

How to *Educate* Active Citizens in *Vocational* *Schools*

MODELS OF CIVIC
AND POLITICAL EDUCATION IN
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
IN CROATIA



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Abstract

This analytical report examines the exclusion of civic and political education from vocational schools in Croatia as a consequence of the vocational education reform fully implemented from the 2024/2025 school year. Specifically, through this reform the previously compulsory subject in vocational schools (three- and four-year programmes) Politics and Economy (PiG) has been transformed into an elective module, which leaves a substantial share of the vocational school student population (who account for more than 70% of all upper-secondary students in Croatia) without systematic access to the development of fundamental civic and political competences.

By analysing available empirical research, policy documents and findings from focus groups conducted with teachers and principals of vocational schools, as well as interviews with members of the academic community and key stakeholders, the report identifies the main causes of the problem and proposes four models that would ensure the development of basic skills for vocational school students (*basic skills*¹). Evaluation of the options using the criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability leads to the conclusion that the optimal solution is a combination of an integrated model with compulsory learning outcome sets and a structured model with an active citizenship portfolio, supported by a clearly defined national competence framework. The recommendations put forward in this report are intended for submission to the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (MZOM) and the Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education (ASOO).

1 2025 European Commission's Communication on the Action Plan on Basic Skills: „Basic skills form the foundation for individuals to become independent, better informed and prepared, engaged and active citizens, thus contributing to safeguard our democracy and fundamental values, in a context of rising political polarisation, eroded trust in institutions and increasing information manipulation. Missing out on these skills is not just a loss for the individual but for our European societies.”

Introduction

Democratic society presupposes citizens who understand the institutions in which they participate, recognise the mechanisms of political participation, and can critically evaluate the information to which they are exposed daily. The education system is a key mediator in the acquisition of these competences. The reform of vocational education in Croatia, which from the 2024/2025 school year onwards has transformed the compulsory subject Politics and Economy (PiG) into a so-called elective module², in all three- and four-year vocational programmes, has raised the question of how the system ensures a minimum set of civic and political competences for all students, regardless of the vocational programme they attend.

The research question of this analytical report is:

Which alternative models of civic/political education in vocational schools in Croatia are most effective for developing basic civic and political competences among students in three and four-year vocational programmes, in the context of the ongoing vocational education reform?

The aim of the report is to identify the problem, provide an evaluation of alternative solutions, and formulate concrete recommendations for relevant decisionmakers. The report is directed towards the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (MZOM) and the Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education (ASOO) as the key actors in education policy in Croatia. The report findings are also relevant for civil society organisations that actively monitor the development of civic and political education in Croatia, as well as for all interested individuals and institutions that consider school to be the place where civic and political competences should be acquired.

Given the announced evaluation of the vocational education reform and the project “Modernisation of Vocational Education” (Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education, 2017) after 2027, there is scope for advocating new, more effective models which, through this report, will be proposed to the relevant decisionmakers and education policy designers (MZOM, ASOO).

2 The module may be implemented as a compulsory, elective or optional module. All modules that are designated as compulsory modules constitute a mandatory part of the curriculum in all schools and form the basis of the qualification. Elective modules are modules that schools may choose to offer depending on the specific characteristics and needs of the local community and their students. In other words, different schools will be able to implement different elective modules. In addition to adopting already developed modules, a school may develop new elective modules, provided it complies with the prescribed procedures for approving sets of learning outcomes (SIU) and elective modules.

Methodology

This report is based on an analysis of secondary sources (desk research), including a review of the literature, national and international documents, and available national and international studies, as well as on qualitative research comprising focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative part of the research included two focus groups conducted in March 2026: one with vocational school-teachers (N=5) and one with vocational school principals (N=3), and four interviews (N=4) with representatives of the Agency for Vocational Education, the Institute for Social Research, the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, and the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the aim of including different perspectives from within the vocational education system. The focus groups and interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted both online and in person. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, through which key patterns and barriers related to the implementation of civic and political education in vocational schools were identified. The focus group findings were used as illustrative qualitative insights and as a complement to the analysis of the literature and policy documents.

The limitations of the report relate to the limited number and selection of participants in the qualitative part of the research, and to the fact that the effects of the reform are still unfolding and the findings and results of its evaluation are not yet available. The recommendations are therefore grounded in a combination of comparative analyses, stakeholder perspectives, and the theoretical framework.

Background and Problem Statement

One of the most comprehensive studies on civic education in European countries (Eurydice Report, 2017; cited in Šalaj, 2024), which describes the situation in as many as 36 countries, notes that in most of the analysed states “education authorities pay less attention to civic education in vocational schools compared to other types of schools.” This neglect of civic education in vocational schools constitutes a serious error in the process of building a democratic political culture (Šalaj, 2024). These conclusions are confirmed by research indicating that vocational school students have substantial shortcomings in their political competences (Baketa et al., 2021). The political literacy of vocational school students in Croatia is systematically below the level of their peers in grammarschool programmes, and the gap between threeyear and fouryear vocational programmes is even more pronounced. For example, a study on the political literacy of finalyear secondary school students

in Croatia, conducted across three distinct periods (from 2010 to 2021), consistently and clearly shows that vocational school students are statistically less proficient in political literacy than grammarschool students (Šalaj, Gvozdanović and Horvat, 2024). These studies demonstrate that the level of students' political knowledge during the observed period has remained relatively low (Baketa et al., 2021). In addition, students in three-year vocational programmes continuously achieve poorer results compared to those in four-year vocational and grammar-school programmes. It is important to emphasise that these findings directly call into question the effectiveness of the previous model (a compulsory PiG subject taught for two lessons per week), which clearly has not yielded satisfactory results, while at the same time indicating that further reducing systematic access to civic and political education will not solve the problem, but will instead deepen it even more.

The institutional structure of the education system is not neutral with respect to the development of civic competences. In a comparative analysis of data from the European Social Survey (2002–2012), it was shown that students in vocational programmes are less politically engaged than their peers in general education programmes (Van de Werfhorst, 2017), leading to the conclusion that the institutional structure of the education system can directly affect democratic equality; in other words, the choice of an education system model is not only a pedagogical but also a political decision with significant implications for the democratic system. In the European context, the systematic marginalisation of civic and political education in vocational schools is not specific to Croatia alone. A study from Sweden (Rosvall and Nylund, 2024) shows that vocational systems predominantly prioritise practical and technical skills, thereby structurally limiting the space for the development of abstract, conceptual knowledge needed for democratic participation. Debowski et al. (2025), in a comparative analysis of the development of democratic citizenship in European vocational education systems (Poland, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, England), emphasise that this development is a complex, multi-dimensional process that cannot be reduced to simply introducing a new subject or module. The key dimensions they identify (assessment, inclusion, and meaningful student participation) point to the need for a systematic approach that transforms the organisation of learning and the involvement of all stakeholders, rather than merely the curricular content. The authors draw on the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC³), which defines 20 competences grouped into four domains: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding (Council of Europe, 2024). The Council of Europe

3 For more on the Reference Framework of Competences (RFCDC): [LINK](#)

(2025) explicitly states that the development of competences for democratic culture requires an integrated approach that includes curricular, pedagogical, and assessment mechanisms, and actively involves employers and civil society organisations. Tommasi et al. (2021), in their review of the literature on the development of critical thinking and media literacy in initial vocational education, show that the dominant focus of vocational education on technical skills neglects metacognitive competences that are essential for active citizenship.

In the Croatian context, it has been shown (Baketa, 2025) that the system of civic education is fragmented and dependent on local initiatives originating from school founders, namely local and regional selfgovernment units (for example, in the City of Zagreb the “Community of Active Citizens” programme⁴, the “School and Community” programme⁵, and Rijeka’s model of Civic Education⁶). Farah et al. (2025), in a multicountry case study that includes Croatia among other analysed states, identify institutional barriers and a lack of systematic support as key factors limiting the implementation of civic education in vocational schools. The civil society organisation Gong (GONG, 2026), in its analysis of the context of current reforms in vocational education, specifically warns that reducing the space for civic and political education may negatively affect the development of young people’s resilience to disinformation, which is particularly relevant given current social and political challenges at both local and global levels.

In brief, the main findings from the various secondary studies used in this analysis point to the following:

- There is a structural problem in the implementation of political/civic education in the European context (shared by many of the countries analysed), which mainly concerns an insufficient number of teaching hours, inadequate or insufficient teacher preparation, a lack of materials tailored to vocational schools, and the absence of evaluation of implementation.
- Political/civic education in Europe is most commonly delivered through a combination of models (a separate subject, integration into different curricular contents, and a crosscurricular approach).

4 [LINK](#)

5 [LINK](#)

6 [LINK](#)

- ▶ The literature stresses the importance of didactic approaches that help teachers plan civic/political education in the vocational context; in other words, extensive and practical, hands-on training of those implementing the programmes is needed.
- ▶ Students in vocational schools often have reduced access to the kinds of knowledge that enable critical reflection on society, which directly affects their active participation in social and political processes.

In the context of the current public and political environment, it is important to note that the rationale for implementing the reform of vocational education in Croatia rested on two key arguments (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2021; Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education, 2017):

- ▶ Adapting the education system to labour-market needs, given longstanding criticisms of vocational education that the system does not fully succeed in preparing students for the actual demands of employers, and
- ▶ Modernising outdated curricula by increasing the share of work-based learning⁷ (UTR)

7 Workbased learning (UTR) is an integral part of vocational education and is carried out at the employer and/or in the vocational education institution, which may also be a regional centre of competence, or in a combination of these settings. Workbased learning refers to all activities implemented in the standard classroom, in specialised classrooms or laboratories, at the employer, and in regional centres of competence. Through workbased learning, the student is placed in real work situations and, under real or simulated conditions, solves tasks and problems related to the demands of their occupation. UTR is defined as a percentage share of the overall module, which means that, depending on its capacities, the school may implement a higher or lower share of guided teaching and learning processes (VPUP) relative to UTR.

Decisionmakers argue that PiG and other general education subjects have not been abolished but rather integrated into the modular structures of vocational curricula. However, the transformation of a compulsory subject into an elective module⁸ means that schools may, but are not required to, offer this content, and students may, but are not required to, choose this module. In effect, the systemic obligation to develop civic and political competences has been replaced by a marketoriented logic of choice, which in practice operates differently depending on the school, principal, and local community.

Teachers and representatives of civil society organisations, including trade unions, warned during the development of the new curricula that elective modules are not an adequate substitute for a compulsory subject and that there is a real risk that students (particularly those in threeyear programmes) will be left without a minimum number of learning outcomes related to political and civic literacy. PiG teachers in vocational schools, including those who participated in the focus groups conducted for this report, expressed particular concern and identified a lack of staffing capacity for crosscurricular integration, overcrowded timetables in vocational programmes, and unclear allocation of responsibility for implementing civic and political education as three key barriers to the implementation of any alternative model.

Options Available For Education Policy

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to enable a systematic comparison of the four proposed models, they were evaluated against five standard publicpolicy evaluation criteria: effectiveness (the extent to which the policy achieves its stated objectives), efficiency (the relationship between resources invested and results achieved), relevance (the alignment of the policy with the identified problem and the needs of the target group), coherence (the consistency of measures within the policy itself and with other policies, primarily the implemented vocational education reform), and sustainability (the durability of effects after the intervention has ended).

8 An elective module in the context of the vocational education reform is a module that individual schools may choose to offer depending on the specific characteristics and needs of the local community. Unlike compulsory modules, which constitute the foundation of every qualification, different schools may implement different elective modules. Schools may also develop new elective modules, provided they comply with the approval procedures laid down by ASOO.

Each model was assessed on every criterion using a threepoint scale (✓ weak, ✓✓ moderate, ✓✓✓ strong), with the ratings derived from an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each model and from the empirical and comparative findings presented in this report. The table containing the rated evaluation criteria is provided later in the text in the chapter “Conclusions and Recommendations” (p. 13).

Proposed alternative models of civic/political education in vocational schools



Model 1

REINSTATING A STRUCTURED SUBJECT (POLITICS AND ECONOMY – PiG AS A SUBJECT)

This model entails reintroducing Politics and Economy (PiG) as a separate compulsory subject in vocational programmes, with adaptations which, according to focus group participants, would include the following:

- ▶ Changing the name of the subject in a way that highlights civic and political competences (removing the part related to economics and the economy).
- ▶ Moving the delivery of the subject to the 2nd year instead of the 3rd or 4th (with the aim of reaching students earlier, especially those in threeyear programmes).
- ▶ Potentially reducing the number of teaching hours while clearly defining priority learning outcomes and adding alternative forms of instruction (projectbased learning, fieldbased learning).

The advantages of this model are its clear curricular position, guaranteed teaching time, and clearly identified implementers. The disadvantages stem from the current architecture of the reform itself. The reinstatement of the subject is not difficult because of modularity *per se* (the modular reform primarily restructures the vocational component of the curriculum), but because of the way the reform has been implemented. The common teaching plan, which prescribed PiG as a compulsory subject with a fixed weekly timetable identical for all programmes, no longer exists. Instead, a separate curriculum has been adopted for each qualification (more than 120 in total), in which the general education component is limited to approximately 20–25% of the total number of hours, that is, CSVET credits⁹,

9 CSVET credits are a measure used in modular vocational education to express the student workload required to achieve specific learning outcomes. They do not represent grades, but indicate the scope and time needed to acquire skills. One CSVET credit corresponds to an average of 25 hours of student work, including classroom instruction, workbased learning (exercises, practical training), and independent study.

depending on the qualification level, and this quota has already been allocated to the subjects that were retained in the reform (e.g. Croatian Language, Mathematics, a foreign language, Physical Education, History, Geography, and Religious Education/Ethics). Reintroducing PiG as a compulsory subject would therefore require amending all adopted qualification curricula and reducing the teaching time of other subjects or modules, which makes this model difficult to implement, though not impossible, and carries the risk that reducing teaching time may compromise the minimum quality of expected learning outcomes.

Model 2

INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING MODULES THROUGH SETS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

This model involves integrating civic and political education content through formally defined sets of learning outcomes¹⁰ within already existing vocational modules. It consists of embedding civic and political competences into learning outcomes across different vocational subjects, regardless of the specific vocational programme, supported by systematic crosscurricular cooperation between PiG teachers, ethics teachers, and vocational teachers.

The advantages are a prominent level of coherence with the logic of the reform and mandatory implementation where such sets of outcomes are prescribed in the curriculum. The key drawback is the risk that vocational subject teachers may lack the competences needed to deliver civiceducation content, which makes the model dependent on intensive professional development and systematic crosscurricular collaboration. Šalaj (2024), in a comparative analysis of European practices, confirms that this model works only when mandatory learning outcomes are clearly defined at the national level and when teachers receive systematic support.

10 Set of learning outcomes (SIU) – the smallest coherent set of related learning outcomes of the same level, scope and profile, designed to respond to labourmarket needs for rapid changes in competences.

Model 3

COMBINED MODEL

This model involves a compulsory module for all vocational school students, regardless of the programme they attend. The model corresponds to a student workload of 2 CSVET credits ($2 \times 25 \text{ hours} = 50 \text{ hours}$), structured as follows:

- ▶ 30 hours delivered through the Guided Teaching and Learning Process¹¹ (VPUP) and 10 hours through WorkBased Learning (UTR)¹². This takes place through a so-called Active Citizenship Portfolio, which begins in the 2nd year and, depending on the school's decision, may extend into the 3rd and potentially the 4th year. It is defined by sets of learning outcomes and implemented through workbased learning (UTR), projectbased and fieldbased teaching, and cooperation with the local community.
- ▶ The remaining 10 hours are allocated to SAP (Independent Learner Activity) and encompass all forms of independent work, study and task completion outside direct instruction or guided processes. This includes homework, literature research, project work, and exam preparation, and is crucial for achieving the prescribed learning outcomes.

11 Guided Teaching and Learning Process (VPUP) refers to all activities carried out in the standard classroom that involve theoretical instruction and the implementation of exercises under teacher guidance. VPUP is expressed as a percentage share within the overall module, meaning that, depending on its capacities, the school may implement a higher or lower share of VPUP in relation to UTR.

12 WorkBased Learning (UTR) is a form of vocational education that integrates theoretical instruction with real work experience. It is implemented in schools, specialised workshops, or directly with employers, with the aim of faster acquisition of skills and smoother transition to the labour market.

The dynamics of implementation and the timetable for the module should be determined at school level, autonomously, in line with the planned hours, school capacities and similar considerations.

It is important to emphasise that this module must be delivered by PiG or ethics teachers who are competent to cover the theoretical content related to the core concepts of democratic culture, human and labour rights, and active citizenship and participation, as well as the practical content through field-based project teaching.

It is also important to emphasise that a compulsory general education module is formally envisaged in the reform framework. The decision on adopting the curricula for general education subjects explicitly states that general education modules, including Politics and Economy developed in the form of sets of learning outcomes (depending on the needs of the sector, occupation and qualification), may be offered as compulsory, elective or optional (MZOM, 2025). The difference between the former compulsory subject and the compulsory module proposed here is therefore not in its obligatory nature, but in its form. The module is defined by learning outcomes and CSVET credits and is delivered flexibly (e.g. 30 hours for guided teaching and learning – VPUP, 10 hours for workbased learning – UTR, projectbased and fieldbased teaching, and 10 hours for SAT – independent learner activity), with the school autonomously determining the implementation schedule instead of following a fixed weekly timetable identical for all programmes (ASOO, 2025).

The advantages of this model are its compatibility with the modular logic, the guaranteed minimum compulsory teaching time (intended for learning theoretical concepts), and its reliance on experiential and participatory forms of learning that empirical studies have shown to be more effective for developing civic competences (Debowski et al., 2025; Tommasi et al., 2021). The Council of Europe (2025), in its publication on learning about democracy in vocational schools, explicitly highlights the combination of formal teaching and experiential learning as the optimal model for the vocational education context.

The disadvantages are the complexity of implementation, particularly the challenge of finding timetable space in overcrowded vocational programmes, and the need to clearly define learning outcomes at the national level in order to avoid uneven implementation, which can be timeconsuming.



Model 4

STATUS QUO WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The fourth option is to retain the current situation, that is, to keep PiG as an elective module, but add guidance documents and recommendations for schools that decide to offer an elective module in civic/political education, together with additional resources for teacher training and professional development. This option is coherent with the existing reform framework but is almost entirely irrelevant in terms of addressing the identified problem. By definition, electiveness means that the module is chosen by schools with motivated teachers and by students who are already interested in such content, while those who need these competences the most are likely to remain beyond its reach; a model that leaves reach up to individual choice therefore maintains, and potentially deepens, existing inequalities. Van de Werfhorst (2017) shows that the institutional structure of the education system directly affects democratic equality, which leads to the conclusion that the decision to keep these contents elective is not neutral, but an institutional choice that reproduces democratic inequality. Supporting this, a comparative analysis of European practices (Šalaj, 2024) indicates that civic education provision based on voluntarism and the enthusiasm of individual teachers results in highly uneven effects, whereas effective practices presuppose nationally mandated obligation. While good-practice guidelines and professional development are undoubtedly beneficial, they do not alter this structural problem of electiveness, because even though they may improve the quality of implementation where the module is offered, they still cannot ensure that the content reaches all students, particularly those who need it most.

Conclusions and Recommendations



Synthesis of key findings

The analysis shows that, despite the legitimate aims of modernisation and alignment with labour-market needs, the reform of vocational education in Croatia has not adequately addressed the problem of systematically ensuring civic and political competences for all vocational school students. The transformation of PiG from a compulsory subject into an elective module is not a neutral change; it structurally reduces access to civic and political education for a population already identified as the most vulnerable in terms of political literacy (Šalaj, Gvozdanović and Horvat, 2024). Comparison with European experience (Van de Werfhorst, 2017; Rosvall and Nylund, 2024; Debowski et al., 2025) confirms that vocational systems which do not develop systematic mechanisms for integrating democratic competences reproduce and deepen democratic inequality.

As evident from the table, none of the models achieves the maximum rating on all criteria, but the comparison clearly shows that MODEL 3 (COMBINED MODEL) attains the most favourable overall result, primarily because it is the only one that simultaneously ensures obligation for all students, pedagogical quality grounded in experiential learning, and full alignment with the existing reform framework. This is achieved under the necessary assumption that, in parallel, the integrative dimension from MODEL 2 (INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING MODULES THROUGH SETS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES) is strengthened by defining mandatory sets of learning outcomes in vocational modules, which in practice also serves as a precondition for establishing Model 3.

EVALUATION CRITERION	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4
EFFECTIVENESS Extent to which this policy achieves the specified objective	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓
EFFICIENCY Assessment of the likely impact on the development of students' civic and political competences	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
RELEVANCE Extent to which the option addresses the identified problem and meets the needs of the target population	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
COHERENCE Compatibility of the option with the current reform framework and the logic of the modular curriculum	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
SUSTAINABILITY Feasibility of implementation given the available human, financial and organisational capacities.	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓

✓ WEAK ✓✓ MODERATE ✓✓✓ STRONG



Recommendations

Based on the analysis conducted, the following recommendations are addressed to decisionmakers:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Introduce a compulsory combined model of civic and political education in all threeyear and fouryear vocational programmes amounting to 2 CSVET credits (50 hours).

RECOMMENDATION 2

Define at national level a minimum set of mandatory learning outcomes related to civic and political competences (the previously mentioned Council of Europe “Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture” – RFCDC – can be used as a basis), which are compulsory for all vocational programmes regardless of sector. As a proposed competence framework and key themes, respondents from the academic community indicate that any future curriculum for a module related to civic and political competences should mandatorily take into account the following themes: Workers’ rights; Solidarity (responsibility in the community, volunteering, migration, values, respect for diversity, etc.); Participation (active citizenship, human rights, participation in elections at all levels, etc.). Teachers of PiG and ethics from vocational schools must be involved in the development of sets of learning outcomes in the various vocational curricula.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Clearly regulate staffing through amendments to the regulations governing teacher competences, explicitly stipulating that PiG and ethics teachers have primary responsibility for delivering civic and political education content in vocational schools, with an obligation for crosscurricular cooperation with vocational teachers. This requires defining staffing conditions through a revision of occupational standards¹³ and qualification standards¹⁴.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in systematic professional development for vocational subject teachers in the content and methodology of civic and political education, accompanied by the development of teaching materials (print and digital), learning scenarios, and similar resources adapted to different vocational contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Establish a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of civic and political education in vocational schools, which, in the planned evaluation of the vocational education reform (after 2027), will also include indicators of the development of democratic competences.

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- 13 An occupational standard is a set of norms that specifies the content of a vocational qualification at a given level of complexity and determines the required knowledge, skills and vocational competences, or identifies jobs and activities within those jobs and the competences needed to perform them, as expressed by the labour market. It underpins the development of qualification standards and vocational curricula. The occupational standard is the result of agreement among all relevant labourmarket and education stakeholders on the optimal content of a particular occupation and on the knowledge and skills, together with corresponding autonomy and responsibility (competences), required. It identifies key tasks and the competences needed to perform those tasks for a given occupation.
- 14 A qualification standard defines the content and structure of a given qualification. It includes the information needed to determine the level, scope and profile of the qualification, as well as the information required to ensure and enhance the quality of the qualification standard. A qualification standard consists of several sets of learning outcomes.



CONCLUSION

The European Commission, in its Action Plan on Basic Skills (European Commission, 2025), explicitly states that basic skills, including the ability for critical thinking and democratic engagement, are not merely individual competences but a cornerstone for safeguarding European democratic values in a context of increasing political polarisation and information manipulation. Croatia therefore cannot allow more than 70% of its uppersecondary student population to remain excluded from the systematic development of these competences. Comparative research clearly shows that systems which leave civic and political education to the market logic of choice or to local initiatives do not achieve equal educational outcomes for all students (Baketa, 2025; Farah et al., 2025). Moreover, such systems actively reproduce democratic inequality, as students who already come from less politically engaged environments receive even fewer opportunities to develop competences that could help compensate for that inequality (Van de Werfhorst, 2017). In the Croatian context, this means that, without systematic intervention, generations of vocational school students will lack the minimum prerequisites for informed and active participation in democratic life. The decisions that policymakers will make in the coming years, in the context of evaluating the vocational education reform, will therefore have longterm consequences for the democratic culture of an entire generation, and of society as a whole.

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Appendices



APPENDIX 1

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL FOR TEACHERS

Introduction: The level of political knowledge among vocational school students is lower than that of their grammarschool peers, and students in threeyear programmes have a lower level of knowledge than those attending fouryear schools. These results from continuous research indicate that the previous model, which relied exclusively on the compulsory subject Politics and Economy – two lessons per week in vocational schools – has not yielded results. This situation clearly points to the need to strengthen and improve civic education in vocational schools, rather than abolishing it, as the education authorities have done. Achieving the educational objectives of the crosscurricular theme in vocational schools is additionally hindered because teachers find it difficult to integrate them into vocational subject curricula. For this reason, in vocational schools knowledge about society and democracy was, until this school year, acquired predominantly through the compulsory subject Politics and Economy. All this suggests that vocational school students, who account for more than 70 per cent of Croatian uppersecondary students, urgently need knowledge about the society in which they plan to live and work, and that education institutions, despite the changes brought by the vocational education reform, must find a model that will enable students to acquire knowledge in the field of political/civic education.

BLOCK 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Tell us briefly: at which school do you teach, which subject, and do you have threeyear programmes?
2. How would you describe students' interest in the content you teach?
3. How would you describe the current status of civic/political education in your school?



BLOCK 2

4. The vocational education reform reduced the number of PiG lessons in four-year programmes and abolished it as a compulsory subject in three-year programmes (it became an elective module). How did you experience this, and what changes do you see in your school?
5. In your experience, can civic/political education topics realistically be integrated into vocational subject curricula, primarily as cross-curricular themes?

BLOCK 3 : ALTERNATIVE MODELS

6. If PiG cannot continue in its previous form, which model do you see as the most realistic and most beneficial for your students – a compulsory module, a cross-curricular theme with clearly defined teaching hours, an elective subject, or something else?
7. Gong uses as inspiration several examples: Italy (33 hours of compulsory cross-curricular theme), France (a compulsory subject linked to vocational specialisation), Austria (80 hours over two years as a separate subject), and Germany (community engagement learning). Which of these models seems closest to the reality of your school, and why?
8. One concrete thing that the Ministry or the Agency for Vocational Education should do from the next school year in relation to these topics?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add that is important to you and that we have not covered with these questions?

APPENDIX 2

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL FOR PRINCIPALS

introduction: The level of political knowledge among vocational school students is lower than that of their grammarschool peers, and students in threeyear programmes have a lower level of knowledge than those attending fouryear schools. These results from continuous research show that the previous model, which relied exclusively on the compulsory subject Politics and Economy, has not produced results. The vocational education reform reduced the number of PiG lessons in fouryear programmes and abolished it as a compulsory subject in threeyear programmes. Teachers have noted that students who go directly into the labour market do not know even their basic labour rights or how institutions function. Vocational school students account for more than 70 per cent of Croatian uppersecondary students – we are interested in what you, as principals, see as a solution in this situation.

BLOCK 1: INTRODUCTION

1. How would you describe the status of civic/political education in your school today in light of the reform?

BLOCK 2: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION REFORM

2. In threeyear programmes, the reform transformed PiG from a compulsory subject into an elective module.

Teachers we spoke to said that everything depends on the enthusiasm of individual teachers, i.e. that there is no system to ensure that this content is actually delivered. Do you recognise this in your school?



BLOCK 3: ALTERNATIVE MODELS

3. Teachers suggested different models: some advocated reinstating a structured PiG subject, perhaps under a different name and definitely earlier – in the 2nd year (even with fewer teaching hours); others proposed embedding the content through sets of learning outcomes in existing modules; and a third group suggested a combination of theory and projectbased work. One model around which there was some degree of consensus would involve delivering 35 compulsory hours through VPUP (Guided Teaching and Learning Process), organised as the school decides, but starting in the 2nd year of uppersecondary education, where PiG/ethics teachers would teach the theoretical content, followed by the introduction, across all three years (2nd, 3rd and possibly 4th), of an Active Citizenship Portfolio defined through sets of learning outcomes and UTR (WorkBased Learning). From your perspective as principals, what do you see as feasible in your school?
4. Teachers highlighted two concrete problems: staffing (who is allowed and able to teach this content) and students' weekly workload, which does not allow for adding new modules. How do you view these obstacles – are they solvable, and if so, how could this best be implemented in the school?

Gong points to several European models as inspiration: Italy (33 hours of compulsory crosscurricular theme per year), France (a compulsory subject linked to vocational specialisation, including practical training), Austria (80 hours over two years as a separate subject), Germany (communityengagement learning, with school autonomy in implementation). Which of these models seems closest to what could work in your context, and why?



BLOCK 4: ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

5. How much autonomy do you as principals actually have in this matter? Can you do anything yourselves already from the next school year, or is everything on hold until the Ministry decides?
6. Teachers have noted that students who go directly into the labour market do not know even their basic labour rights or how institutions function. Do you, as principals, feel responsible for this, or do you see it as an issue of broader education policy?

BLOCK 5: CONCLUSION

7. One concrete action that the Ministry or ASOO should take – what are your proposals?

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