Democrat
EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Policy Brief

Education for Responsible Democratic Citizenship.

A European Vision

Deliverable 2.2

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Project factsheet

Acronym:	**Democrat**
Title:	**Education for Democracy**
Coordinator:	UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA
Reference:	101095106
Type:	HORIZON
Program:	Horizon Europe
Start:	1st March 2023
Duration:	36 months
Website:	democrat-horizon.eu
Consortium:	**University of Barcelona,** Spain (UB), Coordinator
	NOTUS, Spain
	Tallinn University, Estonia (TLU)
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	Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability, Belgium (FOGGS)
	Stichting International Parents Alliance, Netherlands (IPA)
	European Universities Continuing Education Network, Belgium (EUCEN)

Deliverable factsheet

Number:	**D2.2.**
Title:	**Policy Brief: Education for Responsible Democratic Citizenship – A European Vision**
Lead beneficiary:	Hochschule Düsseldorf
Work package:	2
Task:	2.2. Policy Brief
Dissemination level:	Public
Submission date:	30.09.2023
Contributors:	HSD, FOGGS, UB, NOTUS, TLU, UH, JU, DCU, IPA, EUCEN

Revision	Date	Main modification	Authors
1	16/10/2023		Beatriz V. Toscano, Georgios Kostakos, Karsten Krüger
2	15/09/2025	Revising the policy brief giving answers to the recommendation of the external evaluatires	Georgios Kostakos, Karsten Krüger Fabian Virchow
3	20/10/2025	Comments and suggestion for modification by all partners	All partners
4	15/11/2025	Final version of the policy brief integrating the suggestions of the partners	Georgios Kostakos, Karsten Krüger Fabian Virchow

Citation: Kostakos, G.; Krüger, K. & Virchow, F. (2025) Policy Brief. Education for Responsible Democratic Citizenship. A European Vision. DEMOCRAT deliverable 2.2. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17777839

This project has received funding from the European Union's HORIZO.N-RIA HORIZON Research and Innovation Actions under Grant Agreement No. 101095106

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KEY MESSAGES

Democracy is the cornerstone of European identity, which is complementary to national identities. In view of the challenges democracy is currently facing, at both European and national level, such as growing polarisation, increasing threats to human security and expanding digitalisation, it is important to defend and consolidate it, as a sine-qua-non element of "the European way of life". Education for responsible democratic citizenship (RDC) or education for democracy (EfD) for short is a way of doing so. EfD strategies and tools to strengthen the democratic agency/capacity for action of citizens, the youth in particular, through transformative learning, has been the focus of the DEMOCRAT project (March 2023 to February 2026).

This Policy Brief was initially drafted after the seven first months of the DEMOCRAT project but is now being finalised with the experience of two-and-a-half years of project implementation in mind. Key findings and proposed policy actions presented here include:

- To safeguard democracy within the European Union, transformative education for democracy must be reinforced, also taking into account fast-moving digitalisation and fast-breached planetary boundaries.
- The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent competence framework defined in complementarity with the frameworks of citizenship competences proposed by the EU (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) and the Council of Europe (Competences for Democratic Culture). The four key RDC competences identified by DEMOCRAT are: Solidary Participation, Deliberation, Judgement, and Democratic Resilience.
- The above competence framework should be translated by EU member states and schools in different parts of Europe into a sample curriculum for responsible democratic citizenship adjusted to their education systems and societies.
- Schools have to be laboratories of democratic practice on a daily basis and across subjects, not just for a few hours of civic education or education for democracy per week, and need to connect with a conducive local, regional, national, European, global and digital environment.
- Students need to be aware of both their rights and responsibilities, and be guided to act on both, within their peer groups and in relation to their teachers, parents, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders.
- A crucial aspect of any approach to education for democracy is the competence of the teacher to create an environment in which the students can learn democracy in action and not just in words.

1. Introduction: Policy challenges and required response

Democracy as a political and social order is being increasingly challenged by polarisation and extremism, mistrust in scientific research and conspiratorial beliefs, as well as by threats to human security like the impacts of climate change, pandemics and rising inequality. This means that democratic principles such as liberty, equality and solidarity, as well as respect for other fundamental rights, are at stake. Increasingly, a sense of responsibility towards the planet is added to the responsibility towards people and societies, pointing to the global dimension that any concept of citizenship and especially democratic citizenship must have today. Moreover, the digital dimension is becoming ever more prominent and must be taken into account, as today's citizens, especially the youth, are increasingly active in cyberspace and form virtual communities within and across borders.

Democracy is the cornerstone of European identity, which is complementary to national identities. In view of the challenges democracy is currently facing, at both European and national level, it is important to defend and consolidate it, as a sine-qua-non element of “the European way of life”. Therefore, the European Union and its member states must place emphasis on democracy, as a model for tackling today’s challenges. Education for responsible democratic citizenship (RDC) or education for democracy (EfD) for short is a key way of doing that.

EfD is already part of citizenship education in the EU member states. It needs to be strengthened, though, and given a distinct status against the aforementioned background of growing anti-democratic tendencies. This requires a coherent design of RDC competences that citizens should acquire to be able to address current problems at local, regional, national, European and global level. Strengthening the democratic agency/capacity for effective action of citizens, especially the youth, through transformative learning, is indispensable for achieving that.

The present Policy Brief was initially drafted after the seven first months of the DEMOCRAT project, on the basis of desk research and conceptual analysis that had been conducted till then. Two years later and with the three-year project close to completion (March 2023-February 2026), the brief has been revised to reflect the results of the Living Labs and pilot projects that have taken up the main part of the project’s implementation. Correspondingly, some policy recommendations are drawn from the conceptual framework and some from the Living Labs and pilots, as indicated below.

2. Policy Recommendations derived from the DEMOCRAT Conceptual Framework and EfD Vision

2.1 Background

DEMOCRAT argues that democracy is a social order and should be learned continuously in everyday practice to consolidate it and improve its quality. Therefore, education for democracy is crucial for empowering democratic knowledge and agency/capacity to act. Democracy is a conflict-prone construct, in which conflicts of interest are commonplace and are (or should be) resolved through democratic procedures, which in turn can be the subject of interest-driven disputes. Due to the fact that socio-economic status influences political participation, in a way that people with lower socio-economic status participate less in political processes, EfD is not only about preserving democracy, but also about improving its quality through the inclusion of a broad range of social collectives and individuals in the deliberation of political decisions.

To make the above possible, two competences are key: First comes one's own participation and ensuring the participation of others, especially underprivileged individuals and groups ("Solidary Participation"). Second is the ability to be part of the discussion/debate, to make one's views known in a clear and convincing way ("Deliberation"). Given the importance of the quality of the information underlying public policy debates and the growing prevalence of disinformation, a third competence is necessary, the ability to judge the trustworthiness of information and to assess people and situations surrounding you ("Judgement"). In the context of growing undemocratic tendencies, it is also necessary to be competent in democratic resilience, that is preventing or reacting to social challenges without losing one's democratic disposition, based on a critical commitment to fundamental principles, such as respect for human rights and rights of minorities, and keeping up democratic values and norms even in adverse situations ("Democratic Resilience"). The main elements of the identified four key competences are presented in table format in the Annex to the Policy Brief.

In planning how the above could be implemented in practice, we keep in mind that the primary governance level for EfD, as it relates to RDC, is the country level, because it encapsulates what most people perceive as their main identity and polity of reference. The diversity of social contexts, education systems, and legal frameworks among the different EU member states makes it difficult to design a generally applicable EfD curriculum. In addition, in the area of education the EU only has "supporting competence", namely it may support, coordinate or supplement the action of EU member states but cannot adopt binding legislation or implement policies. The three recommendations that follow are addressed to both the EU and its member states, each according to their respective roles and responsibilities in EfD.

2.2 Policy Recommendations

- **RECOMMENDATION 1: To safeguard democracy within the European Union, transformative education for democracy must be reinforced by giving priority to this topic in the open method of coordination at EU level and promoting mobilities and mutual learning, taking also into account fast-moving digitalisation and fast-breached planetary boundaries. EU member states should review their curricular frameworks and the organisation of their education system to ensure the inclusion of EfD as a cross-cutting element in formal education.**

A review of policies on citizenship education and education for democracy in a number of EU countries shows[1] that their relevance is often limited to the understanding of democracy as a formal political system. This reduces education for democracy to the transmission of knowledge about the political institutions and democratic procedures but does not include the learning of democracy as a lived reality in practice.

A shift is needed in our understanding of democracy, not only as a formal political system but rather as a social order. That would lead to also shifting the focus of strategies to safeguard and improve the model of democracy in Europe towards transformative education for democracy, with emphasis on learning democracy by doing.

National citizenship is increasingly circumscribed by the international codification of human rights, the rules emanating from supranational entities such as the EU, but also global societal shifts, such as migration flows and digitalisation, as well as environmental changes, like climate change and biodiversity loss. Alternatives, such as global citizenship, digital citizenship and European citizenship are emerging, but the conceptual and

[1] See DEMOCRAT deliverable D4.1: Hytti, M.; Sandström, N.; Kalev,L.; Mallon, B. & Eren, E. (2024) OUTLINE of a European EfD Curriculum. Democrat Deliverable 4.1. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14512483

practical importance of core democratic competences remains equally valid for individuals and their respective communities.

- **RECOMMENDATION 2: The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent competence framework defined in complementarity with the frameworks of citizenship competences proposed by the EU (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) and the Council of Europe (Competences for Democratic Culture). The competence framework put forward by DEMOCRAT can be published by the European Commission as a well-visualised and supported tool, similar to others such as DigiComp – Digital Competence Framework, EntreComp – Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, GreenComp – Sustainability Competence Framework.**

The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent definition of a competence framework. There are many proposals for citizenship competences developed by academics, but also by the EU and the Council of Europe. In general, these proposals have a broad perspective on citizenship, so that democratic agency recedes into the background. To reinforce the democratic agency element through education, it is necessary to define the core competences of responsible democratic citizenship in detail.

The DEMOCRAT consortium collectively strengthened its analytical foundation through a systematic, comparative curriculum review undertaken across partner countries. Using a shared framework aligned with the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), partners examined how democratic competences are reflected in national curricula, teacher education frameworks, and education policy.

As explained in 2.1. above, DEMOCRAT has developed a competence framework for responsible democratic citizenship (RDC competence framework) that includes four key competences, namely: solidary participation, deliberation, judgement and democratic resilience.[2] The framework has been discussed extensively with national stakeholders in the course of several national and transnational workshops, as part of the Living Lab activities, and its usefulness in guiding EfD in practice has been proven by teachers and heads of schools in 42 pilot interventions. The pilots have shown the complementarity of the RDC competence framework with national curricula regarding (global) citizenship education and with elements of civic competences, such as critical thinking, empathy and handling emotions.[3]

The Outline of a European Education for Democracy (EfD) Curriculum includes critical analysis of how democratic competences are included in the national education strategies and learning programmes. The findings vary from country to country. In Poland, schools aim to cultivate in students attitudes conducive to their individual and social development, such as: honesty, reliability, responsibility, perseverance, self-esteem, respect for others, cognitive curiosity, creativity, entrepreneurship, personal culture, readiness to participate in culture, initiative-taking, and teamwork.

In Estonia and Finland, democratic competences are included in the general education objectives. For instance, the Estonian Education Act promotes "acting creatively and being a responsible citizen" and puts emphasis on general human and societal values that derive from the state constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and foundational documents of the EU. Democracy is also

[2] See Annex to this Policy Brief. Note that the competence titles may vary somewhat in one representation from another.

[3] For a presentation and evaluation of all pilot projects see DEMOCRAT deliverable D5.2.: Kostakos, G. et al (Eds. 2025). Evaluation of Local Pilot Projects. Democrat Project, Barcelona.

mentioned alongside being law abiding, cultural diversity, tolerance, environmental sustainability, solidarity, and equality between genders.

In North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany), democracy education is a central educational goal that is anchored in various subjects and educational plans. The curricula for schools emphasize the promotion of democratic skills, the development of critical judgment and the teaching of values, in order to educate pupils to become responsible citizens. In Catalonia/Spain, the analysis shows a high compatibility of the RDC framework with the curriculum of global citizenship and digital competences. In Ireland the national analysis applied a nine-domain coding framework aligned with the RDC competence clusters to quantify the presence of democratic values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge across the Irish education system. The elaborated evidence base, archived for open access, demonstrates how desk-based comparative research can underpin the design of a European EfD curriculum and inform scaling strategies.[4]

Together, the comparable analyses from partner countries provide a transparent, data-driven foundation for identifying convergence and divergence across national curricula. They provide evidence that the European EfD curriculum, which is based on the RDC competence framework as outlined, is empirically grounded and compatible with national teaching strategies and plans for civic education within the EU.

3. Policy Recommendations derived from the DEMOCRAT EfD Living Labs and Pilot Projects

3.1 Background

The comparative analysis across the six countries covered by the DEMOCRAT Project — Estonia, Finland, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), Ireland, Poland, and Spain (Catalonia) — highlighted the necessity for systematic incorporation of democratic education into all six national curricula.[5] The current educational landscape reflects a broadly shared acknowledgment of the importance of EfD across all countries. The implementation strategies in place, though, including the pedagogical approaches used, vary widely, ranging from traditional lectures to interactive methods, from mini projects carried out by one grade in school to projects involving the broader school community or even an entire municipality. This diversity leads to inconsistencies in the effectiveness of EfD across different countries, even if they officially share the same core EU principles of democracy.[6]

The EfD competence framework developed by the DEMOCRAT consortium, along with a series of tested pedagogical approaches and assessment tools for the evaluation of the uptake of the four competences by young people, has led to the design of a “European EfD curriculum” of sorts. It is, in fact, an array of tools for teaching responsible democratic citizenship and testing performance regarding the four RDC competences in a flexible way within local settings, in cooperation with schools and other societal actors. The 42 interventions make use of innovative pedagogical approaches and digital tools to engage learners and convey a deep

[4] See: Education for Democracy – National and Comparative Analysis [Data set]. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17545548; and Rami, J., Eren, E., Mallon, B., & Lalor, J. (2025). Appendix A: Online, Curriculum, and Policy Resources – National Curricular and Policy Frameworks (DEMOCRAT). Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17546023

[5] See forthcoming Serra, J. A., Kostakos, G. & Salamon, E. (2025) Comparative evaluation of local pilot projects. Deliverable 5.3. https://democrat-horizon.eu.

[6] See Hytti, M.; Sandström, N.; Kalev,L.; Mallon, B. & Eren, E. (2024) OUTLINE of a European EfD Curriculum Democrat Deliverable 4.1. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14512483

understanding and acceptable patterns of democratic action. The DEMOCRAT approach to pilot projects did not focus on obtaining statistical data but first-hand, quality experience in practice.

Democracy needs to be learned continuously and public policies on education for democracy should go beyond purely technical, rigid, and top-down education. They should be linked to democratic practices within schools, in cooperation with other organisations and initiatives promoting democracy. DEMOCRAT's approach has addressed policy development and implementation, combining top-down and bottom-up perspectives, and the positions of different stakeholders and their discourses.

3.2 Policy Recommendations

- **RECOMMENDATION 3: Schools have to be laboratories of democratic practice on a daily basis and across subjects, not just for a few hours of civic education or education for democracy per week, and need to connect with the local, global and digital environment by introducing participatory leadership methods. Local communities and society at large need to be conducive to learning and practising responsible democratic agency, through the actions of citizens, teachers, parents, authorities and other relevant actors. An essential step for EfD is the creation of opportunities for direct engagement of students with diverse community members, including minority groups, local artisans, and intergenerational dialogue partners.**

Schools are central educational institutions for children and young people. This means that they are in a key position to hone their democratic competences. Nevertheless, it has been proven that citizenship education that is based more on imparting factual knowledge of political institutions and procedures in traditional classes does not lead to the development of democratic agency and to strengthening the will to act democratically.

The analysis of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and European Social Survey (ESS) carried out by DEMOCRAT indicated that self-perception of political effectiveness is one major driver of future political participation.[7] For this, it is necessary that democracy be practised within the school and outside of the school, thus enabling its internalisation by young people for the totality of their lives.

In fact, EfD should not be conceived as a purely school-based matter, but as a social mandate. In order to strengthen responsible democratic agency, the cooperation of different actors is necessary, such as state institutions at different political and administrative levels, non-governmental organisations, social partners, neighbourhood associations and citizens, with the schools and other educational establishments as central actors regarding their students. The 42 interventions of DEMOCRAT showed that the cooperation with external entities is a major way to improve formal education for democracy, as it complements the learning of factual knowledge and any interactive experience at school with real-world democratic experience outside school. "Learning by doing" encourages students' engagement and competence development. Creating space for students' voices throughout the entire process and assigning them distinct roles increases engagement, responsibility, and autonomy. This shift from passive reception to active engagement proves particularly effective when students work independently, take initiative, and assume responsibility for outcomes.

[7] See the DEMOCRAT deliverable D3.2.: Warat, M.; et al (Eds.) (2025) Education inequalities and political participation. Deliverable 3.2. https://democrat-horizon.eu DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14550660 and DEMOCRAT deliverable D3.3: Krüger, K. et al. (Eds.) (2025) Policy Brief: Education inequalities and political participation. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15302926

- **RECOMMENDATION 4: Students need to be aware of both their rights and responsibilities, and be guided to act on both, within their peer groups and in relation to their teachers, parents, local authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. For this reason participatory and experiential methodologies including problem-based learning, project-based approaches, peer teaching, and service learning should be prioritized using diverse flexible learning formats such as workshops, fieldwork, interviews, exhibitions, and public presentations, instead of rigid lesson formats. Such approaches allow students to conceive themselves as active citizens, curators, decision-makers, and co-shapers of the future rather than passive recipients.**

The focus on practical experience with democracy is intended to strengthen the students' democratic agency so that they become aware of their democratic rights and duties and perceive them as guides for their actions at all levels of society, such as in the family, at school, in their dealings with friends and acquaintances, but also at local, regional, national, European, and global societal/political/economic levels. This does not imply that formal democratic procedures apply to all life situations, but that actions in all life situations should not violate basic democratic values, such as respect for human dignity and the rights of the others, be they individuals or groups.

Most of the pilots were project-based, engaging students not only in learning but also in co-creating activities and solutions. Elements of political simulation (e.g. participatory budgeting), service learning, and community-based learning enriched the approaches, allowing young people to move beyond abstract concepts into concrete democratic practice. Project-based learning that combines training, fieldwork, and public presentation engages students in moving from concepts to action and makes democratic principles meaningful. Also theatre-based approaches were tested. Combining diverse methodologies fosters deeper reflection and accommodates different learning needs. Integrating lecture-based input from external experts with experiential workshops balances theoretical frameworks with practical application. Peer teaching consolidates knowledge, while also developing practical skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership.

- **RECOMMENDATION 5: Education for Democracy should be recognised as a strategic lever for gender equality and civic inclusion, ensuring that participatory learning environments empower all learners, especially girls and under-represented groups, to act as confident, competent democratic agents. Education for Democracy must be designed to reduce structural barriers to participation by addressing socio-economic disadvantage, migration background, and disability. Inclusive pedagogies, such as cooperative inquiry, storytelling, and community-based learning, enable learners from diverse contexts to experience recognition, belonging, and agency, reinforcing democracy as a lived and equitable social order.**

The analysis of main data bases, such as those of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and European Social Survey (ESS), has revealed persistent factors that influence political participation, such as socio-economic inequality, gender and being member of an immigrant family.[8] Gender responsive and socially inclusive approach were applied in several national pilots.

Several national pilots across partner countries integrated gender-responsive pedagogies that strengthened democratic competencies through inclusive participation. One example is an Irish local pilot worked

[8] See Warat, M.; Krüger, K.; Montolio, D. Sekuła, P.; Ostafińska-Molik, B. (Eds.) (2025) Education inequalities and political participation. Deliverable 3.2. https://democrat-horizon.eu DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14550660

exclusively with female students in a DEIS[9] post-primary setting, using participatory approaches to enhance their civic voice, confidence, and judgement.

The inclusive approach was also adopted in pedagogical methods across countries. In Spain, for example, two projects promoted democratic competences in order to strengthen the integration of children from recently immigrated families. One pilot promoted awareness of human and children's rights through collective lectures on specialised literature, followed by debates among pupils. The other pilot promoted the establishment of a children and youth council in the local area, with the aim of improving relations between the native population and those who had recently immigrated. In Germany, a local project tackled diversity and anti-racism in schools by using theatre training methods. All of these approaches operationalised the RDC competence framework as exposed in the Annex.

- **RECOMMENDATION 6: A crucial aspect of any approach to education for democracy is the competence of the teacher to steer the whole process and create a learning environment in which the students can deeply internalise democracy. For this, the EU institutions, as well as member states, should create learning and mentoring opportunities for teachers, in addition to enriching their university curricula and continuous training programmes.**

A critical point of this approach is the preparation and willingness of teachers, trainers and other education professionals to apply EfD principles. Teaching competence for democratic education is not a central element of teacher training either at universities or in continuing teacher training programmes. Therefore, a central requirement is to strengthen teachers' competences in the field of education for democracy. Ideally, this does not only refer to teachers in public or private schools, but also to all those individuals who are involved in shaping characters outside the formal education system. This is especially important for countries where democracy as a social order is at risk or not fully-fledged yet.

A Finnish pilot project for training future teachers tested a phenomenon-based approach, treating those studying to become teachers as designers of democratic learning rather than merely implementers. This approach promoted personal responsibility and interdisciplinary transfer, as well as facilitated the rapid development of ready-to-use teaching materials, such as debates on misinformation, maps on ethical dilemmas and a prototype game on global responsibility. Iterative learning cycles involving joint design, testing, presentation and reflection have proven to be a promising model for teacher training. In an interdisciplinary pilot project in Estonia, university students conducted mini-studies on civic education in several schools, focusing on the DEMOCRAT competence model. The students gained practical experience in the field, gathering practical knowledge about the situation regarding citizenship education in Estonia, and acquainted themselves with the tools developed by the DEMOCRAT project, including the competence assessment tools.

The Irish pilot “Form Concept to Classroom” was developed within a postgraduate teacher education module, “Social and Environmental Education” (Global Citizenship Education). It combined visual and participatory approaches, such as the Walking Gallery, Philosophy for Children activities, which modelled a transition from

[9] „Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools“ (DEIS) is a national policy initiative of the Department of Education and Youth. It provides targeted supports to schools with a high concentration of disadvantage and aims to reduce educational inequality (DEIS Plan 2017, Department of Education and Youth.

teacher-led to student-led dialogue, the Graffiti Wall and small-group discussions, which allowed participants to explore philosophical questions around democracy.[10]

Both pilots show the importance of integrating RDC competences into teacher education curricula, rather than treating them as optional or isolated modules. Student teachers benefit most when they are supported in understanding democratic principles both conceptually and in terms of their practical application in the classroom. Therefore, teacher training programmes should combine academic and experiential approaches to ensure sustainability. There should be a particular focus on the competence "democratic resilience" to prepare teachers to manage disagreement, misinformation stress, and conflict resolution, with explicit moves and clear actions for tense moments, and care for learner well-being when discomfort arises.

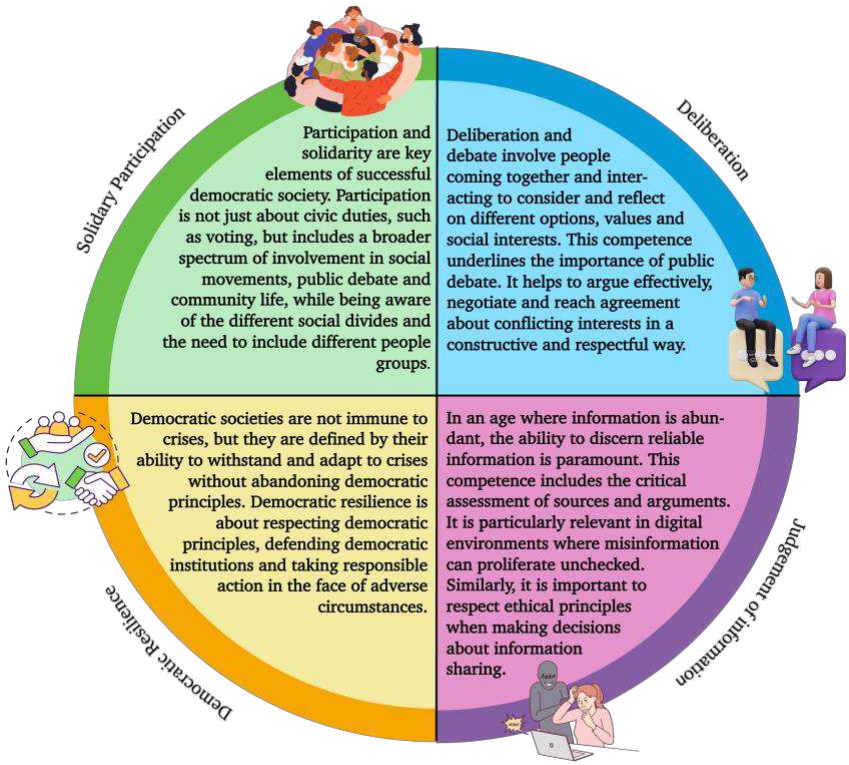
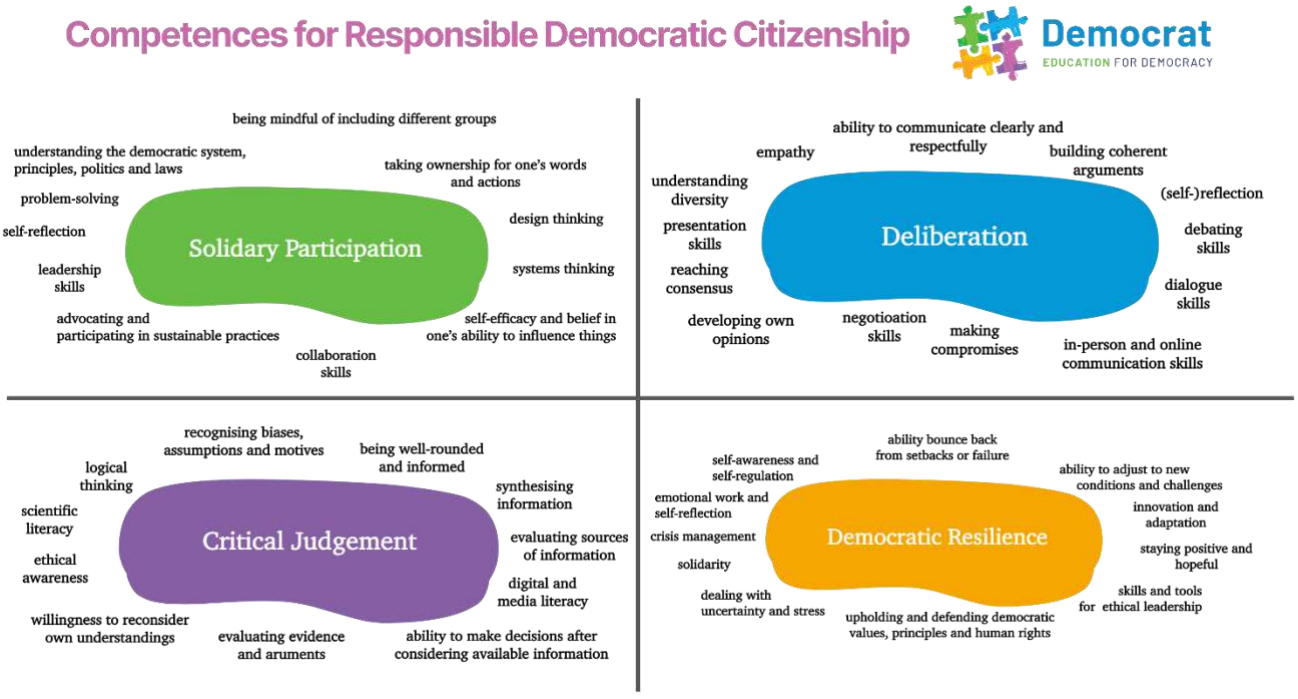
A more comprehensive framework for teacher training in democracy views learning modules as workshops for professional judgement and growth, rather than simply courses on methodology. Instead of tying learning to a single cycle, the focus should shift to recurring practices that prepare teachers to design, promote and assess democratic competence across contexts and subjects.

[10] See DEMOCRAT deliverable D5.2.: Kostakos, G. ed et al (2025). Evaluation of Local Pilot Projects. Democrat Project, Barcelona.

Annex

RDC Competence Framework

In table format

Key competences of responsible democratic citizenship			
	Knowledge	**Skills**	**Attitudes**
Solidary participation	Being competent to actively participate in democratic processes and promote the inclusion of others, especially minorities and social groups affected by problems and solutions in collective decision-making processes with the intention of overcoming existing social inequalities in the processes of participation and deliberation.		
	Being aware of the analogue and digital channels and mechanisms to make their own voice heard and to bring in the voices of others.	Ability to use channels and mechanisms to make their own voice heard and to bring in the voices of others, particularly groups, which usually do not participate in collective decision-making.	Willing to participate in collective decision-making and to involve as many people as possible, particularly underprivileged groups, which usually do not participate.
Deliberation	Being competent to promote debates on the consequences of collective decisions that could be taken to solve a shared problem, respecting different preferences, values and interests.		
	Being aware of the democratic deliberative principles and what it means to act in accordance with them.	Ability to articulate one's own point of view and to listen to and respect the opinions of others.	Willing to listen to everyone's voice, to dialogue and to make active and constructive contributions.
Critical Judgement	Being competent to judge what is reliable information and what is not, knowing how to assess the reliability of data received and interpret it.		
	Being aware of tools for searching, finding information and assessing its reliability and veracity.	Ability to analyse the reliability of information and its veracity.	Always ready to double-check the veracity and reliability of information.
Democratic resilience	Being competent to prevent or react to social challenges without losing their democratic disposition based on a critical engagement with democratic rules, norms and values. It implies acting democratically also in adverse situations, contributing to the consolidation and development of democracy, and acting responsibly towards one's community at local, regional, state and global levels.		
	Being aware of democratic rules, norms and values (e.g. respect for minority rights) to resolve social challenges at the different levels of society and in different fields. Being aware	Ability to apply and defend democratic procedures to solve social challenges even in adverse situations defending democratic rules, norms and values (e.g. minority rights) and contributing to their improvement	Willing to apply and to defend the use of democratic procedures to solve social problems even in adverse situations.

Visual representations