

Learning the European Union at school

EU-in-BRIEF | 09-2017

Knowledge is power. Only the ones who know which instruments of political participation exist can make themselves heard and help reshape the Union. Unfortunately, the biggest critics of the EU often have the least knowledge, and many rely on so-called “fake news” or prejudices. The European Movement Germany and the European Movement International are convinced criticism of the EU is justified and even necessary, but it should be exercised on the basis of solid knowledge. Therefore, the European Movement proposes a rethink of the European education policy: in particular, more knowledge about the EU should be conveyed in schools.

The European Union is today facing a host of challenges. Existing trends of polarization are being accelerated by geopolitical changes and social inequalities. Far left and far right political parties as well as anti-establishment movements are gaining ground, often rejecting the values which the EU stands for. This year, Article 50 was triggered for the first time and the United Kingdom has started the process of leaving the EU. The voter turnout in the last European Union elections was 42.6 percent.¹ And according to the latest Eurobarometer report, 42 per cent of Europeans state that they do not know how the European Union works.²

One of the underlying issues is a general detachment of citizens with both national

and EU politics. Whereas the European Union is a unique and by no means perfect or finished project, much criticism circulating in the media is based on insufficient knowledge of the EU and a poor understanding of its added value for the individual citizen. Citizenship education and a better conception of the EU could help alleviate these problems and promote an informed and critical debate about Europe without resorting to populist messages which are often grounded in misinformation or so-called ‘alternative facts’.

In this EU-in-Brief the European Movement International together with the European Movement Germany researched the current state of play regarding EU

¹ European Parliament available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>, accessed on 24.04.17
² Eurobarometer, Spring 2016. “Report. Public opinion in the European Union”. available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/yearFrom/1974/yearTo/2017/search/citizenship/surveyKy/2130>, p. 109.

education in schools across the different Member States in order to define the current challenges and to formulate demands vis a vis national and EU authorities. The empirical research is based on a Commission study carried out in 2012 as well as a number of interviews conducted with secondary school teachers in Germany.

The brief is structured as follows: First, it highlights the reasons why citizenship and EU education are so essential. Second, it provides a definition for what we mean when we speak about "EU at school". Third, an overview as to how the EU is currently taught at school in the EU Member States is provided. Fourth, it outlines persisting problems before formulating policy recommendations both on an EU and on a Member State level.

Why EU education at school?

The necessity of teaching children and young adults about the European Union early on is subject to a certain degree of controversy; and although every Member State somehow formally includes the European Union in their national curricula, the extent to which and the ways in which it is done greatly differ from country to country. In the media, the EU's engagement in education policy is often labelled as propaganda and Brussels is being accused of indoctrinating children with pro European messages.

Criticism about the EU is valid and important in order to improve a project which is unique and by no means complete.

³ The Eurobarometer report of 2002 found out that only 58% of the respondents had knowledge about the direct election of the European Parliament. While in 2012, the average was around 77%. Source: Oberle, Monika (ed.) (2015): Die europäische Union erfolgreich vermitteln.

However, as with any democratic system, the EU is dependent on the input and engagement of its citizens to improve and adapt in an ever changing environment. In the EU this starts with exercising your fundamental right to vote in European elections. It is a fact, however, that not even every second eligible voter participates in European elections - although the percentage of the people who know about the direct elections has increased.³

There are, however, more methods of citizens participation which are widely unknown. For example, how can you write to the European Ombudsman or start a European Citizens' Initiative if you do not know of their existence? Schools are the only educational institutions reaching all European citizens. Teaching the EU at school is thus a step towards providing citizens with the knowledge necessary to make their voices heard in their own countries and in the EU; teaching the EU at school enables active citizen participation, a key element to any functioning democracy.

Defining EU at school

When we speak about EU at school, it is necessary to first define the elements of what that concretely entails. The European Movement suggests that learning the EU includes a learning process which includes: 1) civic competences; 2) cultural awareness; and 3) knowledge about the EU. When it comes to civic competences and cultural awareness, the European Union has a reference framework with concrete definitions in place: In 2006, the European Parliament and Council published a recommendation on eight key competences for lifelong learning.⁴

Perspektiven der politischen EU-Bildung heute. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. P. 43.

⁴ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, available at

Therein, “Social and civic competences” are defined as the ability to participate effectively and constructively in one’s social and working life and engage in active and democratic participation, especially in increasingly diverse societies. This also involves critical and creative reflection and constructive participation in community activities as well as decision-making from local to national and the European level, in particular through voting. “Cultural awareness and expression” includes an awareness of local, national and European cultural heritage and their place in the world. According to the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council, it is essential to preserve the cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe and other parts of the world.

The third element, “knowledge about the EU”, is a somewhat separate issue and first and foremost a question of national sovereignty. In this study, we refer to knowledge about the EU as 1) core facts about the EU such as knowledge of the working of the institutions and 2) historical and cultural understanding of the EU and its shared values. As laid out in Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the European Union has a supporting role in education, while the Member States retain their national sovereignty over school curricula.⁵

EU education policy thus mainly aims at developing the European dimension in education, encouraging mobility of students and teachers, promoting

cooperation between educational establishments, and encouraging the participation of young people in the democratic life in Europe. The extent to which knowledge about the EU is taught at schools is a matter of national competence and the EU has so far refrained from defining the elements of what exactly should be taught about the EU in which age group. The EU does not have a framework for comparison of knowledge about the EU in place.⁶

EU at school: state of play

Efforts to include a European dimension in the education systems of the EU’s Member States date back to 1988 when the Council passed a resolution that Member States should make every effort to explicitly incorporate the European dimension into their school curricula.⁷ But how is the European Union currently being taught at school? In which subjects is it a topic and what is covered by the curricula?

There is little comprehensive and up-to-date information on the extent to which the EU is taught in the Member States. The latest study that has been carried out in this regard is the “Learning Europe at School” which was carried out by the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission between January and November 2012.⁸ The

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>.

⁵ Article 165 TFEU.

⁶ In 2016, the European Parliament called for such a common EU framework on learning about the EU “in order to foster objective and critical thinking about the benefits of the European Union for its citizens, while respecting Member States’ competence in the field of education and training”. See European Parliament, Own Initiative Report on “Learning EU at School”, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?p>

[ubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2016-0106+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41988X0706(01)&from=EN).

⁷ Resolution of the Council and the Ministers of Education meeting within the Council on the European dimension in education of 24 May 1988 (88/C 177/02), available at [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41988X0706\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41988X0706(01)&from=EN).

⁸ European Commission DG Education and Culture, “Learning Europe at School, Final report”, 11 April 2013, available at

study analysed learning about the EU in primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary education and covered the 27 Member States (before Croatia joined) of the EU.

The study finds that reference to learning about the EU is made explicit in key education legislation in almost half of the Member States. In most cases, the legislation mentions that education should prepare young people for their roles as citizens of their countries as well as of the European Union. Theoretically, each young person who has been through compulsory education today will therefore have been exposed to some teaching that concerns the EU. In all countries, national curricula or learning outcomes contain some requirements that cover the EU in at least one subject and typically at each level of schooling. Theoretically, every young person who has graduated from school will have basic knowledge of the EU.

Thus, the study notes that the framework conditions for teaching about the EU in most countries are present. The curricula show what is to be taught about the EU and provide teachers with a framework in which they can teach about the EU. Typical contents of the education of the European Union in the curricula are geography, the history of the EU, its role as a world political actor, and the role and cooperation of the Member States.

Persisting problems

While the framework for teaching the EU at schools is in theory available in most EU countries, the reality can look quite different. As highlighted in the “Learning Europe at School” study, there are great differences among countries in what aspects of the European Union are

expected to be covered in schools. In particular, knowledge about the EU relating to “historical and cultural understanding of the EU and its shared values” is rarely clearly defined.

According to the study, the curriculum content that covers the EU is highly fragmented in most countries. There is little evidence that the information taught about the EU is designed in a progressive manner to lead pupils and students from basic facts towards a more complex understanding. An important point to make is that the extent to which the EU is taught in schools depends on the current government and its relationship with the EU in general.

There is little consistency and complementarity in what is taught at different levels and in different subjects. Bits and pieces of information about the EU can be found in curricula of different subjects without creating a clear picture of the entirety. “The functioning of EU institutions and the decision making process”, relating to the first point of our definition of knowledge about the EU, is a rather neglected topic compared to other more basic facts such as the geographic or historical aspects of the EU.

Furthermore, in practical terms almost everything depends on the teachers themselves - the problem being twofold: On the one hand teachers who are rather EU skeptical can easily chose to prioritise other subjects in class. On the other hand however, for teachers who would like to teach the EU, they have to possess immense power of perseverance. The European Movement has interviewed teachers in Germany in order to investigate the problems which active and engaged teachers are facing.⁹ These can be summarized as follows:

<http://www.eupika.mfdps.si/Files/Learning%20Europe%20at%20School%20final%20report.pdf>.

⁹ Interviews carried out by Ramona Brzoska.

Fragmentation: In schools in Germany, the topic “EU and citizenship education” is very fragmented. It is taken up very briefly in different subjects. Moreover, the teachers of different disciplines do not communicate enough and do not cooperate with each other.

Time related issues: “EU and citizenship education” is a very small topic in the fields of Social Sciences, Geography and History. It is only a “sub-topic” in middle class. In History, all topics are discussed chronologically, meaning that there is little time left over for Europe and the EU.

Attitude: “Europe and EU citizenship education” is an unpopular topic among both pupils and teachers. In general, pupils have little interest for this topic. Many teachers avoid the topic because it is very complex.

Channelling of information: There is an abundance of material on the EU available for teachers as well as a variety of non-formal educational programmes employed by a range of youth and civil society organisations and well as the EU itself. However, the quantity of offers does not facilitate their use - there is a lack of coordination and accessibility. Often the bureaucratic hurdles and research teachers must undertake require strong initiative and perseverance on side of the teacher, which not everyone is willing to take.

Proposals

The European Movement is convinced that in light of the persisting problems outlined above, there are still issues to be overcome on both the EU and national levels.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Own Initiative Report on “Learning EU at School”, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?p>

Addressing the European Union

In light of its supportive role, the European Movement would like to see continued funding for alternative and modern teaching methods for EU at school: The EU should ensure increased and adequate financial support for the Erasmus+, Europe for Citizens and Creative Europe programmes, which play an important role in strengthening European citizenship. Moreover, the study “Learning Europe at School” finds that the EU should enhance teaching about the EU in schools by way of 1) adding a learning Europe at school element to the Erasmus Student Mobility action and 2) by issuing a Euro Teacher label to teachers in recognition of their competence to teach EU topics.

The latter idea has also found support by the European Parliament as expressed in the Report “on Learning EU at school” from March 2016.¹⁰ Furthermore, both the study and the EP report find that the Commission should further strengthen existing EU level activities including Jean Monnet programmes, e-Twinning and other EU learning networks. Furthermore, the EU should facilitate networks that promote learning about the EU at national, regional and local level, as well as exchanges of best practice between these networks at Union level.

The European Movement would like to see more integration in education policy. As a start, the development of a common framework with guidelines for learning about the EU would be desirable to assist Member States’ contribution to fostering a sense of objective and critical thinking about the benefits of the EU for its citizens.

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This would serve to provide comparability of knowledge about the EU in all Member States.

Addressing the Member States

With education policy being a matter of national sovereignty, the European Movement proposes that Member States review how the EU is embedded in the curriculum, so as to foster knowledge about the EU beyond the physical geography and history of the EU. It is desirable that the curriculum includes knowledge on the role and functioning of the EU institutions and the participation of citizens in the decision-making process. The context in which the EU is taught should be more closely linked to national policy in order to highlight the extent to which national and European policies are now interlinked.

With respect to the difficulties that teachers are facing in finding space in the curriculum, the European Movement asks that teaching about the EU is made mandatory. Member States should put in place a schedule for an EU education module.¹¹ At the same time, teachers should be given more opportunities for development so they are better prepared to teach on EU topics.

Member States should thus support, and update their education systems with a view to strengthening the EU dimension in close collaboration with all relevant actors. This also applies to regions and municipalities, as long as they have a say on school curricula.

The European Movement demands support for all possibilities of conveying more information about the EU to learners as well as to teachers and other educators through

formal, non-formal and informal learning. Member States should moreover acknowledge and support social partners and civil society organisations, in particular youth organisations, in bridging the gap between the EU institutions and the European citizens. They need support and recognition on the part of the Member States. There must be a better channelling of information in order to bridge the aforementioned gap between supply and demand of learning materials and educational programmes.

Conclusion

If we want an informed and critical debate on Europe, then education, democracy education, cultural awareness and knowledge about the EU is crucial. According to the study "Learning Europe at School", the basic conditions exist in theory in most EU Member States.

However, the study points to a number of persisting issues which relate to fragmented curricula and the political alignment of the government. Having spoken to teachers in Germany, one could add problems such as time restraints, the unpopularity of the EU among both student and teachers, as well as a high burden for teachers to employ non-formal education methodologies. The European Movement thus formulates a number of demands on the EU and national level.

The EU should continue funding successful educational programmes while providing a common framework with guidelines for learning about the EU and to provide comparability of knowledge about the EU in all Member States. The EU is to finance successful educational programs adequately and to develop guidelines for European education, which make the state of knowledge comparable in the Member

¹¹ Oberle, Monika (ed.) (2012): Politisches Wissen über die Europäische Union. Subjektive und

objektive Politikkenntnisse von Jugendlichen. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. P. 13.

States. In light of a lack of recent studies and information on how the EU is currently being taught in schools across Europe, the European Movement encourages further research to ascertain how the EU features in curricula, textbooks and exams.

On the national level, Member States should review their education systems in order to strengthen the EU dimension. This should be done in close collaboration with all relevant actors including youth organisations, civil society organisations and regional authorities. The European Movement demands support for all possibilities of conveying more information about the EU to learners as well as to teachers and other educators through formal, non-formal and informal learning.

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About the European Movement Germany

At the website of the European Movement Germany you can find more information about our organisation and find out more about Europe: www.netzwerk-ebd.de

The European Movement Germany, founded in 1949, is the biggest network for European politics in Germany and an institutional partner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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About the European Movement International

The European Movement International seeks to provide a platform to encourage and facilitate the active participation of citizens and stakeholders in the development of European solutions to our common challenges.

We offer thought leadership on the issues that affect Europe and we give the opportunity to representatives from European associations, political parties, enterprises, trade unions, NGOs and other stakeholders, through our 39 National Councils and 36 International Associations, to work together, towards improving the way that Europe works.

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