diverse societies.

## CONCLUSION

One of the functions of the citizenship as a phenomenon is the “promotion of a sense of identity and belonging” (Heater, 2004, p. 180). In this sense, citizenship education in the context of EU provides a foundation for development of a sense of both national and European identity. Striking a balance between national and pan-European values presents a significant challenge in the present-day context. The issue of national identity has become increasingly relevant amidst the ongoing processes of globalization.



The nation-state serves as a framework wherein identity is institutionalized through education, legislation, and national symbols; within this structure, the educational system plays a central role in the socialization of citizens, namely the political one, with citizenship education fostering an understanding of values, rights and responsibilities, acting as a safeguard against extreme forms of nationalism, and cultivating a political culture grounded in shared norms and active participation in public life.

Based on the analysis provided, citizenship education is an *objective necessity for the successful development of the political process in democratic societies*. In its substantive part, it consists of various knowledge about the civil status of the individual, the functioning of society, institutions, the state, and more. These pieces of knowledge are related to ongoing processes and phenomena, with an undeniable part of them being the impact of human activity on national identity. The effects of these actions are reflected at the subregional, regional, national, continental, and global levels. In addition to the territorial aspect, issues of national identity affect social, political, economic, cultural spheres, etc. National identity is an important aspect of citizenship education. By studying issues related to national identity and building national awareness, a more active, responsible and cohesive society can be developed. It can be concluded that the study of the interconnection between politics, national identity, and societal cohesion in citizenship education curricula is of great importance for the security, development, and well-being of society.

Citizenship education functions both as a *reflection of an established democratic state* and as a *strategic instrument* for cultivating and sustaining democratic values within the state. If the state invests time and resources in building basic political literacy among the younger population, it lays the foundation for a strong and educated civil society. Awareness and understanding of the specifics of social and political processes increase citizens' confidence and capacity for engagement with their own rights and those of their loved ones while reducing levels of apathy. This means that the more an individual understands the interconnections between the state and society, the more easily they will recognize and respond to violations and injustices (Popova, 2024). *A stable democracy requires continuous citizen engagement and an active civil society that extends beyond electoral participation*. Well-informed and citizens with developed critical skills are equipped to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of their communities, identify pressing issues and initiate actions to address them through democratic mechanisms. Moreover, the advancement of digitalization gives new opportunities for European citizens to participate in political processes across the continent, especially among the younger generation.

Distrust in political institutions often stems from citizens' limited understanding and awareness of how these institutions operate. The problematic aspects of a democratic society, as well as the possibilities for resolving them, largely depend on the stage of development of a given country's society. There is no universal formula for addressing problems and responding to contemporary challenges, as the specific characteristics of each society is also important in these processes (Popova, 2024). However, this may result in an identity crisis, characterized by a weak sense of belonging, diminished patriotism, and apathy and even in extreme manifestations of nationalism. Such dynamics often lead to the polarization of public attitudes. In the long run, citizenship education can become an instrument for preventing such crises. In the context of sustaining multiethnic democracies - characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, a defining characteristic of today's globalized world, particularly within the European Union - citizenship education can contribute to *foster respect for diverse identities and promoting intercultural understanding*. Regarding the extremist and populist appeals and actions of political leaders and parties within the EU, citizenship education provides an opportunity to develop *critical thinking skills*

and conduct *objective analysis of facts*, which can help *mitigate the harmful effects of extremism and populism on society*.

Beyond acquiring a comprehensive conceptual framework and in-depth theoretical and factual knowledge in key political domains - such as public administration, human rights, equality etc. - citizenship education provides students with opportunities to develop a range of competencies and practical skills across various levels, as presented. The analysis of the significance of citizenship education for modern nation-states in Europe should not be limited solely to its role in transmitting knowledge about political institutions and processes; its *potential for societal development* must also be recognized. The goals of contemporary citizenship education should focus on developing competencies for effective and constructive interaction between individuals, as well as between individuals and political institutions at both national and international levels, fostering critical thinking, and promoting a socially responsible attitude.

### ***Declaration by Authors***

**Ethical Approval:** Approved

**Acknowledgement:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**How to cite this article:** Popova, R. (2025). The Influence of Citizenship Education on National Identity in the EU. *International Journal of Digital Research*, E-ISSN: 3033-179X, Vol. 1(1): P.p. 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.net20250103>

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