



# CHOOSING EDUCATION AS EUROPE'S DEMOCRACY SHIELD

## INVESTING IN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION OVER DEFENCE FOR LASTING PEACE

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Recent EU and NATO policy developments signal a growing alarming trend toward securitisation :


- NATO allies have just committed to spending 5% of GDP on defence, with 3.5% on hard military capabilities – exceeding what most EU Member States currently invest in education;
- The European Commission has placed security, defence, and competitiveness at the core of its agenda, justified by the promotion of peace and democracy and called for a creation of an “EU Democracy Shield” to strengthen resilience from external threats;
- The ReArm Europe Plan of President von der Leyen aims to finance €800 billion over the next four years to finance a massive wamp-up of defence spending.

This shift is reshaping public attitudes towards anti-democratic, militaristic sentiments and is accelerating Europe's drift from a peace project toward a militarised identity (as shown, for instance, in the increased support of mandatory military service by EU citizens).

Global experience shows that increasing militarisation leads not to greater security and democracy, but to instability, human rights violations – in particular children rights – , and democratic erosion.

Europe does not need more weapons. What is urgently needed is a new vision of security grounded not in fear or militarisation, but in the everyday practice of democracy, solidarity and social justice. A resilient democracy requires engaged citizens who have the knowledge, skills, and lived experience to protect democratic values. But such citizen engagement needs to be cultivated from a very early age.

If the EU is serious about building resilient democratic societies, it must recognise that education is the foundation.



**As a European Educational Network, our work is based on the understanding that democratic education – starting from early childhood – is the most effective long-term investment in safeguarding democracy.**

It empowers young people to become aware of themselves, active citizens, capable of peaceful conflict resolution, valuing diversity, standing against discrimination, and participating meaningfully in democratic life.

This requires more than teaching about democracy. It demands education systems that offer children and young people daily opportunities to practice democracy – in classrooms, in school governance, and in their communities.

Investing in democratic education equips young people with critical skills to:


- think independently and critically;
- understand themselves and others;
- participate actively in decisions that affect their lives;
- engage in dialogue and resolve conflicts peacefully;
- restore justice through equitable participatory processes.

Such skills are essential to countering polarisation, resisting authoritarian narratives, and sustaining democratic culture in the long term.

At present, however, education systems across Europe too often reinforce disengagement, division, and competitiveness – rather than fostering civic skills and democratic engagement.

This can and must change.

We urge the European Commission and Member States to establish concrete instruments and coordination mechanisms to place democratic education at the centre of Europe's vision for security and resilience, and to ensure that all children and young people in Europe have the opportunity to learn, practice, and live democracy.



In order to advance a true “Democracy Shield”, we call on the European Commission and Member States to:

- Ensure that curricula in Member States integrate the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), promoting a lived experience of democracy and support a dedicated strategy, in close consultation with civil society and education stakeholders, to guide national implementation and provide long-term, structural support;
- Encourage Member States to provide sustainable funding for an education that is truly anchored on children’s rights – taking the art. 12 of the UNCRC seriously : respecting children's right to be listened and to participate in the decision affecting their life at school, while safeguarding the independence and pluralism of educational content;
- Invest significantly in the European Education Area, firstly by strengthening the Erasmus+ under its current structure, dedicating more resources to training for in-service and pre-service teachers to build the capacity of educators in delivering democratic education and participatory pedagogies, departing from existing virtuous examples;
- Strengthen EU-level coordination and funding for innovative educational practices anchored on already existing EU initiatives (ie. Pathways to School Success, the Life Competences Framework, RFCFC Framework).
- Support the scaling up of proven initiatives – such as school-based participatory governance models, peace education programmes, self-directed education – that empower young people to experience and practice democracy in their everyday lives;
- Mainstream democratic education across all relevant EU policies, including youth, culture, digital, migration and inclusion, and not limit it to isolated programmes.

The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) provides a key opportunity to deliver on this commitment, ensuring that democracy is not simply taught as theory, but lived by young people across Europe.

A generation of empowered, engaged citizens is Europe’s strongest defence against authoritarian threats, and the only path to lasting peace.



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