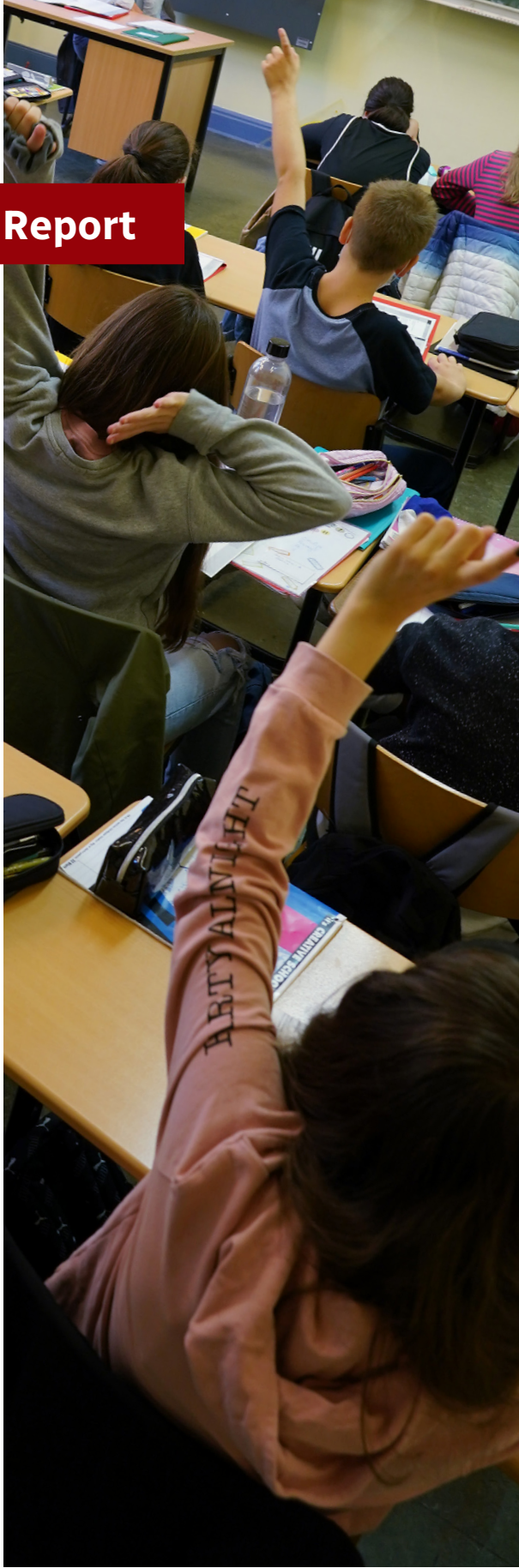




Report

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Improving Civic Education in the Western Balkans

*The Experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Montenegro, and Serbia*

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Summary

Civic education is critical in building democratic resilience. Yet, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, it remains an underdeveloped, inconsistently implemented, and politically marginalized part of the education system. Civic education is included in the school curriculum in the three countries, but its delivery often misses the mark, due to weak institutional frameworks, lack of teacher motivation and support, and limited political will for reforms. As taught now, instead of fostering informed, critical, and engaged citizenship, the subject leaves young people unprepared to participate actively and vulnerable to disinformation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, civic education has been a mandatory school subject since 2001, but fragmentation across 13 education ministries produces significant disparities in content and quality. In Montenegro, it was downgraded to an elective subject in 2017, effectively eroding its presence in schools. In Serbia, it is elective and competes with religious education, reinforcing the notion that the two are mutually exclusive. Across the region, the subject suffers from insufficient resources, low institutional priority, and low student engagement.

The gap between subject design and implementation persists. Although civic education is a well-designed part of the education system on paper, in practice it is often peripheral, theory-heavy, and disconnected from everyday life. Students are expected to memorize rather than to engage and to debate. There is inconsistency in schools as it largely depends on the motivation of a few teachers. For teachers, selection criteria are loose and professional development is rare or dependent on external support, and there is little career incentive to teach the subject. Civil society organizations play a vital compensatory role by developing materials, organizing extracurricular activities, and training teachers, yet these efforts remain donor-dependent and unsustainable without state support.

Reforming civic education requires bridging the gap between civic knowledge and civic action. This entails a shift to experiential learning that develops critical thinking, media literacy, and democratic participation. There is a need for improving teacher training and certification, embedding civic education as a standalone and visible subject, and fostering cooperation between ministries, educators, and civil society. Greater parental awareness and public advocacy are essential to raise the status of the subject and build societal support for reform.

Ultimately, strengthening civic education is a strategic investment in democratic culture and social cohesion. By institutionalizing inclusive, participatory, and practical civic learning, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia can empower young people as informed, responsible citizens and improve the quality of democracy. Effective civic education is not only an educational priority but also a democratic imperative for the region's future stability.

Introduction

“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife”, the American philosopher and education reformer John Dewey wrote.¹ Theoreticians of participatory and deliberative democracy have argued that democracy is sustained through the infrastructure of active and informed citizens. In the Western Balkans, the lived experience of active citizenship is becoming increasingly visible, with young people turning dissatisfaction into civic action. Since November 2024, youth-led protests across the region have highlighted a growing demand for democratic accountability and institutional reforms. Following tragic events in Serbia and in Montenegro, young people took to the streets. But protests are only one element of engaged citizenship, and they may not fulfill their potential in democratizing society without complementary ones. A crucial one is civic education in schools, which provides young people with foundational skills and values that nurture democratic engagement, which are particularly needed in societies undergoing democratic transition. Historically, civic education has been recognized as a building block for functional societies. Sometimes the connection between democratization and education is even more apparent, as in the case of the protests in Montenegro where one of the demands has been reinstating civic education as a mandatory subject in schools. In the region, the effectiveness of civic education is inconsistent despite its inclusion in some way in school curricula. Many students lack opportunities for practical engagement in democratic processes, leading to a gap between theoretical knowledge and its application. Narrowing this gap requires rethinking how civic education is taught in schools, integrating participatory methods, and fostering critical thinking to empower students as active citizens.

This paper analyzes the state of civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. It first looks at the conceptual and historical foundation of civic education and its relevance to democratic resilience. It then examines how civic education is institutionalized within the European and EU frameworks, before considering the democratic context of the Western Balkans. The subsequent sections provide a comparative analysis of the state of civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, identifying common problems, implementation gaps, and structural barriers. The paper then discusses the consequences of weak civic education for democratic participation and political culture. It concludes by offering short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations to enhance the impact of civic education in the region. The paper is based on a combination of desk research (covering relevant policy documents, curricula, academic literature, and international frameworks on civic education) and of interviews with educators across various sectors, including schools, research institutes, advisory institutions, and civil society, as well as with students who were involved in recent protests in Montenegro and Serbia.

From Democratic Theory to European Practice

From the 17th-century philosophers to democratization efforts after the Second World War, civic education was envisioned as a means to educate citizens who would make informed choices, exercise their rights, and contribute to the overall improvement of their country. In the late 20th century, with the work of organizations such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, the concept of what constitutes an educated citizen has

expanded beyond the traditional notion of someone with a general education acquired from primary to university schooling. Civic education became a concept focused on developing skills and knowledge that enable people to be active citizens, to promote democracy, to exercise their rights, and to familiarize themselves with their civic obligations. In Europe, the development of civic education can be traced through the work of the Council of Europe²—notably the initiatives related to its Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship, Human Rights Education—and others, in which it has taken shape as a toolbox for empowering individuals to understand and practice democracy.³ Given the challenges that democratic societies continually face, civic education is critical as a means of building social cohesion and strengthening democratic principles. The emphasis of the Council of Europe, and by extension its members, on civic education reflects a broader mission to strengthen democratic security, ensuring that all citizens, particularly young people, are equipped to contribute to and sustain democratic societies. As such, civic education is not only a means of personal development but a collective investment in the future of democracy itself.

The EU provides a strong supporting mechanism for developing civic education in member states and in candidates for membership, in addition to the framework offered by the Council of Europe. In its accession process, the EU highlights the importance of civic education for candidate countries, in two negotiation chapters particularly. Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) recognize the connection between civic education and participatory citizenship, tolerance, and democratic values. Relatedly, policy documents, such as the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027)⁴, stress the importance of active youth engagement and democratic participation, and the European Education Area⁵ and the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)⁶ identify civic and digital competencies as crucial components of inclusive and resilient

Best Practice: The Finland Example

Assessing civic education can be done with reference to cases of best practice. Notably, Finland is widely praised for its comprehensive approach, with civic education based on a clear legal framework and is a distinct school subject. This includes legal recognition and state funding for nonformal programs (learning activities offered outside the regular school curriculum), a cross-curricular approach (bringing civic-education themes into different school subjects), and clear and measurable learning outcomes. Civic education is delivered through multidisciplinary learning modules at all educational levels and is mandatory in lower and upper-secondary education, commencing at the age of 12. There is a strong emphasis on student participation, volunteering, awareness-raising, and other engagement-focused activities. Schools are intended as spaces where students can acquire the skills, competencies, and values needed for active citizenship. Finland's example provides a benchmark for civic education systems, indicating that they require a solid legal foundation, a clear and shared vision by different stakeholders, commitment by state institutions, and the involvement of nonformal education and civil society actors.*

* Monika Pažur, [Analysis of the Possibilities for Non-Formal Civic Education: Croatia, Finland, Austria, and Romania](#), Gong, 2024.

education systems. Similarly, the European Pillar of Social Rights, particularly Principle 1, highlights access to quality education and lifelong learning as essential to full societal participation.⁷ For candidate countries, aligning civic education with EU principles and broader democratic standards would strengthen citizens' trust in the necessary reform process and improve policy coherence between national and EU legislation, as required by the accession process.

Democracy and Civic Education in the Western Balkans

Nearly over two decades into their democratic transitions, the Western Balkans countries—which mostly gained independence following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s or through self-determination in the early 2000s—continue to face persistent political challenges while they pursue EU membership. Regional trends reveal slow progress in democratization, weak political culture, political stagnation, and declining public trust in institutions. The experiences of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia illustrate these different but crucial aspects of democratic difficulty. Freedom House rates all three as “partly free”, with Montenegro scoring highest.⁸ The Varieties of Democracy Institute rates Bosnia and Herzegovina as a “‘lower bound’ electoral democracy”, Montenegro as an “electoral democracy”, and Serbia as an “electoral autocracy”.⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit rates Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro as “flawed democracies” and Serbia as a “hybrid regime”.¹⁰ Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles to cultivate a unifying democratic culture under the country's complex power-sharing government system. Montenegro, recently cited as the EU accession front-runner in the region, scores low on some democratic indicators, such as political culture. Serbia has been experiencing for nearly a year large student protests against what analysts describe as a competitive authoritarian regime.

Despite differences in context, all three countries share the urgent need to strengthen their democratic resilience and promote active citizenship. Addressing these challenges is crucial both to reverse the democratic erosion and to align with the EU's Copenhagen Criteria for membership. By ensuring that civic education is a thriving and continuously improving element of their school system, these countries can create a more informed and engaged citizenry capable of contributing to a more democratic society. As members of the Council of Europe, they have committed themselves to advancing civic education, reflecting a broader recognition that the active participation of citizens aware of their rights and responsibilities sustains democracy.

In each of the three countries, civic education is in some manner integrated into the school system and the work of several well-established civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as supported by international organizations. Some Council of Europe frameworks, like Education for Democratic Citizenship, provide guidelines for developing civic education programs that will empower citizens to participate in and strengthen democratic processes actively.¹¹

The unrealized potential of civic education in the region is evident in the low levels of political knowledge and participation among its young people. A recent report on countries of Southeast Europe, including the Western

Balkans, offers an insight into the political attitudes and opinions of young people there.¹² It shows that these can be inconsistent, suggesting a limited understanding of politics and political concepts. This contributes to low levels of political participation, with many young people showing little interest in engaging with political life beyond the minimum of voting in elections or supporting online petitions. Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia show little interest in non-electoral activities, such as volunteering or activism. Although the study notes a slight increase in young people's interest in and self-assessed knowledge about politics compared with earlier iterations, both remain very low. Fewer than 30% of respondents in the three countries rated highly their knowledge of politics, which, while subjective, influences young people's attitude toward civic engagement.¹³

The study also shows that support for democracy as a preferred form of government is decreasing among young people in the region, as well as that nearly half of those who said they strongly supported democratic values also paradoxically expressed openness to authoritarian solutions, such as their country having a single strong leader not limited by elections or parliamentary oversight. Young men who identify with right-wing ideologies reported slightly higher political engagement and self-assessed political knowledge. Importantly, many young people did not perceive their political knowledge as sufficient, despite the fact that, at least in theory, they have received some civic education through formal schooling. This indicates that education systems in the region are not instilling in young people the confidence for active citizenship. They do not feel prepared to participate fully in political processes. Strengthening civic education could help address this gap, equipping them with the knowledge, critical-thinking abilities, and motivation needed to engage effectively in democratic life.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Civic education was introduced in the school system in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2001. It is a mandatory subject in primary and secondary (vocational and gymnasium) schools. It is typically implemented in the seventh to ninth grades of primary schools and in the second or third grades of secondary school.

The country's complex political system, which includes 13 ministries with authority over education, presents the most significant challenge. Republika Srpska and the Brčko District each have a centralized ministry, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has one advisory-level ministry and ten cantonal ministries, each with broad autonomy. This political fragmentation has led to 13 versions of the national framework curriculum, with substantial inconsistencies. For instance, in Croatian-language schools, regardless of the canton in which the school is situated, civic education is embedded within other subjects rather than taught as a standalone course. On the other hand, CSOs report that some cantons offer parts of the civic education course as separate elective subjects: they note that students are presented with a choice between subjects focused on health and the environment or on citizenship and politics. This is not in line with the national framework, which suggests that such subjects should be consolidated into a single civic education course. However, the political fragmentation and the large degree of autonomy that educational institutions, schools, and ministries have resulted in the blurring of the line between what is mandatory and what is not. According to practitioners, offering a fragmented version of civic education does not inform students about a comprehensive citizenship identity; for example, the option of choosing between learning about being environmentally conscious and being an active citizen confuses their

perception of foundational civic roles. Like with other subjects, students are graded in civic education in a way that prioritizes memorization over analytical and participatory learning.

Outside state institutions, the organization most involved in civic education is CIVITAS, an internationally funded CSO that has been active since the early 2000s. It plays a quasi-institutional role, supporting the development of the national and other curricula. Its involvement is politically contentious, particularly in Republika Srpska, where it is perceived as external interference. CIVITAS also leads in teacher education and offers certifications, while universities and public institutions are mostly uninvolved.

A notable positive example is the Ja, Građanin (I, Citizen) project, also led by CIVITAS. It offers students hands-on experience with public policy through a national-level competition. However, ministries often sideline it by relegating it to extracurricular status, or removing it entirely, as in Republika Srpska. While beneficial for its practical focus, the project is primarily designed by teachers and offers students limited input, which reduces opportunities for critical thinking and student ownership.

Montenegro

Civic education was introduced in Montenegro in 2006 as a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools. However, in 2017, it was downgraded to an elective subject, with students allowed to choose between religious or civic education. Since then, CSO representatives suggest, civic education is no longer consistently taught in some schools or in some others is entirely dropped as a subject. It is unclear whether the latter is as a result of no students opting for it or because it is not offered as an option. CSOs have called on the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation to make civic education mandatory again and to strengthen programs for teaching it. Since 2024, they have petitioned the government to reform the civic-education curriculum as part of a broader education reform effort. Similarly, the student-led protests from November 2024 to March 2025 included the demand to reinstate civic education as a mandatory component of the curriculum.¹⁴

Montenegro has a centralized Ministry of Education. Of the three countries, it has the loosest criteria for selecting civic-education teachers. CSOs report that, while the ministry claims civic education may be given back its mandatory status as part of cross-curricular reform, this is not expected to occur before 2035. There is no official timeline, curriculum, or strategy regarding the subject. There has been a public discussion organized by the ministry on the Draft Strategy for Educational Reform 2025–2035, but its published results do not offer insights into the status of the subject. According to different studies at the time, civic education was considered underdeveloped even when it was a mandatory subject. It often avoided “controversial” or “politically sensitive” topics, leading to cases where related extracurricular CSO activities, such as International Day of Tolerance commemorations, were reportedly censored in schools. CSOs describe the ministry as slow to grant permissions and largely uncooperative on civic-education initiatives. There are no sustained partnerships between the ministry and civil society on this topic. Without concrete steps and institutional commitment, civic education remains sidelined, despite increasing public demand for taking actions to improve it.

Serbia

In Serbia, civic education was introduced in the school system, with the same status in primary and secondary education, as an elective subject in 2001. It is offered as an alternative elective option to religious education, which was introduced earlier. This has created a perceived rivalry between the two subjects and fostered a false notion that students must choose between being good believers or good citizens, as if the two are mutually exclusive. Currently, only one-third of students elect to attend civic education classes whereas two-thirds take religious education ones instead. Parents choose elective subjects for their children from the first to the fourth grade of primary school, and children can do so from the fifth grade and are allowed to change their mind annually. Most organizations interviewed, including the Institute for Advancement of Education and Upbringing, note that parents and students are mostly unaware of what civic education offers. Religious institutions promote religious-education classes while civic education enjoys no similar promotion, especially given the high turnover of teaching staff for and the lack of ownership of the subject.

The fact that civic education is not part of the core curriculum leads to its low status and institutional marginalization. Education is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The Institute for Advancement of Education and Upbringing, one of its advisory bodies, develops and updates curricula and has from 2020 to 2025 produced new civic-education materials and programs for schools and educators, from handbooks for educators to practical guidelines on integrating democratic culture into all school subjects. However, schools are not obligated to adopt these materials, which are utilized in a fragmented manner. Organizations such as Građanske Inicijative (Civic Initiatives), Zaječarska Inicijativa (Zajecar Initiative), the OSCE, and the United Nations Children's Fund have provided critical training, curricula, and material support.

The Institute for Advancement of Education and Upbringing worked on a pilot project with the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to incorporate practical civic-education student projects in classes through intra-school competitions. However, despite the interest from the ministry, which supports a limited number of intra- and inter-school competitions each year, the pilot project was not further developed. The Association of Civic Education Teachers, which is legally responsible for organizing school competitions that qualify for ministry funding, says there was a lack of human resources to run these events, which resulted in the pilot project being abandoned.

The lack of resources is influenced by the absence of strict criteria for selecting civic-education teachers, which leads to significant fluctuations in the pool of teachers as one assigned to the subject in one year can not be in the next. In some schools, experts report, the leadership assigns teachers to civic education as a "punishment". Where there are motivated teachers, students have the opportunity to participate in study visits, form student parliaments, or engage in CSO projects.

In the best cases, schools have an engaged administration and dedicated teaching staff who view opportunities for improvement in civic education as a chance to benefit the entire community. In one example offered by an expert involved in evaluating civic education in the country, school directors in mixed communities viewed civic education as the most effective way to promote tolerance among them.

All CSOs interviewed report significant variations in the quality of teaching the subject, with some schools excelling and others barely teaching it. Some students who participated in the protests that began in November 2024 say that they became active and that they learned to organize and to employ democratic processes through their actions rather than through any school education.

Ultimately, civic education in Serbia is supported isolated efforts by committed individuals and civil society, but the lack of state support, continuity, and public visibility for the subject limits its potential to cultivate democratic competencies on a national scale.

Common Challenges and Structural Weaknesses

Despite efforts to integrate it into the school systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹⁵ Montenegro,¹⁶ and Serbia,¹⁷ civic education often fails to equip young people there with the knowledge or skills needed to participate actively in democratic life. Lack of normative precision, marginalization of the subject, and non-motivated educators leave students disconnected from political realities.¹⁸ Despite being a mandatory subject in Bosnia and Herzegovina and an elective one in Montenegro and Serbia, civic education is in fact only nominally part of the school system in all three countries. The challenges are multifaceted and include weak policy frameworks dependent on subsequent decisions or directives from ministries or other bodies, educators being motivated by securing their job rather than by the subject matter, a lack of practical application, and insufficient integration into the broader educational framework. Civic education tends to be treated as a peripheral subject and is not given the emphasis and resources needed to make a significant impact, especially in Montenegro and Serbia. Additionally, civic education lacks strong societal backing. Many parents are unfamiliar with its purpose and do not encourage student engagement with it, while conservative segments of local communities view it as a form of political indoctrination.

The framework for civic education as a school subject in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia is underdeveloped and neglected. The education laws in all three countries define its status, with the Ministry of Education responsible for determining frequency of instruction, curricula, teaching materials, and educator qualifications. School directors and teaching boards can design timetables, hire teachers, and organize classes and extracurricular activities, giving them control over decisions that highly influence the quality of implementation.

In the three countries, the civic-education curricula are mostly built around theory and disconnected from the realities of political life, and they fail to engage students sufficiently. The approach to the subject is rarely experiential: simulations, debates, field visits, tournaments, and competitions are usually not included. When they are, it is through cooperation with CSOs. Similarly, practical elements, such as citizen initiatives and student-led projects, are often relegated to extracurricular activities.

Some curricula and teaching materials are relatively well-developed with room for technical improvements, according to assessments by CSOs. Public institutions such as the Institute for Quality Assurance in Serbia and CSOs such as CIVITAS in Bosnia and Herzegovina have collaborated with the ministries to develop programs. Secondary-school curricula build on concepts taught at the primary-school level, covering a broad range of topics beyond democracy and governance—including sexual and reproductive health, addiction, environmental consciousness, and globalization—to foster critical thinking and civic competencies. Some curricula incorporate practical work, but these activities are often moved to extracurricular hours, limiting inclusivity and student engagement. This undermines one of the key advantages of integrating civic education into the school system.

When it comes to civic education, the breadth of decision-making freedom that school administrations enjoy is a double-edged sword.

The implementation of civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia is also hindered by administrative marginalization in schools. In all three countries, it is supposed to be taught once a week during the school year but is often scheduled as the last class of the day, signaling a lower priority than that of core subjects. Educators report that this reinforces the perception that civic education is less important than other subjects. In some cases, the classes are not even held or are quietly dropped entirely. In such circumstances, programs rely more on motivated individuals than on the system. The criteria set by the Ministries of Education for the selection of civic-education teachers are relatively loose, and school administrations, particularly school directors, have much leeway in hiring decisions, leading to a broad range of educators taking on the classes. The classes tend to be assigned to teachers who require additional hours to meet their workload and maintain job security, rather than to those who are motivated and qualified to teach civics. And performance and motivation in teaching this subject does not further teachers' advancement prospects, as the only relevant factor is the number of classes they teach. This approach discourages professional development as teachers have no incentive to take on civic education as a subject because it will not impact their overall professional position. Furthermore, many teachers are not motivated to improve their civic-education teaching methods because they know that the class may be reassigned the following year to another teacher in need of additional hours. All this leads to inconsistencies and a lack of thoroughly educated and committed people to teach it.

When it comes to civic education, the breadth of decision-making freedom that school administrations enjoy is a double-edged sword. In some cases, it yields positive results. All interviewees said that there are cases of strong and positive engagement of some teachers, of extracurricular activities where students engage voluntarily, or interactive classrooms that yield community projects. For example, interviewees in Serbia pointed to a case in which a school director in an ethnically mixed community recognized the potential of civic education and ensured that the subject's teacher was motivated, included civic education in the early morning classes (a time usually reserved for math or languages), and collaborated with the community. As a result, the number of students from both ethnic communities choosing to attend civic-education classes grew, fostering more cohesion and space for dialogue in the community. However, in other cases the political nature of the appointment of school directors poses a significant challenge and can result in a lack of interest in the subject. In the worst cases, some school directors completely sideline it. Where this happens, schools often rely on engaged teachers to take it on, who face obstacles ranging from administrative scrutiny to ostracism by their peers for disagreeing with the school

administration's political opinions. There are reports of teachers developing two versions of their lessons: one that aligns with institutional expectations and another that adequately covers the subject matter. Meanwhile, teachers of other subjects rarely integrate civic education concepts into their classes, further isolating the subject from the broader curriculum. Motivated teachers often seek additional training through CSOs, but in their private time.

In all three countries, these shortcomings leave civic education very reliant on the work of CSOs, which have stepped in to fill the gaps left by the school system. CSOs often collaborate with schools to improve the delivery of civic education, providing most of the content and skills, including teacher education, study materials, and networking opportunities. They also provide nonformal approaches often as a replacement for the inefficient or limited formal ones provided by schools. But while civil society keeps civic education alive, its impact is primarily limited to urban areas. This reliance is not a sustainable solution in the long term and systemic solutions should originate from state institutions instead. For one thing, the established and credible CSOs that are involved are dependent on, and their work is driven by, donors whose priorities can change. CSO programs aiming to enhance citizens' capacities and values should not entirely rely on outside support, as most currently do. Without a comprehensive and integrated approach that involves formal education and the work of civil society, the effectiveness of civic education in fostering democratic citizenship will remain insufficient.

Since the introduction of civic education in their school systems, there has been no improvement in its teaching in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, or Serbia. In some places, it has even deteriorated. There is little research into and evaluation of civic education's effectiveness, and the entirety of available information comes from CSOs, many of which are responsible for educating students in the subject and developing the necessary learning materials. What there is shows that, instead of evolving to address the changing needs and attitudes of young people, civic education programs are outdated and disconnected from the realities of political life. As a result, they fail to effectively counteract the growing challenges faced by the youth or to engage with younger generations.

The Need for Reform

As a result of all the shortcomings noted above, the potential of civic education to contribute to democratization and citizens' participation is largely unrealized in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. They risk weakening their democratic capacities if they do not change the way they implement civic education. A comprehensive reform, recognizing the roles of the school sector and civil society, is crucial in preparing young citizens for active democratic participation. Without it, future generations will be increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and political instability will be more likely. These three societies risk falling into a never-ending cycle: a disinterested and disillusioned society neglects civic education, which breeds apathy among younger generations, perpetuating the status quo. However, balancing the noted general political apathy in these countries, the rise of recent, primarily student-led social movements suggests a growing awareness of civic responsibility among the youth. The protests show that there is a latent sense of accountability and civic duty that surfaces when triggered, even if they also raise the question how much of this can be attributed to existing civic

education.¹⁹ Nevertheless, as the protests demonstrate an undeniable desire for systemic change, this reinvigorated activism could be a critical moment to break with inadequate practices.

To date, the status of civic education in schools does not seem to be a priority for policy improvement in the three countries. Even when recommendations or priorities for improvement from CSOs (in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro) or auxiliary ministry bodies (in Serbia) address the issue, practitioners and experts in the field say having civic education as an obligatory subject with a better status and position in the curriculum and teaching schedules is a politically contingent long-term goal.

The consensus among experts and stakeholders is that civic education should continue to be part of the school system in the three countries as this enables reaching a maximum of young people, who should have equal access to developing basic civic competencies. It is also seen as the most sustainable approach, to be supplemented by the work of CSOs. However, the topics for civic-education classes and the manner in which are chosen need to be addressed, with recognition of the importance of practical components and having students involved in setting priorities and choosing the items they wish to discuss. This enables creativity, fosters a deeper understanding of abstract concepts, promotes critical thinking, and encourages greater ownership among students. It must also be recognized that teaching values and processes should precede teaching theory and encouraging memorization of facts about political systems.

The status of teachers also needs reform—it is the quality of how civic education is provided in classrooms, not the subject's formal status, that drives student interest and learning outcomes. The current situation in the three countries fosters discontinuity in teaching and demotivates teachers from engaging meaningfully with the subject. However, to ensure that teachers are of the required quality, school administrations and Ministries of Education need to provide more straightforward guidelines for teaching civic education, a systematic building of skills and competences for teachers, and better mechanisms for their selection that ensures they are motivated by the subject.

Civic education in the three countries would benefit from greater internal democratization within schools as classrooms should be a space for critical reflection among students and the exploration of topics, even when their opinions diverge from those of their teachers, to foster an overall democratic ethos within schools. Students tend to perform better in environments where they have a say in their learning priorities. While CSOs provide programs to promote democratic schools, individuals who are part of schools need to sustain them beyond the scope of a single project.

How To Reform Civic Education

In the short term, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia would benefit from increasing the visibility of civic education as a necessary and valuable component of the school system. While in these countries there is some outreach, primarily by CSOs and auxiliary educational bodies, to promote the importance of civic education,

this should focus on parents, particularly in Montenegro. While ministries remain inert or outright stall the improvement of the educational system, parents can be a strong supporting factor that will demand building civic competencies for their children. The research for this paper, particularly the feedback from educators, shows that parents must be aware of the subject, its content, and its purpose for this to happen. Campaigns and materials can thus first focus on building this understanding among parents, and then, in the long term, move toward generating concrete demands for improvement. This would require stronger and transparent cooperation among like-minded organizations and individuals. As seen in the example of the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing in Serbia, motivated individuals are also strong allies for reform who need to be supported in building even more extensive support for civic education.

In the three countries, no one really tracks where the process stands if an educational reform has been announced or introduced. Even when groups or coalitions, like the CSOs in Montenegro, advocate transparency in reform, they are easily overlooked by the authorities because parents and educators are excluded from them. Civil society watchdogs need their support to make the institutions more transparent and responsive. A strong coalition of civil society, parents, and educators can request more institutional accountability for structural reforms, ensuring that civic education adheres to quality standards and yields concrete educational outcomes.

All three countries would benefit from the recognition and integration of nonformal learning in civic education.

In the medium term, all three countries would benefit from the recognition and integration of nonformal learning in civic education. In one European survey, practitioners said the leading civic educators of the future will be not school teachers but youth leaders, social influencers, community leaders, and civil society activists.²⁰ This indicates that the spaces for developing critical thinking skills and civic values are increasingly found outside the school system, which can be a double-edged sword. Many of these new spaces are digital, and digital media play a growing role in civic learning and engagement. Social influencers and online communities can shape young people's political understanding, potentially more than formal education itself. But, while digital platforms can offer valuable insights and perspectives to young people, they are also rife with misinformation, biased content, and polarizing narratives that can distort their understanding of political and civic issues. Algorithmic social media, which are particularly popular with young people, often prioritize sensationalism over accuracy, leading to echo chambers where people are exposed only to viewpoints that reinforce their beliefs.²¹ Relying only on these sources of information undermines the foundation of democratic citizenship. Because many young people engage with and trust information shared by peers, influencers, and online communities more than they do traditional institutions, civic education must be strengthened while also adapting to these new realities. To remain relevant, it needs to extend into the new spaces where opinions are formed. CSOs are well positioned to bridge this gap because they can promote critical engagement and translate democratic values into formats that resonate with young audiences. To mitigate the risks and maximize the benefits of these trends, educational systems need a stronger connection to civil society, which would be formally accredited for providing civic education outside of schools. As seen in the degree of involvement of CSOs in democratic capacity-building, they have relevant knowledge to inform this, and they need to be recognized and included systematically as assets to civic education.

Additionally, the curriculum should emphasize more practical components for civic skills, such as critical thinking, media and digital literacy, and the importance of understanding democratic processes and community action. It should be flexible to allow student-focused learning to take a central role. Civic education in all three countries should enable students to determine the practical projects they work on. One example they could emulate is the Škola i Zajednica (School and Community) program in Croatia, in which students determine their priorities and topics of interest and teachers are primarily tasked with moderating. Ministries, auxiliary educational bodies, and CSOs can collaborate on a revised curriculum that is not dense with topics just so as to tick boxes, but is instead accessible, practical, and adaptable to different age groups. Civic-education programs must also reflect that the purpose of civic education in schools is inclusivity and ensure that practical projects and fieldwork are not voluntary or exclusive, but rather foster joint experiences and include as many students as possible.

The most necessary solutions to civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia are also the ones that require the more time to achieve. However, there is no unified vision of civic education to which the educational system can commit. All three countries would benefit from the institutionalization of teacher training and certification when it comes to the subject. Ministries should put in place standardized training programs, regularly recertify teachers, and ensure that faculties of pedagogy and university-teacher requalification programs offer specializations in civic education. This would reform the existing challenges of teacher education and build institutional capacity for teaching the subject. In addition, civic education or some level of building civic competencies should be offered to all teachers to facilitate the democratization of schools' ethos. Nonformal education programs should also focus on teachers beyond those directly involved in civic education. In a school where all teachers have a fundamental grasp of civic values, promoting a school culture that thrives on participation would be much easier. Such teachers would promote student councils, encourage participatory decision-making, and provide a safe space for students to engage critically with their surroundings. This approach would transform everything in the school experience, from advisory classes to selecting students for student parliaments, into a learning experience focused on active citizenship. A cultural shift requires a long-term mindset change among school administrations and educators, and the engagement of parents and civil society can support this cultural shift. Last, all three countries should work toward greater clarity in the status of civic education as a subject, whether mandatory or elective. There are different ways to do so, and any would be better than currently vague setups that encourage the marginalization of the subject. For instance, strategies could include introducing a unified and recognizable course name, allocating a core time slot on the weekly schedule, having permanent teaching staff for civic education, and having it feature more prominently in school activities and projects (exhibitions, school websites, school programs, ceremonies, and celebrations).

The most necessary solutions to civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia are also the ones that require the more time to achieve.

Given the challenges faced by all three countries in implementing civic education effectively, the EU offers more than abstract concepts of democratic standards. The accession process also includes important mechanisms and funding that can be used for the operationalization of reforms focused on civic education. Candidate countries

can access the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance to ensure that sectors directly related to the rule of law, civic engagement, and education reform also have financial support for reform processes.²² Apart from financial tools aimed at governments, the Erasmus+ programme offers opportunities for strategic school partnerships and projects that could target civic education.²³ Programs such as the European Solidarity Corps, EU4Youth,²⁴ and EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organizations²⁵ promote youth-led civic engagement and empowerment for civil society. However, utilizing these tools requires a strategic approach and alignment with EU priority areas. This is another reason why cooperation among ministries of education, CSOs, and auxiliary educational bodies is necessary to democratize the culture in schools and the outcomes of the school system. Through utilizing some of these mechanisms, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia could scale up promising projects, expand teacher-training opportunities, or institutionalize some of the nonformal practices that already give good civic learning results.

An additional way to mitigate implementation gaps is to integrate progress on civic education into the EU's accession reporting. The European Commission's annual Enlargement Reports have consistently flagged challenges such as youth disengagement, political apathy, and weak democratic culture in these three candidate countries.^{26 27 28} These trends are closely linked to the deficiencies in civic education systems outlined above. Including indicators on civic education's quality, implementation, and policy impact—such as for curricular reforms, student participation, and teacher training—would strengthen EU conditionality tools under Chapter 23. This would provide clear, measurable expectations and incentivize reforms that align with national and EU democratic objectives. Embedding civic education indicators into existing EU monitoring mechanisms could also help track youth resilience to populism and disinformation, both of which are growing concerns in the EU enlargement discourse.

An additional way to mitigate implementation gaps is to integrate progress on civic education into the EU's accession reporting.

Bosnia and Herzegovina could start by addressing the structural complexities noted and the need for a unified approach. While the constellation of ministries cannot be changed in the short term and without political contestation, it is more feasible to form an interministerial working group for civic education that would collaborate with civil society representatives to create a shared standard for the content, delivery, and assessment of civic education. The current national curriculum developed by CIVITAS can be the baseline to ensure that all subsequent ones meet the best standards. Such a working group could create the needed drive to mandate making civic education a standalone course across the entire school system. The current situation noted above dilutes the subject and undermines its visibility and value to students. Mandating that it should be standalone would clarify the status of civic education in schools, despite its nominal status as a mandatory subject. Furthermore, civic-education methodology and teacher education programs could be integrated into public universities and other educational bodies. Programs such as the one offered already by the Pedagogical Academy—a one-year course for university graduates who wish to requalify as teachers—can be expanded to ensure that all teachers receive a minimum understanding of civic education, and more detailed courses could be offered as electives to those who wish to specialize. While the system now relies on CIVITAS for teacher preparation, teaching standards, and certification, the responsible ministries need to work on creating broader institutional ownership and standardization for education professionals. This would also foster the perception of

civic education as locally grounded and increase its legitimacy in contested areas. Last, donors should focus more on facilitating exchange between state institutions and CSOs on civic education. Micro-grants or recognition schemes for schools that implement high-value participatory projects and decision-making, or that encourage civic action through projects would encourage them to work more with CSO, reinforcing what is taught in the classroom through practical experience.

In Montenegro, downgrading civic education to elective status has almost led to its disappearance in practice and the priority should be reinstating it as mandatory. Society at large should continue to demand transparency in decision-making when it comes to reforming curricula. The Ministry of Education should work with engaged CSOs to understand their demands for civic education as a mandatory subject. Phased implementation can be an interim solution, but it should start earlier than the target date of 2035 in the government's statements on education reform. The subject could be reintroduced initially in a limited way; for example by making the course mandatory for one school year only, in the final year of elementary and secondary schooling, and to keep it as elective in other years. The Ministry of Education should also develop and release a realistic, time-bound strategy that clearly defines objectives, outlines implementation steps, and assigns institutional responsibilities for civic education. It could also establish a national working group with civil society representatives to co-develop content, methods, and teacher-training modules. Civil society has kept civic education alive, and formalized cooperation would help build trust and leverage existing knowledge to create a comprehensive learning framework. The ministry should also provide a minimum standard for civic-education teachers and provide certified training. Montenegro should consider implementing a pilot program that allows students to select civic issues to explore and address through local projects. Last, though the student protests ended in March, civil society should continue collaborating with students on public advocacy campaigns to support civic education and raise awareness among parents and teachers about its purpose and benefits.

In Serbia, the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing has already developed proposals to resolve the contested issue of civic education's status as a core curriculum subject. One is to make the subject compulsory while reducing the number of years in which it is taught. This would resolve the issue of marginalization and false equivalence with religious education. However, civil society and parents must be actively engaged in demanding this proposal be adopted. One interim solution could be to pilot this approach in selected schools. To ensure that parents are willing to offer their support, CSOs should collaborate with the institute in an awareness campaign on civic-education content. Cooperation between civil society and the media cooperation is also essential in diversifying and broadening the reach among the target audience. In a more long-term perspective, the Ministry of Education should work on specifying more the role of teachers of civic education, with clear job descriptions and requirements. The lack of fixed teaching positions in this field prevents its professionalization. The high turnover of civic-education teachers also affects coalition-building among educators, who often lack the resources to sustain their networking and organizing efforts. The donor community should support teacher associations in organizing and in enhancing their capacity for advocacy and action. Such cooperation could also reactivate projects, such as the pilot project on practical civic learning that the OSCE supported. Donors could support such initiatives and encourage that cooperation on civic education is not entirely detached from the school system. Serbia could also introduce mechanisms for student feedback on the subject and, along with ongoing professional development for teachers to enable them to evaluate student feedback and

progress over time. This could be implemented to analyze how civic education influences civic behavior and values over time through the Institute for Evaluation, an advisory body of the Ministry of Education, and its existing work. This would provide evidence of impact and grounds for policy adjustments based on student experiences. The success of reforms in civic education ultimately will hinge on deeper structural issues in Serbia's governance. The implementation of most of the recommendations are heavily dependent on the consistent application of the rule of law and the depoliticization of decision-making processes at all levels of the school system. Civic education will remain vulnerable to neglect and inconsistencies as long as political loyalty trumps merit in appointments and policy implementation.

Conclusion

Civic-education reform in the Western Balkans. It is not merely an educational concern but also a democratic and geopolitical imperative in the context of the EU accession process for the countries of the region. The erosion of youth trust in democratic institutions, combined with civic disengagement and the rise of authoritarian tendencies, threatens the credibility of the promise of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Reinvigorating civic education presents a dual opportunity to cultivate a new generation of active citizens and to reaffirm the EU's role as a normative power there. By embedding civic education as a non-negotiable EU value and benchmark, EU actors and national policymakers can reinforce democratic development and regional stability. The enlargement process should recognize civic education as a foundational tool for building democratic resilience from the classroom outward.

Hannah Arendt wrote that "It is somewhat difficult to take a crisis in education as seriously as it deserves".²⁹ Yet the importance of education has been proven time and time again. It is clear that the Western Balkan countries would benefit from building up better their democratic resilience and that civic education is currently not fulfilling its role in that process. Civic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia is mainly symbolic, underutilized, and politically undermined. The core challenges are systemic: low subject status, visibility, and priority; politicized governance; weak accountability; lack of teacher specialization and professional standards; and overreliance on CSOs to fill structural gaps. However, effective civic education cannot exist in isolation from broader democratic governance. All three societies would benefit from the democratization of the school system, including the depoliticization of decision-making. A reformed system would shape people's participatory habits, reduce polarization, and rebuild public trust in institutions. As all three countries are struggling when it comes to transparency, accountability, and participation, it should be the goal of their civil society and international partners to champion the potential of civic education and insist on education reform in general be given a higher priority. Education reform should be strategic based on assessed national priorities, inclusive with more participation of parents and local communities, and supported by institutions that actively implement policies and engage civil society and other relevant stakeholders. The resulting system would engage youth and lead to more knowledgeable and participatory communities, and ultimately a sustained democratic culture.

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