

LIFELONG LEARNING - OUR TRUE DEMOCRACY SHIELD

BACKGROUND

In 2025, the European Commission launched a **strategic package** to respond to identified threats linked to Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, rising geopolitical tensions, state-sponsored hybrid and cyberattacks, sabotage targeting critical assets, foreign information manipulation and interference, and electronic warfare, by **treating education and training as a key pillar**.

The Commission's strategic package includes the release, in March, of the [European Preparedness Union Strategy](#), and the release, in November, of the [European Democracy Shield](#) and of the [EU Strategy for Civil Society](#). Each of these is aiming to boost Europe's resilience to unexpected crises, while also considering democratic values and civil society as foundations for ensuring safeguarding the EU model.

Yet, across the strategies, the Commission has placed education and training as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The result has been a failure to safeguard article 26 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) - 'Everyone has the right to education'. Though all people will resoundingly agree, the caveat is that universal human rights are not achieved until truly accessible to all. Learning is a social process connecting everyone, as learners together form a fully functioning body. As soon as one part suffers, the whole is in danger. In this sense, education and training is built on solidarity. **Does the current situation worldwide allow us to say that article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is met?**

PARTICIPATION AS THE FIRST STEP TO EUROPE'S RESILIENCE

The LLLPlatform supports the three pronged strategy of the European Commission, and considers the expanded focus on media literacy and citizenship education as a long overdue action. Nevertheless, one glaring omission is **not treating the right to education as a central pillar**. With a 9.3% rate of early leavers from education, the European Commission has been progressing significantly, but there needs to be an acknowledgement that **still many learners are left behind**, and that this rate creates **geographic imbalances, with the number reaching 16% in Romania**¹. Moreover, the **participation of adults in education and training is only at 47%**², which also does not necessarily cover the development of transversal competences that boost Europe and Europeans' resilience.

Therefore, **the strongest defence is a well-educated society** and for this, the number one priority should be boosting participation in education and training. Initiatives such as the Individual Learning Accounts, Micro-credentials, and Skills Guarantee should be strengthened, with additional resources placed for Member States to develop such initiatives, and with the involvement of education and

¹ Eurostat (2025). Early leavers from education and training. Available [here](#).

² Eurostat (2025). Adult learning statistics. Available [here](#).



training stakeholders operating in the formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, so that they can tailor the learning offers and reach to learners within their communities.

THE ILLUSION OF EXTERNAL THREATS

When it comes to the actual scope of the three documents, the Commission is identifying external threats that infiltrated Europe, but always portrays the danger as external. However, polarisation and misinformation grows within the EU as well, and education and training play a crucial role in halting the proliferation of such concerning trends. Moreover, unfortunately, as LLLPlatform has signaled earlier in the year, violence within learning spaces has increased³. The current geopolitical conflicts give rise to aggressive and exclusionary discourses which are socialising Europeans towards a narrative that is just as threatening as external interference. Furthermore, the absence of solidarity towards conflicts beyond Europe's border and an isolationist approach contributes to this situation. In various parts of the world, in recent years, systematic destruction of life, and implicitly lifelong learning, has been occurring. Attacks resulting in death or injury to children and educators and the destruction or occupation of educational facilities have become almost routine during armed conflict and situations of insecurity⁴. **No victim is less significant than the other, no suffering lesser than others and no barbaric act is ever justified.**

The armed conflicts cause loss of, injury to or flight of learners and educators; fear of turning up to class; damage to buildings, materials, and resources; difficulties in staff recruitment; shelving of investment; and generalised degradation of the education and training systems⁵. This marks education and training as a target in itself, with the widespread conflicts by state armed forces or by non-state armed groups serving **as a reminder that any conflict left to fester will violate the universal access to learning**. As lives and dignity are taken, the inability to access education is another reminder of the dehumanisation that conflicts cause. **Education is not only a human right but also a key solution to these challenges. The new packages must recognise that any attack on education and training is an attack of the EU's democratic fabric itself.**

THE SCOPE OF PREPAREDNESS

MAINSTREAMING VALUES AND ATTITUDES IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The EU Democracy Shield is deeply connected with the Union of Skills, and LLLPlatform welcomes the policy coherence. The connection in terms of language and cross-referencing initiatives must now be followed by actions.

³ LLLPlatform (2025). When learning spaces turn unsafe: a wake-up call for European education and training policies. Available [here](#).

⁴ PEIC (2013). United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms and the Right to Education in Insecurity and Armed Conflict. Available [here](#).

⁵ United Nations (2025). Right to education in armed conflict: a human rights imperative. Special Rapporteur on the right to education. Available [here](#).



The Union of Skills ushered in **citizenship education as a basic skill**. Upcoming initiatives such as the Action Plan on Basic Skills, Basic Skills Support Scheme for schools, EU citizenship competence framework, and a series of guidelines are actions in the right direction. The LLLPlatform welcomes especially the **EU citizenship competence framework**, and insists once more on taking a **competence-oriented approach**, which also focuses on knowledge and attitudes, just as much as on skills. Citizenship competences depend on people having a strong grip on how democracy functions, on the historical facts that led us to where we are today, but most importantly on **Europeans having a healthy attitude towards active participation in society**. To this end, we invite the Commission to go one step further and **include values in this process**, building on [Council of Europe's \(CoE\) Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture \(RFCDC\)](#). As recognised in the EU Democracy Shield, the EU's democratic values are intentionally picked as Europe's selling point, and it is time to embrace a type of learning that promotes European identity. **The extremist pushes towards so-called neutrality in education and training are nothing but a ploy to silence education and training from building resilient critical thinkers.**

THE EU AND GEOPOLITICS: GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Access to lifelong learning sustains people's capacity to thrive, while developing the competences to interact peacefully and in solidarity with one another. Nevertheless, focusing on citizenship competence development is insufficient for preventing conflicts if it does not include efforts to foster civic and democratic competences in practice. For this reason, **citizenship education must be championed globally, mainstreaming it across national curricula, with proper assessment of the competences developed embedded into the learning process**. It cannot be limited only to **formal education, since non-formal and informal learning contexts** ensure that learners have real-life experiences of embedding citizenship competences in action. To this end, **LLLPlatform regrets to see that the EU Democracy Shield focuses disproportionately on schools**. Though future generations need to be well-prepared, there needs to be acknowledgement that many adults lack basic citizenship competences, and this places Europe at serious risk. **Intergenerational learning actions need to also be emboldened**, with clear funding lines for cross-sector projects which connect different age groups of learners for citizenship education. Similarly, social partners are referred to across the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, but are not considered within the EU Democracy Shield. Learning linked to unionisation and active participation in shaping the workplace is a crucial pre-requisite for broader citizenship competences development. The approach of the Media Resilience Programme to target learners of all ages is what is needed for citizenship education as well.

It must be highlighted that citizenship education, as understood by the Lifelong Learning Platform and its members, represents an all-encompassing term which considers local, regional and national nuances. Therefore, peace education, which is associated with it in certain contexts, is essential. Deeply interconnected with peace and intercultural understanding is the process of decolonising curricula and ensuring that each perspective is carefully presented. This is required to enrich the



learning process and bring all learners together around a shared understanding of the world's complexity. A model of citizenship education that includes peace education must be made accessible to all so that they can understand their responsibilities if they or their country become victim, bystander or aggressor in contexts of violence. Equally, the **internationalisation of education and training** is a pillar for world peace and mutual understanding, as it enables learners to connect across borders, foster intercultural dialogue, and build solidarity.

LOOKING FORWARD: LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL FACETS OF RECONSTRUCTION

Though we call for ceasing all attacks on lifelong learning, preventing war crimes that curtail the universal rights from the civilian populations requires raising awareness of the aftermath. **The complete halting of a violent conflict will not bring back what was destroyed or lost and will not erase the trauma that people went through.** For them to smoothly resume their lifelong learning process there is a need for significant investment into the reconstruction of education and training institutions, into trauma support, into services that can support the resumption of learning while people deal with the surrounding challenges. **Reconciliation, understanding, and solidarity are further crucial aspects which peace education can promote**, as the people who found themselves on different sides of a conflict will need to learn to live together and break the cycle of violence.

This is where the EU Preparedness Union Strategy comes to the forefront. With ambitions to develop learning resources and guide curricular adaptations at national level, **it speaks little of conflict resolution and community building as competences which in fact strengthen the resilience of Europeans.** Though media literacy and citizenship education remain essential, **EU's preparedness hinges also on solidarity between Member States and their population**, and in a strong belief in the EU project. For this reason, competences on trust-building, conflict-resolution, and in general the promotion of solidarity should become essential to be included in the guidelines prepared for the Member States. Moreover, it is crucial to implement such approaches in a **cross-curricular manner**, which is relevant for media literacy and citizenship education as well. However, the cross-curricular implementation must not prevent thorough assessment of preparedness competences, nor make the topics a negligible add-on, but ensure that they are a central goal for education and training. Though cross-curricular, they must be **tied with examples relevant for the learners within their community, and embedded into practical learning activities.** The LLLPlatform welcomes the involvement of civil society stakeholders in the development of such resources, considering how they work with non-formal and informal methodologies of teaching and learning, how they can tailor learning according to community needs, and how they can embed transversal competences development across a multitude of learning initiatives.

INVESTING IN DEMOCRACY IS NOT A COST: CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY BUILDING

The EU Civil Society Strategy tackles to a great extent capacity building for civil society organisations which support Europeans to be active participants in society. **Ensuring that civil society is an**



objective in itself ensures that resources are allocated for a sector that already implements numerous EU initiatives, and connects the grassroots level with the European level, boosting the outreach of EU initiatives in all corners of the Union. This brings further trust and support in the EU project and increases the resilience of the entire EU.

However, the Strategy speaks of direct support for national-level civil society stakeholders, with **insufficient reference to EU-level civil society**. The national stakeholders have intentionally set up EU-level networks to facilitate cross-border collaboration, with increased capacity building, and with translating the EU decision-making process and ensuring the national level perspective is represented. **To this end, a healthy ecosystem requires support for both the grassroots and network levels in the EU.**

Furthermore, particular references to education and training in the Civil Society Strategy are minimal, yet again viewing civil society as a service provider rather than a stakeholder that aggregates the perspectives of the common citizens. **Civil society organisations do not secure Europe's defence simply because they implement social policies where governments have cut down on public investment. They ensure this defence by giving people a voice in policymaking, and creating an ecosystem in which all Europeans contribute to the decision-making that impacts them.** This is what creates trust and support. However, for civil society to be able to engage Europeans in this way, it needs to also build the capacity of people to be active participants in society. This is where the Civil Society Strategy should be better connected with the European Democracy Shield, and ensure that funding for such activities is ensured.

A CALL TO ACTION

The Lifelong Learning Platform stands for the right to education and training for all and as such we defend the rights of learners and educators as well as support the education and training providers to develop inclusive learning environments. In this regard we call:

- For the development of targets on citizenship competences attainment and on the participation of learners in citizenship education which are embedded in the monitoring of the implementation of the European Democracy Shield and the EU Preparedness Union Strategy. The targets should be built on the existing ones and future initiatives under the Union of Skills.
- For the co-development of EU Citizenship Competence Framework with stakeholders, and focus on the development of attitudes, while also including the values referred to in the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC).
- For ensuring a better connection between the EU Preparedness Union Strategy and European Democracy Shield to ensure more intergenerational learning opportunities, and more opportunities for adults to also develop citizenship competences, while providing



opportunities for such learning opportunities under the upcoming Intergenerational Fairness Strategy.

- For immediate suspension of attacks on lifelong learning in active conflicts, and repercussions from EU and international authorities towards those violating the human right to education.
- For reinforcement of citizenship education across all levels of learning, from early childhood education and care to adult education, and including all non-formal and informal learning contexts. This would require ensuring adequate resources for it in each such environment, curricular mainstreaming and development of meaningful assessment procedures for citizenship competences.
- For safeguarding and promoting international education and training, and learning mobility opportunities, recognising that the internationalisation of learning and education is a pillar for world peace and mutual understanding.
- For emergency support to regions affected by conflict, to ensure that lifelong learning can be continued or that learners can be provided alternatives to pursue lifelong learning.
- For a broader understanding of preparedness, which includes intercultural understanding and also boosts solidarity and cooperation between people living within the EU, and with people living beyond the borders of the EU.
- For the EU and its Member States to take an active role in upholding their legal obligations under international law in preventing such crimes to be committed.
- For the EU to expand the scope of the EU Civil Society Strategy to EU-level civil society organisations as well, and foresee more investment in capacity building actions for civil society staff, but also for civil society to implement with Europeans as their target group.

