***Fostering Democratic Values for the Future: An In-Depth Exploration of Romania's Preuniversity Education System***

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*Abstract*: The paper explores the intricacies of Romania's education system, exploring the subjects that contribute to the democratic values frame. We will investigate the active role of individuals in shaping cultural norms and emphasise the importance of their participation in manifesting democratic power within the state. Moreover, the study questions whether the education system effectively prepares the future generation to be responsible members of society. The paper starts with the concept of co-creation and assesses whether individuals are ready to understand or know its implications. It reviews the empowerment of individuals as active decision-makers in societal processes and their ability to reflect on social movements and evolution critically. Furthermore, the research explores whether the upcoming generation possesses values that enable them to reject or aspire to different ideologies. In addressing the relationship between individuals and civil society, the paper investigates when and how non-governmental organisations play a role in the education of future generations' values. An essential aspect of the study is an analysis of the education system's contribution to promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Romania. The research evaluates whether citizens have the necessary values to protect and support a sustainable future. The methodological framework for the paper is structured around a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, such as literature and document review, content and comparative analysis, and a multidisciplinary approach to gather comprehensive insights. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper aims to contribute valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing Romania's preuniversity education system, strengthening civil society, and promoting a sustainable future.

*Keywords: development, participation, civic engagement, responsibility.*

**Introduction**

Each individual's value system and society become essential in building the future, and education plays the most crucial role. Considerable research was done on engaging public and technical issues to increase deliberation and consensus (Burgess, 2012; Fung et al., 2003; Gastil and Levine, 2005; Rowe and Frewer, 2005). However, a unique method has not yet been discovered. Each society lives by its internal core values, and even if we discuss more global values, such as sustainability, the capacity to adapt and internalise is different. Education is the only constant that can help researchers establish a familiar path. Although there is always some level of influence in a common framework, the value creation cannot vary significantly across the democratic spectrum of European Union member states.

**Responsibility for the future**

The research started from the premise that the values of tomorrow's society are built today, and this process is not just the responsibility of one, the citizen. Cross-sector partnerships (Austin 2010) must be the central point of democratic systems. In this sense, Visser (2011, p. 5) stated, “Being responsible also does not mean doing it all ourselves. Responsibility is a form of sharing, a way of recognising that we are all in this together. ‘Sole responsibility’ is an oxymoron.” Knowledge of building partnerships among the members of a democratic society for a better co-creation process requires theoretical and practical guidance. Guidance in young democracies, such as the Romanian one, is not yet well developed, and the core principles of transparency and access to information are still the sole reference.

With an ‘active’ and ‘reflexive’ individual (Clarke, 2005; Martin, 2010), co-creation is increasingly seen as a way of reimagining the harmonious relationship between citizens and state and European institutions. The future generations of the European Union, besides those born in a democratic context, need guidance to experience democratic processes; collaboration of schools with state and society organisations to continually broaden and deepen the relationship with new value renewal must be part of an unremitting process.

A much deeper commitment to integrative processes requires deploying more valuable resources, a better vision of the future, and more leadership effort. Therefore, investments in co-creation are of more excellent value for the partners of the process and society. Besides, the sociological engagement of citizenship as ‘political participation’ critically viewed this re-imagining (e.g. Contandriopoulos, 2004; Rose, 1996). The inherent ambiguities of the ‘active citizen’ role and the lack of actual power transfer that could support it were also highlighted in the literature (Marinetto, 2003; Martin, 2010).

The ‘active citizenship’ studies were divided by authors into two large categories: in the first, domination is the core value, and according to it, the citizens are called to relate to the governmental power (e.g. Martin, 2010), while in the second social movements or awareness of everyday needs are the triggers of participation (Isin and Turner, 2002). Therefore, we discuss active citizenship as ‘top-bottom’ impunity or ‘bottom-up’ empowerment.

As Isin (2009: 369) argued, citizenship in different stages of social development and based on contextual needs citizenship may encompass both of the mentioned situations. Hybridity (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007) within the national state and European regions may be maintained, and control can be solidified in some areas, while freedom to citizens and liberation can be awarded in others.

The increased fusion for sociologists such as Schinkel and Van Houdt (2010: 698) is the core meaning of neoliberal governance, the so-called ‘neo-liberal communitarian governmentality’ in which citizens and community values and responsibilities are interlocked.

As we revealed, citizenship and governance are, at least for us, the two fundamental pillars of democracy, which enable the entire system to function in terms of capability and efficiency. Governance is the result of the entire executive process done by the government for the citizens with the citizens' participation. Governance refers to the political system (Moore, 1993:39) in which the national resources are used to develop the country or region. The citizens' interactions with the government make democracy successful and deem the political system democratic.

The World Development Report (1997) opened up the discussion on the importance of citizens in the governance process and the state's effectiveness. The idea behind bringing the citizens' participation forward was to unveil the inner core of transparency and accountability of governance. The process depends on two main factors: first, to provide the space where the citizens can act as government partners, and second, the facilitation mechanisms created to encourage citizens’ participation. Co-creation as one participation mechanism is intrinsic to the governance and contributes to social development. The research hypothesis was that the low participation of citizens in this process results from the low level of values, more precisely, development values.

**Democracy the path to sustainability**

For the health of democratic societies, scholars from diverse disciplines (Tocqueville 1969/1835; Tönnies 1940; Bellah et al. 1985; Wilson 2000) emphasised the importance of engagement in public life. Also, efforts were made to identify factors for better political and civic participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The trust of people with no and little direct interactions was exposed as the primary contributor to collective action (Putnam, 2000; Stolle, 2001). Putnam suggests that this cultural shift has enormous implications for the institutional support of civic participation. However, when we open the discussion on future development, we must address questions on declining involvement in social and civic life. What does citizen engagement do?

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1999) stated that there are three ways to think about people's engagement.

1. participation in voluntary organisations enhances the development of the social capacities of individuals;
2. voluntary associations cultivate democratic virtues and build the community pillar;
3. group participation makes the protection of collective interests possible.

The lack of engagement is the result of the lack of democratic values. The values that the ones before us protected and which the future generations should build their future.

Nevertheless, how can we educate the people within the democratic value system when the school dropout rate in Romania was and is one of the highest in the European Union? Eurostat, May 2023, data showed that the early school leaving rate in Romania has remained constant in recent years, from 17% in 2013 to 15.6% in 2022, while the European average has fallen from 12% to 9%. From where almost 3 million people will take their democratic values and learn to be engaged socially and civic. Except for Bucharest (7.9%), the early school leaving rate is significantly above the EU27 average in all regions of Romania. Similarly, early school leaving rates by region have been relatively constant over the last ten years everywhere in Romania, which shows that state interventions to reduce the phenomenon have failed.

Based on these results, we inquired into the preuniversity system's capacity to provide value for the future. We wanted to determine to what extent the next generations are ready to support a democratic path and a sustainable future.

Romania needs a change in the current development paradigm to face the challenges of the 21st century. We live in a period marked by globalisation, increasing inequalities, and aggravating environmental problems.

In the Romanian context, sustainable development represents the desire to achieve a balance, a synthesis between the aspirations of the citizens born in democracy, the society on which they depend and to which they should engage, and the European context that allows self-realisation.

The worldwide realities and the United Nations and European Union time horizon that looks over generations at the state's capacity to meet ‘the needs of the present generation without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their own needs’ are more under question. In this global economic, social, and environmental context, governance must be ready to give an agile answer to new global challenges by proposing strategies anchored in regional and international organisations' agendas (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). The capability to organise public administration for a prompt and sustained reaction by citizens based on democratic values is now more than ever put under pressure. The global action plan, which Romania chooses to support in the coming years, is aimed at alleviating poverty, combating inequalities and social injustice, and protecting the planet until 2030.

The Stockholm Conference (1972) resulted in the creation of a UN Program by adopting a Declaration on Environmental Protection, within which legitimacy was given to the concept of sustainable development with its three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. Nowadays, the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 goals and 169 actions, follows the same pillars under which the nations must:

* be able to meet their basic needs for employment, food, energy, water and sanitation - social equity;
* approach the quality of life for economic growth;
* conserve and improve the available resource base through a step-by-step change and development of technologies – environment.

From the social point of view, a cohesive society is needed, which benefits from the improvement of the education and health system, from the reduction of inequalities between men and women, and between the urban and rural areas, leading to the promotion of an open society, in which citizens they can feel appreciated and supported. In a fair institutional framework, there is a need to cultivate the population's resilience so that the citizen can realise their dreams at home. At the same time, the state must help increase the citizens' potential by addressing the problems related to health, education, and the limits of the free market, issues that can be answered through public policies, resulting in a higher standard of living for all citizens. Capital increases social - creating a civic sense defined by trust between citizens - and will unlock the potential of Romanian citizens to realise themselves through their forces while ensuring their communities' sustainable development.

Among the significant values ​​and objectives on which the Romanian National Action Plan Sustainability (2020:7-8) is shaped, we find as fundamental the ones that address the democratic institutions, resilient, open, transparent, in permanent dialogue with citizens, with the ability to anticipate changes, demographic growth, safety in freedom, multiculturalism, equality, and well-being for all citizens. Moreover, education is part of the following values that should contribute to social protection, reduction of inequalities, and inclusion for all categories and social groups without barriers and discrimination.

**Questioning the green future to come**

The Sustainable Development Goals represent the international effort to find an answer to a growing World within the same space. Each state practises the UN vision of the future for the next generations through national strategies. None of these national, European, or international strategies can be implemented without the citizens' involvement. Co-creation has become more required than ever. However, without a well-informed citizen, the entire construct will collapse. In the Eurobarometer on democracy-citizenship (528:2023), it was emphasised that only half of the respondents (50%) feel well-informed about their rights as a citizen of the EU. In comparison, a third (33%) said they do not feel very well informed, and 16% do not feel informed. At the Member State level, the proportion of people feeling well-informed ranges from 26% in France to 64% in Poland and 50% in Romania. Still, in the Special Eurobarometer on justice, rights, and values (514:2021), 65% of Europeans agree that the core values of the EU, such as fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law, are well protected in their own country. On a multiple-answer question to choose if the respondents do any social and civic actions, close to a fifth of respondents (17%) mention that they are making politically motivated consumer choices, while only 15% mention posting opinions on current issues on online social media networks. Also, one in ten EU citizens mention getting involved in NGOs and civil society organisations, while close to the same percentage (9%) mention getting involved in trade unions, political movements, or parties, and 7% are not engaged in such activities. Most Europeans see participation in local, national, and European elections as the main civic activity (75%). Only 8 % of Romanians participate in volunteering activities, and half (4%) are involved in NGOs and civil society organisations, reflecting the actual situation of building a co-creative democracy. Education is correlated with increased involvement in trade unions, political movements or parties, NGOs, and civil society organisations, with a higher likelihood of making politically motivated consumer choices and taking part in volunteering activities or local community projects (Special Eurobarometer 514:2021:18).

In 2019 (Flash Eurobarometer 478), young people, with more than two-thirds (67%) of respondents, said protecting the environment and fighting climate change should be a priority for the EU in the years to come. The majority (56%) also said improving education and training or fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities should be a priority. Romania scores 57% for education, only 41% for environmental protection, and 6% for health and well-being. However, 44 % considered that promoting human rights, democracy, and shared values is essential. As the report stated, respondents who completed education aged 15 or younger are more likely than those who completed education at an older age to mention fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities. The more actively a respondent participates in civic, social, and political activities, the more likely they think each area should be a priority.

Valuing the topics that are taught sufficiently in schools, within the same 2019 Flash Eurobarometer, more than four in ten respondents think critical thinking, media, and democracy (42%); climate change, environment, and eco-friendly behaviours (41%), and entrepreneurship and financial competences (41%). In Romanian, the most mentioned answer with a value of 39% was health education (physical and mental), and democracy scored fifth in a row with only 25%. The respondents who are still studying (48%) or are engaged in social, civic, and political activities are the most likely to mention critical thinking, media, and democracy (44%).

The transition to a green future that leaves no one behind is supported by 88% of EU citizens (Special Eurobarometer 527, Fairness perceptions of the green transition, 2022). Nevertheless, only 46% of Europeans are confident that in 2050, sustainable energy, products, and services will be affordable for everyone, including low-income people. Romanian is in the last place in the European Union, with only 29% of the action taken to fight climate change over the past six months. (Special Eurobarometer 538:2023). Nevertheless, when the impact of a product on the environment is considered, Romania is in third place by rating it as very important (37%) and rather significant (47%) when making a purchasing decision (Flash Eurobarometer Ecolabel 535:2023).

The reviewed Eurobarometer surveys describe what citizens believe they can do, what they are called to do, and what they expect from the government to do, and shine a light on the future development of Romania in the European Union context. Additionally, it evaluates the state's performance in different democratic areas to ensure a fair transition to a sustainable future. It discusses the role of education in both process – democracy and sustainability. Furthermore, the higher the level of education was each time the questions were addressed, the higher the participation and awareness of EU and national development issues was.

**Education of future generations' values**

The Romanian preuniversity education focuses on developing and diversifying critical skills and forming specific skills depending on the field, profile, specialisation, or qualification. It includes the following branches and profiles:

* theoretical field (humanist and real profiles)
* technological chain (technical profiles, services, natural resources, and environmental protection)
* vocational sector (military, theological, sports, artistic, and pedagogical profiles)

These fields of study are intended to help students choose a career according to their affinities. In our quest to find out why Romanian scores so low in democracy and sustainability, we considered it necessary to look at the preuniversity disciplines. Among the fields, profiles, and specialisations, we wanted to determine which subjects/disciplines will educate the future generation about green development and co-democratic society. The research was done on the Romanian education framework, plans, and school programs (2023). The Romanian preuniversity system within the curriculum areas includes counselling and guidance, language and communication, mathematics and natural sciences, human and society, informatics-technologies, and others that are at the school management's decision. This last curriculum segment demonstrates the capacity of the school governance to adapt to the new democratic and sustainable requirements. We studied all the disciplines that are supposed to raise inner values in young students through gained competencies for a better and sustainable democratic future.

The correlation of preuniversity disciplines with environmental and sustainability concerns was one of the leading research paths, and within a few mandatory subjects’ references in competencies were made, such as Sciences (XI grade), Geography (IX, X, XI grades), Biology (XII grade). In other disciplines dependent on the school management decision, detailed competencies on democracy, civic engagement, and sustainability were found: Education for Democracy, Civic Education, Education for Development, Entrepreneurial Education, and Human Rights. Moreover, no references were discovered in one discipline within which we were expected to find references to sustainability and environmental impact – Project Management.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Conclusion**

By exploring the disciplines that contribute to the democratic values frame, we investigated the lack of involvement of Romanian citizens as active actors in the democratic system. The study emphasised the importance of their participation in manifesting democratic power within the state and at the European Union level through the lenses of co-creation. We questioned whether the education system effectively prepares the future generation to be responsible in the future co-democracy. The Eurobarometer surveys helped us to have a better comparative view of Romania within the context of the European Union. Sustainability was the core concept through which the pre-university education system was analysed. We can easily conclude that the role of education is increasing, especially the pre-university one, because of the high drop-out rate in Romania, and democratic and sustainable values need to be better promoted among young students. Here, we do not refer to the disciplines that are part of the school management decisions but the core ones, which must not have only general ideas on the environment and world.

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1. Detailed research on the competencies of each discipline and the content that determines them can be offer at request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)