# Citizenship Education Curriculum Making for Troubled Times

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**Abstrakt:** The rise of far-right forces in Europe, the increase in the number of illiberal and autocratic regimes, and influence operations against European democracies call for a new role of citizenship education. While education policy has previously focused on issues of justice, inequality and inclusion, the focus of new far-right parties and governments is now on curriculum content and related cultural issues. In this article, we discuss the implications of changes in the European political landscape for citizenship curriculum making. We propose a research and development approach that connects two broad perspectives – curriculum studies and critical educational scholarship – and covers three areas: study of changing concepts of citizenship and education needs of young people; analysis of factors contributing to connections and disconnections between European and national policies in citizenship education; and new models of curriculum making at the meso-sites. The necessity for broader collaboration between researchers across disciplines and national contexts is highlighted, and the potential as well as limits of the proposed approach to curriculum making in the field of citizenship education are discussed.

**Keywords:** curriculum, curriculum making, citizenship education, democratic education, illiberalism, Europe

On the 24th of February 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world and in particular the European states entered new uncharted waters (Terry, 2023). But long before that, the last decades have seen the emergence, recrystallisation and increase of right-wing political beliefs across liberal democracies leading to – and further fomenting through – a series of global sociopolitical transformations such as, the global financial crisis of 2008–9, and its fall out; the United Kingdom's exit from the EU in 2020; or the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Latest in this series of events, and apparently crucial for further developments, has been Trump's

**12**    re-election in 2024. This shift has been linked to rightist discourses arguing for a
return to nativist, sovereigntist, anti-liberal and even imperialist visions of the past
veiled in the rhetoric of national identity or common-sense politics (Krzyżanowski et
al., 2023; Mastrorocco, 2024; Wodak, 2021). Even though various parties may come
to power in European and other traditional democracies in the coming years, such
discourses will not disappear.

As the impact of anti-democratic forces is sobering when one considers that the
2023 global Democracy Index recorded the lowest average score for democratic
health in Europe, since its inception in 2006 (Economist Intelligence, 2024). Even in
countries not directly affected by war (yet) and where the rule of law still exists,
this period is characterised by an ever-increasing gulf between academic, policy and
popular understandings of democracy and education. These developments dispro-
portionally threaten the rights of minorities, migrants, LGBTQ+ people, and women,
and contribute to social unrest amidst increasing inflation and inequality as well as
falling standards of living within Europe (European Union, Eurostat, 2025).

These processes in different countries have somewhat different sources, forms
and manifestations. Therefore, there is no generally accepted conceptualization
and terminology yet, which is also reflected in our text (as one reviewer noted). We
are talking about far right or populist forces, or processes of democratic backsliding
that lead to the emergence of authoritarian or illiberal regimes. At the same time,
some of the authors we refer to below emphasize other features or connections,
to neo-conservatism, rise of oligarchy, but also to technolibertarianism (cyberlib-
ertarianism).

The anti-democratic promise of challenging the status quo can be particularly
attractive to some groups of youth whilst also being extremely deleterious to their
socio-cultural, emotional and economic lives. Thus, education is critical to free soci-
ety and particularly in promoting democratic qualities among young people (Snyder,
2024). The importance of citizenship education is recognised in European policy, by
including, for instance, citizenship competence as one of the eight key competenc-
es for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2018) as well as in United Nations
policy, such as through the principles of prosperity for all and fostering peaceful,
just and inclusive societies enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 "Quality
Education".[1]

As citizens and academics, we are concerned about these phenomena and their
implications for – and sometimes perhaps even their roots in – citizenship education.
In this paper, we aim to outline a blueprint for research and development activities
that could at least partially contribute to understanding and overcoming several
challenges faced on a societal level and within the education system in particular,
including:

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[1]    https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/

- the ongoing standardisation of curricula through outcomes-based priorities,
- the nationalist inflection within the treatment of citizenship across European contexts,
- the restriction of curricula through banning of critical material such as that related to LGBTQ+ inclusion or anti-racism by neo-conservative politics, but also attempts by forces from the opposite end of the political spectrum to silence some legitimate dissenting opinions,
- the fragmentation of curriculum-making networks through the persistent exclusion of diverse voices/perspectives,
- the influences of misinformation and misuse of digital media,
- variations and concerning occurrences in student attitudes towards European democratic principles and emerging findings of youth radicalisation.

This list should be understood as provisional and will require further critical review, as the manifestations and impacts of shifts to the far right (or other forms of populism) and authoritarian rule are not uniform across countries. In the field of education, we believe that the response to these challenges requires deep understanding of the changing models of democracy, citizenship and complex political education needs of youth. At the same time, we need to explore how to develop policies and curricula through new models of practice.

Exactly because of this wide, multi-levelled and across different sites agenda presented in this paper, we adopt the term 'citizenship education' as a broader one to 'civic education'. Although they are often interchangeably used in public and academic discourse, we draw on Kerr (1999) and McLaughlin (1992) to consider them as lying at the ends of a broad continuum, respectively denoting 'maximal' as opposed to 'minimal' approaches to citizenship and citizenship education. More particularly, *civics education* has a restricted scope of citizenship and who can be included, also characterised by 'thin', content-led, information-based and teacher-centred approaches in mainly formal education programmes. *Citizenship education* lies at the 'maximal' end of this continuum, because it is more inclusive of diverse populations as citizens and denotes a 'thick' and broader range of progressive educational community and school activities which emphasise active participation and process rather than content.

## 1 Impact of Policy Shifts and Rise of Illiberal Forces on Education and Youth

In this section, we first recall that even in countries with liberal democratic governments committed to the values of European integration, citizenship education has often been implemented in national curricular documents in very different ways. Then, we focus on the influence of new domestic actors in European (educational) policy whose agenda is in direct conflict with the goals of democratic citizenship. Another key new factor is the unprecedented level of influence organized by illiberal

**14**    governments of third countries and the development of the technical means used to do so. Finally, we provide some information on youth citizenship attitudes and values and their changes which further document reasons for concern.

Democratic European countries have often been characterized by the dominance of an economic ideology within educational policy; this is not surprising given the economic rationalities often fuelling the expansion of modern school systems in previous decades. Neoliberal forces have reconfigured public education as an input to the economy (Antikainen, 2010; Ball, 2012; Robertson & Dale, 2015). These imperatives have resulted in crowded curricular and school programmes and a culture of high-stakes assessment across subjects in national curricula, restricting the time given to citizenship education and the resources devoted to the holistic development of citizens for contemporary Europe (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2017). Even though all countries have been exposed to such forces at the supra-national site, there are still significant variances in the approaches to citizenship education across different European contexts. In fact, the report on the *Implementation of Citizenship Education Actions in the EU* has highlighted an overly strong focus on nationalist ideologies within citizenship education, informed by perspectives on national histories and culture, and economic ideology (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021).

Such variability in approaches towards citizenship education has so far been explained as a side effect of the emphasis on other curriculum domains, of the differential re-contextualisation of European and global citizenship discourses (Keating et al., 2009) or of challenges in relevant professional capacity on various sites where curriculum enactment, making or refraction occurs (Goodson & Mikser, 2023; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Recently, however, in various European countries at the national or regional level, political entities have come to power that purposefully interfere with the citizenship curriculum, eliminate important goals for which there had been overall consensus and replace them with their own, strongly ideologically driven content. For instance, for decades, one priority issue of education policy by European governments, whether they were centre left-wing or centre right-wing, had been issues of equality, justice and inclusion, reflected in measures to change the structure of the education systems to more equitable and accessible forms. As far right and other populist forces increasingly influence (directly or indirectly) education policy, governments' priorities are changing. Cultural issues, not social ones, come first (Giudici et al., 2025).

The rise of anti-democratic forces and authoritarian governments is thus already changing curricular policies across the region, despite the above mentioned European and international policies for education. The frequency of direct interventions in the curriculum is increasing. For example, the Bulgarian government has recently banned content based on non-traditional sexual orientation in early years education (Dukovska & Zheleva, 2024). At the same time, conservative political forces in the United Kingdom are advocating for policy to curtail teaching about colonial history, racism and white privilege, arguing for the political neutrality of curriculum (Murray, 2020).

From a policy perspective, these discourses and reforms stand in contradiction to the principles of solidarity and of non-discriminatory education, as enshrined in the *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development* (UNESCO, 2024). This not only works against the intent of European policy on citizenship education, but further risks eroding values of democracy among current and future generations of European citizens by, in the case of the examples given, restricting the curriculum through which they experience diversity and refusing to challenge antidemocratic ideology framed within a neoliberal 'depoliticization' of educational policy (Delahunty, 2024).

The erosion of EU values of solidarity and equality is notable beyond the policy or national curricular level. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022 – Damiani et al., 2024), for instance, has recorded generally positive attitudes towards the EU and being a citizen of Europe among lower secondary school students across several nations. However, there exists significant variation in these attitudes within individual European states, which also intersect with variables such as socioeconomic status (SES) and gender. In general, students from higher SES groups and those with higher levels of civic knowledge, demonstrated more positive attitudes to freedom of movement across the EU, with females representing a significantly higher proportion of agreement than males. Concerningly, 41% of students agreed that freedom of movement should be limited across the EU with students from low SES groupings demonstrating the highest values. While these findings support the importance of citizenship education, with it being positively correlated with more liberal attitudes to EU movement, this should be read against the widespread increases in students' observations of discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, poor people and those of African descent, respectively (Damiani et al., 2024, p. 40). These findings in particular indicate both the social increase in discrimination and students' vulnerability to such acts across Europe. Concerning evidence signals the emergence of youth radicalisation centred on racist/xenophobic and misogynistic ideologies (Reid & Valasik, 2018), along with increasing disconnections between researchers, policymakers, community and non-governmental bodies, parents, and teachers.

Moreover, we know very little about hostile information activities or strategic disinformation operations organized by various state and non-state actors (Legucka & Kupiecki, 2022), how they occur and what impact they have on youth and also on various actors in curriculum making. The evidence is rather anecdotal so far. For example, a long labour and criminal case was triggered when a Czech lower secondary teacher in April 2022, a few weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, declared that the Russian actions were legitimate and denied very basic facts about the war during an eighth-grade class. The school and subsequently the judiciary handled the issue only when the students themselves published records of the lesson on social media. Moreover, various Czech authorities – educational administration and the courts – subsequently handled the teacher's and students' actions very differently (Bartosz, 2025).

**16**     It is clear from these brief snapshots of European policy and research that there exist mismatches in European and national educational policies and decisions, as well as incongruencies that distort the aims of citizenship education, including its aims in building solidarity and cultivating critical thinking among students (European Parliamentary Research Service; 2021).

Educational research, particularly in critical curriculum studies, has emphasised the impact of neoliberal economic ideology and its effects on limiting the scope of citizenship education for a long time (e.g., Shapira et al., 2023; Keddie, 2014; Zhao, 2020). There exists, however, a significant difficulty in the uptake of this research in curriculum and policy across Europe (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2020). Despite the proliferation of educational research in the last two decades, the transfer and mobilisation of the produced knowledge is limited and often fails to be integrated appropriately in areas such as curricular reform (OECD, 2022). Besides, Apple (2004, 2018) reminds us that the successes of far right forces in education can be explained to some extent by the fact that some progressive reforms were too utopian in their conception of teachers and students, did not offer a real alternative to traditional school, or did not care enough about creating the conditions for the realization of their visions in practice. Therefore, many people listen to the promises of education that combine romantically distorted images of the traditional home, family, and school with promises of a competitive workforce and greater discipline of students.

Altogether, these related issues may restrict the potential of appropriately addressing the rise of anti-democratic forces through citizenship curricula and pedagogy, undermining broader European policy and solidarity, and leading to continued social fragmentation, unrest, and violence, through a neglect of the political needs of students. We are aware that education alone cannot solve all the challenges facing European societies in this or any area. Moreover, formal curricular frameworks are only one factor influencing the form and effects of teaching and learning (Bernstein 1990/2003, 1996/2000; Polikoff, 2021). Therefore, in the following section, we briefly present a broader concept of curriculum, which we have selected as the foundation for our further considerations and suggestions.

## 2 Current Understanding of "Curriculum"

As visions for the world are not uniformly shared by societies, curriculum has historically been contested, shaped by dominant curriculum ideologies and amalgamations of them. Different people in different contexts provide different answers as to what any society should aspire to through its education and schooling, therefore also ascribing different meanings to the term 'curriculum'. As Gordon (1988) put it 'education functions, at least in secular societies, as a text that says something about the things society considers sacred' (p. 446). Drawing on critical scholarship in education we thus understand curriculum not "simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge" (Apple, 1993), instead viewing it as inherently ideological and political.

Moreover, curriculum theorists have long insisted that curriculum is not reducible to the consensus or uniformity its manifestation as state-national official documents might suggest; rather curriculum is shaped at different administrative levels within education systems, such as the 'supra, macro, meso, micro, nano' levels (referring to the international, national, school, classroom and individual level respectively) (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009).

Expanding on these approaches, curriculum may be understood as a social practice enacted within and between different sites of activity, that is, as "multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated" (Priestley, 2019, p. 8). Thus, curriculum is a public project that is both made by social actors across multiple local, national and international spaces, reflecting as well as impacting individuals, communities and societies, while also holding potential to shape the world (Dempsey, 2023). This is a significant departure from the current standard in the field, which tends to focus on singular notions of curriculum as 'products' such as syllabi, teaching materials or official documents rather than the social and material, meaning-making processes through which those are produced and which involve relevant social activity by numerous actors. As Priestley and Philippou (2018) note, theorising curriculum making as social practice involves understanding it as occurring "across multiple sites, in interaction and intersection with one another, in often unpredictable and context-specific ways, producing unique social practices, in constant and complex interplay, wherein power flows in non-linear ways, thus blurring boundaries between these multiple sites" (p. 154).

This lens allows us to research curriculum as something that is created, or more aptly, 'made' and 're-made' simultaneously by numerous actors such as policy makers, agencies, school leaders, teachers across multiple layers or sites of education systems (rather than hierarchical administrative levels). A suggested typology has thus put forth the idea of such sites to include regional and international bodies producing transnational curriculum discourse (supra-site); national, state and governmental agencies producing curriculum policy and legal frameworks (macro-site); national and non-governmental, private publishers and curriculum agencies producing guidance and support for curriculum leadership (meso-site); schools designing curricula for their own context (micro-site) and pedagogic interactions as curriculum events within and beyond school classrooms between teachers and pupils/learners (nano-site) (Alvunger et al., 2021). This typology of curriculum making as occurring within and between these sites should not be viewed as a hierarchy of distinct levels, but rather as a heuristic tool for analysing curriculum-making from a plural publics perspective – whether inside-out, bottom-up, or top-down – highlighting the multi-directional flows of influence, information, materials and activity among these spaces.

As the changing landscape of educational politics and policy and the increasing number of illiberal regimes in Europe presents challenges and threats to citizenship education, relevant curricular scholarship seems necessary. The curriculum making

**18**   typology (and other curriculum theories) have often been suggested as ways of understanding general educational and curriculum phenomena. In this paper we call attention to the specifics of the development and implementation of programmatic curricula for specific educational domains or school subjects, whether in traditional democracies or in transforming countries. We also discuss some insights as to how some traditional problems and dilemmas of the curriculum manifest in the field of citizenship education, such as the debates between a focus on general capabilities (key competencies or soft skills) vs. subject-specific knowledge as well as between teacher agency and autonomy in curriculum making, to name a few.

## 3 Issues in Curriculum Research and Development

In this section, we present our vision of a research and development programme which could contribute to addressing some of the challenges and constraints we have identified in the first part of the paper on citizenship education in Europe. It includes three main components: 1. Clarification of the changing concepts of democracy and citizenship in contemporary social sciences, as well as the situation and needs of young people in the field of citizenship education. 2. Analysis of the factors that contribute to the variability of approaches to curriculum implementation in different European education systems, and of new risks that may constrain or deform the citizenship education. 3. Review and elaboration of models of curriculum making which would better suit the current social situation, the legitimate interests, concerns and needs of different actors, and which would thus be more likely to fuel desired changes both in the processes and in the outcomes of citizenship education. Each of these components is further unpacked below.

### 3.1 Changing Models of Citizenship and Political Education Needs of Young People

Various approaches to curriculum – from founding works of Bobbitt and Tyler to Bruner in North America to the German model of didactic reconstruction to the most recent curriculum design coherence model (Rata, 2021) – consider as the starting points for curriculum development the analysis of both the present and future *needs* of youth and/or of the current state of the corresponding academic *disciplines*. To offer novel pedagogical guidance and resources, it is essential to explore and map the complex changing models of democracy, citizenship education, and the political needs of youth, examined, for example, by numerous authors (e.g. Brezicha et al., 2023; Brezicha & Mitra, 2019; Campbell, 2019; Fozdar & Martin, 2020; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This objective calls for establishing a state-of-the-art knowledge base relating to the impact of societal anti-democratic occurrences and discourses on European publics, in particular on students, policy actors and curriculum makers (e.g., parents and teachers), across different educational levels (from primary

to higher education and lifelong learning) and spaces (e.g., formal and informal sites).

While policy by European bodies (e.g. EU, Council of Europe) and national governments are rhetorically clear on the role of education in promoting democratic citizenship, there is a notable dearth in knowledge on students' evolving conceptions of democracy and citizenship as shaped through the interaction of educational and sociopolitical spaces. Taking the evolving and fluid characteristics of democracy (Mouffe, 2005) as a premise, we suggest that establishing suitable approaches to gather data will inform broader initiatives to develop up to date databases of students' changing citizenship needs.

Such state-of-the-art knowledge base that gathers and interrogates student beliefs and attitudes in relation to these broader political trends could be useful for all social actors across all sites of curriculum making, including teachers and parents. Such knowledge could be available 'close to practice' and provide adaptive conceptualisations and approaches to students' everyday democratic citizenship needs in the context of contemporary societies, locally and more broadly.

Given pressing issues with the participation of migrants across European countries, worsened through right-wing hostilities and violence, educational sites such as '[s]chools have the potential to be real hubs of integration for children and their families', as stated by the European Commission (2021). At the same time, anti-democratic forces operate across various societal dimensions and influence individuals in both formal and informal educational sites; research on issues such as: misogyny in far-right influencers; the situational experiences of professionals in informal curricular spaces; and the position of minority parents and children within citizenship curricula are significant topics to investigate. To achieve such intersectoral and intersectional expertise to build such innovations in educational policy, critical to supporting wide participation, the boundaries of disciplinary approaches to research would need to be expanded in order to generate new ways of both researching and 'doing' policy. Methods from feminist media/internet studies (netnography, online discourse analysis), sociology (interviews, ethnography) and curriculum studies (case studies, historical analysis) could further contribute to the conduct of research envisioned in this paper.

Curriculum making also requires a thorough understanding of fundamental concepts in the corresponding academic disciplines. However, studies of citizenship education rarely acknowledge that democracy involves productive forms of dissensus amongst contested, unchosen publics (as distinct from the destructive forces of right-wing populism and authoritarianism). As Chantal Mouffe (2005) describes, this also entails wrestling with the tension implicit in a liberal democratic focus on individualised market freedoms on the one hand and a homogenous 'common good' on the other. This tension is visible within educational curricula which emphasise economic competitiveness for both the national and individual good, framed within an over-psychologised understanding of citizenship and subjectivity (Delahunty, 2024). However, the conception of the common good as structured by free-market

principles is clearly inadequate when considering the sociopolitical tensions and fractions in today's broader European society. Therefore, a plural vision of democratic education that necessitates diverging opinions, attitudes, and goals is needed, and hence we suggest using the outlook of Mouffe's (2005) *agonistic pluralism*. This marks a significant departure from the present state-of-the-art in global citizenship education research, which, despite an often-interdisciplinary strategy, tends to fall short of engaging *intersectional perspectives* that allow meaningful understanding of the struggles of different communities (De Vries, 2020).

Finally, available scholarship understandably discussed the ways in which education can strengthen the democratic order and respond to negative and dangerous phenomena that threaten not only individual nations, but also the open, rules-based *international order*. This pre-emptive approach is the preferred path, of course, which corresponds to developments in the management of other types of risks (e.g. natural disasters), but we must not close our eyes to dark scenarios in case negative developments cannot be prevented. How can and should we educate young people who may soon live under the regime that restricts basic democratic rights and freedoms and distorts truth, suppressing and punishing even elementary resistance? What can we recommend to teachers who are already educating for citizenship under illiberal government? Researchers from Western countries have long been reflecting on the limitations that neoliberal governance brings to academic life and work as well as to lives and educational trajectories of young people. However, Holford et al. (2020) points out that such experience is only a "small bear" compared to the conditions for research and teaching citizenship education in regimes that are illiberal or authoritarian (Dvořák & Vyhnálek, 2015). The problem of whether and how we can prepare current students (as well as teachers and researchers) for the possible future of illiberal governments in their countries or regions remains largely unaddressed in educational theory and curriculum design and raises further questions. One of them is the question of whether and at what cost it will then be possible to maintain the freedom of educational activities, research or the development of curricular materials, and what alternatives there will be for young people and those who want to educate them.

### 3.2 Disconnections Between European and National Policies in Citizenship Education and Factors that Contribute to Them

Next, we suggest systematizing and extending our knowledge of the factors contributing to connections and disconnections between European and national policies and curricula in citizenship education.

European bodies had produced several research reports on the differential treatment and approaches to the inclusion of citizenship education in official curricula at policy and programmatic levels (Council of Europe, 2018; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). While European policy advocates for a focus on citizenship education to inculcate values supporting solidarity and interculturalism, there are

incongruencies when looking at its implementation in different national contexts. E.g., Donovalová (2024) very aptly shows how the implementation of gender equality topics in four European countries – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland and Sweden – differs at the level of national curriculum frameworks. Another notable trend is the nationalistic theme which characterises numerous examples of citizenship curricula and which may be restricting the full realisation of a European vision of democratic citizenship (e.g. Philippou, 2009). Incoherences exist not only between different levels and sites of curriculum making. Dvořáková and Lánský (2023) demonstrated, using the example of Czech curricular frameworks for citizenship education that within one curricular document, learning outcomes can be aligned with supra-national European policies, while the subject matter (content) listed in the same document adheres to traditional and outdated nationalist concepts.

Curriculum policy learning requires a variety of skills, knowledge, and expertise, and if these are not available or deficient, the capacity for member-states to implement European or United Nations recommendations and guidelines (generally or in the curriculum area) is challenged. Moreover, with the growth of disinformation, society has become increasingly sceptical of the value of governmental policies, especially when there is no apparent improvement in individuals' welfare (Hearn, 2023). The European Commission (2015) established the EU's Better Regulation (BR) agenda in 2015 to improve policy making and implementation. However, problems in implementation persist. To explore these challenges, it will be possible to draw on new institutionalism (Meyer, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014), systemic or sociohistorical theory (Schriewer, 2012) and the policy borrowing approach (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2104, 2025). Similarly, it is possible to mobilize the concept of the 'refraction' of policies between sites (Goodson & Mikser, 2023). In previous decades, curricular research emphasized conditions for the active involvement of teachers in curriculum making (e.g., Pieters et al., 2019), far less studies however addressed capacity building needed at the macro and meso sites for national frameworks development and what support structures and institutions should be established (Dvořák, 2023). These and other general theoretical approaches require new empirical research that would show their applicability or limits both in the field of citizenship education and in the era of post-truth politics and/or illiberal players and regimes.

The current sociopolitical climate across Europe points towards the value of a coherent alignment of European and national approaches to citizenship education. It is therefore necessary to map the different forces operating in the socially situated practices of policy and curriculum making, taking into account the specifics of social sciences and citizenship education, across different educational sites (e.g. formal school, informal youth clubs) and levels (e.g. post-primary and higher education) through comprehensive literature reviews, critical policy analyses and empirical case studies. We consider this crucial to uncovering the topology of anti-democratic threats operating through material, symbolic, institutional and political forces, and their topologies, in order to deconstruct and reimagine citizenship education needs.

Elaboration of the necessary knowledge calls for robust investigating and analysis on intersections of educational policy and curricula with broader social forces operating within the varied topologies of plural publics. Methods and data sources from curriculum studies (e.g. documentary analysis, focus groups), sociology (e.g. critical policy analyses), media/internet studies (online content analysis), and political science (historical analyses) need to be combined to promote a greater understanding of the ways in which policy and curricula intersect and evolve in relation with broader social events and forces in a range of different areas including: interpretation and adaptation of policy/curricula impacted by anti-democratic forces at local sites, the impact of mainstreaming right-wing discourses on policy-actors beliefs and student perceptions of citizenship in light of policy evolutions, the ways political forces reform curricula and policy to 'silence' minorities, the connection and divergence of citizenship policy across European spaces, and understanding the connection of past-present sociohistorical spaces in the evolution to the neoliberal present in education. Particular involvement of gender (e.g., gender differences in citizenship needs), ethnicity, social class, sexuality (e.g., attitudes towards sexuality education) should be considered as appropriate, thereby connecting individual and situated experiences to broader societal power structures.

Of course, there are numerous objections within the EU that supranational organizations are exceeding the mandate given to them if they use their influence in this domain, stressing the right of member-states to determine their own goals and content in the field of general education, and even more so in citizenship education. As researchers and educationalists, we are not neutral here and believe that it is precisely in our time that the European project, including its value component, is proving its necessity and irreplaceability, since it is currently faced with internal and external threats to liberal democracy. However, this does not mean that we consider it flawless and unchangeable. On the contrary, research such as that envisioned in this paper will shed light and take into account the further development of the relationship between individual countries and the European Union and contribute to the ongoing discussions on rethinking its identity, mission and mechanisms of operation.

### 3.3 New Models of Curriculum Work

Understanding key current concepts of social sciences related to democracy and citizenship, the beliefs and needs of young people, and the reasons for limited success of curricular policies to date is a prerequisite for developing new models of curriculum making which focus on agonistic pluralism. This objective works directly on the issue of the fragmentation within the current situation of policy and curriculum-making across different European sites. Not only has the divide between educational policy and research been a persistent academic issue, but the divide between policy stakeholders has been raised as a critical issue working against European aims, such as the integration of migrant citizens in different national contexts. This objective

also bears in mind the current wave of right-wing anti-minorities sentiment and anti-immigrant protests across multiple European nations and intends to develop new models of policy and curriculum-making practices that 'step up action and bring together actors at all levels … to achieve integration and inclusion and to ultimately build more cohesive and inclusive societies', as advocated by the European Commission (2020, p. 20). This stream of action will address the lack of multi-stakeholder models of educational policymaking built on a concept of plural education publics, while simultaneously achieving new ways of curriculum making as specific case of doing policy to address the challenges identified in the academic literature.

Many and complex threats permeate and impact curriculum, including how they foment dissensus amongst minoritised groups on matters such as sexuality and gender education (Kitching, 2022). The concept of agonistic pluralism is engaged here to think about the ways dissensus and passionate commitments amongst communities can be recognised and engaged productively rather than to inflame divisions (Mouffe, 1999). The question of inclusion in a plural sense is to be probed, as it can generate new plural conceptions of curriculum making praxis that bring together a wider representation of global citizens, capable of contributing to a democratic citizenship education.

Research approaches and methods that can contribute to achieving this goal should combine elements from curriculum studies (case studies, design-based research) with educational anthropology (observational approaches, interviews) to explore and understand models of policy and curriculum making to promote plural democratic values and diversity, directly developing new approaches to working in these areas. Achieving this objective will require research to understand emerging professional and learner subjectivities at the intersection of citizenship education with other domains and sites of curriculum; examining the feasibility and efficacy of partnership models of curriculum making, including methods to enhance the inclusion of student voice; emphasising the development of mindful global citizens; and connecting practice and policy for plural curriculum design. It will call for a "regenerative and reflexive cultural policy response" to how we develop and make curriculum for democratic citizenship education (Figueira & Fullman, 2025). Resisting a further narrowing of educational purposes by neoliberal economic ideology, which emphasises individual competitiveness and standardised assessment, we suggest relational pluralism, which can only rest on agonism. However, it is also necessary to explore other scenarios that are not just a simple extrapolation of existing neoliberalism but reflect new forms of authoritarianism. This can shift the resulting curricula significantly beyond neoliberal conceptions of multiculturalism as managing 'good' and 'bad' diversity, a framing which degrades the rich potential an acknowledgement of the pluralities of experiences may produce (Lentin & Titley, 2011).

# 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The rise of far right and populist forces and the increasing number of countries with authoritarian regimes in Europe and beyond requires reflection and action from us as citizens and researchers. Unsurprisingly, the curriculum is becoming a key battleground. Curricular research as briefly outlined in this paper could contribute to addressing anti-democratic challenges by focusing on a comprehensive understanding of the diverse intersections of education and anti-democratic forces, across several levels and contexts. At the same time, it is also necessary to explore new ways of approaching policy and curriculum-making faithful to the ideal of a democratic Europe to bridge the widening gap between academic and public/political debates and decisions in education and communities.

In this paper, we presented a vision and research program that calls for bringing together scholars from social sciences with curriculum experts to address the complex contemporary challenges citizenship education is presented with. Plural identities of scholars coming from different academic fields, but also from various national contexts with different models of curriculum development and education organization, complement and contrast to devise approaches that transcend orthodox academic boundaries; bridge understandings with an increased array of policy-actors across various educational contexts; and devise new models of curriculum and policy-making praxis to inform a citizenship education for modern, plural publics in Europe. The present challenges require also overcoming the existing division of Europe into the West and East, which can be considered as a specific form of post-colonialism (Kalmar, 2022); this is why drawing on the experience and reflection of researchers from both parts of the continent is important. Such an endeavour has the potential to not only contribute to academic innovation in critical theory and curriculum studies, but also to concomitantly innovate in terms of policy suggestions, practices and pedagogy.

As stated above, it is clear that neither citizenship education nor the school as a whole can solve the problems facing young people in Europe today, since these often have deep structural roots. Further research is needed that goes beyond intended curricula and explores their implementation in schools and classrooms, including their influence on students (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Despite that, curricula even in their programmatic form retain an important position as they are, ideally, here "to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 4). That is why one way to challenge present threats to citizenship education is focusing on the social practices and actors that constitute contemporary curriculum-making, aiming to understand the interactions and intersections of curriculum spaces with the broader social movements and policies comprising the fractious sociopolitical climate of today. Here, the educational research in general and curriculum studies in particular can impact current and future policy and practice through both the empirical insights developed, and through

new models of curriculum-making based on plural-public approaches at national and European sites. For such complex ways forward to come into fruition we consider necessary to cultivate partnerships between two broad domains – curriculum and critical educational scholarship. This combination can also help reflect on the weaknesses that academic production in both areas has suffered from so far and which have contributed to its unsatisfactory impact on school practice. We hope to address the gap in academic research that has revealed the necessity to reaffirm educational spaces as political, to conceive of new approaches to policy and curriculum-making, framed with a broad systemic view which remains cognisant of the complex intersectional and social nature of curriculum (Bryan et al., 2024; Kitching, 2024; Priestley & Philippou, 2020). In troubled times, we want to be optimistic about education, but we cannot afford to be romantic (Apple, 2018).

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