



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

PROTECTING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY FROM INTERFERENCE AND MANIPULATION – EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY ACTION PLAN

EAEA Statement
September 2020

EAEA welcomes the [consultation on a European Democracy Action Plan](#) launched by the European Commission. Non-formal adult learning and education has emancipatory and transformative learning at its core – represented across the traditions of ‘liberal’ adult education, popular education, Nordic ‘folkbildning’ and German ‘Bildung’. The sector’s foundational pillars are built around civic engagement, critical thinking and the promotion of democratic values such as social pluralism and inclusion. It also provides the necessary skills and tools to understand and participate in society.

Non-formal adult learning and education (ALE) plays a key role in providing the skills and competences needed for active citizenship, democratic engagement and critical thinking. In many countries ALE providers are an essential platform for adults, providing training in basic digital skills and critical media awareness. According to the latest figures from the Digital Economy and Society Index (2020), 85% of adult Europeans use the internet occasionally or regularly. This contrasts with 40% adults who do not have sufficient basic digital skills - or digital ‘literacy’. Recent research suggests that there may be a link between lack of digital literacy and susceptibility to ‘fake news’ and other forms of disinformation spread through social media and other internet media¹. However, being able to recognise the veracity of online resources is a challenging skill that even many digital natives struggle with. Henceforth, older, digitally illiterate and other disadvantaged learners are further exposed to the threats of disinformation. **Empowering adult learners to improve their digital and critical media literacy skills – thus, tackling disinformation – is at the heart of non-formal adult learning and education.** Participation in ALE can raise political awareness and support learners to think critically about political advertisement and receive access to fact-checkers and other transparency online sites.

Non-formal ALE is a space where the European Democracy Action Plan meets reality, enabling and democratically engaging the citizens of Europe. An action plan on media freedom and media pluralism requires strengthening the awareness and the demands of the recipients, the viewers, readers and consumers of information. ALE centres are important meeting places for communities, bringing together people from all walks of life and creating spaces for exchange, discussion and action across generations, cultures and areas of life. Engaging with different experiences in a community promotes the demand for heterogeneity of information. Self-reflection, dialogue and collective learning can foster social cohesion, a pillar of European democracy. Active citizenship and civil society involvement start from community recognition and learning about civic rights, duties and opportunities. **EAEA, therefore, demands the**

¹ See, for instance, Brashier, Nadia/Schacter, Daniel (2020): Aging in an Era of Fake News. In: Current Directions in Psychological Science, 29/3, p 316-323



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European Union and its Member States to promote civic education (or ‘citizenship education’) for adults by strengthening it within EU programmes and allocating specific funding to this key area of ALE.

A European Union that aims to “improve the resilience of our democracies” (Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency) **needs a holistic approach to democracy that puts a stronger emphasis on the role of civil society, including in lifelong learning and ALE.** According to EAEA, the involvement of civil society in political processes – from the local to the European level – showcases how a country upholds its democratic values. Civil society gives a voice to citizens and represents citizens’ interests vis-à-vis governments, public authorities and private businesses. The role of civil society, however, is not self-evident. It needs to be actively promoted and strengthened through, for instance, giving structural and/or financial support to the development of national ‘umbrella’ organisations that represent civil society in sectors such as ALE.

However, a recent consultation of EAEA members demonstrated that a large majority of civil society organisations in the ALE sector, operating at the national and regional level, are either not or only rarely consulted when governments develop new adult learning policies. This is particularly the case for organisations from Southern and Eastern Europe, but also other countries where there is no culturally embedded tradition for public consultation and grassroots participation in the political decision-making processes. The marginalisation of civil society organisations is also visible in the context of the implementation of EU policies and strategies: almost half of EAEA members indicated that they were not aware of national civil society consultation processes on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. **EAEA urges the European Commission to further encourage EU Member States to interact and consult with civil society all over Europe.**

A European Union that aims to promote democratic values also needs to **seek civil dialogue with countries outside of the EU.** While engagement with civil society is enshrined in the EU's principles for cooperation with EU Neighbourhood countries, organisations active in adult education report that their scope for action is very limited. **EAEA calls on the EU to protect the space for civil society within the EU as well as in Neighbourhood countries,** especially where space has been limited in recent years. Democracy thrives on principles such as freedom of expression of its citizens, respect for election results and plurality of political directions. Where these principles are not respected, the EU must draw consequences, and hold strong to its values.

EAEA urges the European Commission to:

- Embrace a holistic approach to democracy that puts a stronger emphasis on the role of civil society, including in lifelong learning and ALE
- Recognise the key role of non-formal adult learning and education (ALE) in providing the skills and competences needed for active citizenship, democratic engagement and critical thinking

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- Promote civic education (or 'citizenship education') for adults by strengthening this key area of ALE within EU programmes and by allocating specific funding to this area
- Strengthen civil society in ALE by encouraging the creation of national umbrella organisations in countries where they do not exist yet
- Protect the space for civil society, to further encourage EU Member States to interact and consult with civil society all over Europe, and to seek civil dialogue with countries outside of the EU

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.