

# Civic Education in the Republic of Croatia – Familiarity with the Institutions of the European Union among Students of the Faculty of Teacher Education

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## Abstract

*Acquiring civic competences is one of the crucial goals of education systems in democratic societies. Encouraging young people to take an active role in society and politics should be a priority in every society. In most European countries, Civic Education is present in school systems, although under different names and varying in scope. In Croatia, the program of Civic Education is cross-curricular, but the results of numerous studies show the need for systematic, high-quality implementation of Civic Education as a separate mandatory school subject in higher years of compulsory education, secondary schools, as well as in institutions of higher education, particularly the ones devoted to educating future teachers. This need is also supported by the fact that reading literacy is one of the central competencies for participation in politics and society, and according to the 2015 PISA study results, Croatia is among the countries whose scores were below average in this regard. Furthermore, factual knowledge of politics is another important dimensions of democratic culture, since it is a prerequisite to understanding political problems. Teacher proficiencies are also a key factor in the development of civic competences, so the paper further presents a part of the results of a study conducted in 2017/18 at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, which examined familiarity with EU institutions among the students of the Faculty of Teacher Education. The obtained results show that even future teachers themselves also possess certain inadequacies in political literacy.*

*Keywords: Civic Education, EU, political literacy, youth*

## 1. Introduction

One of the priorities of every society should be to encourage all citizens to involve themselves in social and political life. During their schooling, young people should systematically acquire skills and competencies which they would use to improve their society, and the promotion of active citizenry is one of the crucial goals of educational systems throughout Europe. When comparing situations in the European context, it is clear that Civic Education has been present in European schools for a long time, although under various names and varying in scope. Despite the partially different focus, and various terms used, there is a strong agreement on what Civic Education needs to help achieve. All of them agree on strengthening a culture of democracy based on common basic values: human rights and liberties, the equality of differences, and the rule of law [1]. Apart from this, one of the basic goals of schools is to prepare young people for life among adults, and politics are the unavoidable fact of social life [2], and therefore, Civic Education should have a permanent place in educational systems. In many countries, Civic Education is a mandatory, independent school subject, taken in primary schools in some places, but mostly in secondary schools.

## 2. Civic Education in the Republic of Croatia

Croatia has recognized the importance of investing in the development of civic competence, and so in 1998, a National Program of Human Rights Education was developed for preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools. This program was adopted by the Croatian government in 1998, and it has enabled the dissemination of content in an interdisciplinary manner, through subjects which explore themes related to human rights, through electives, but also systematically through the school curricula and syllabi. However, executing this program was optional and the program itself was conducted by teachers who had an affinity for it. The next important year for the approach to Civic Education is 2010, when the Croatian government decided to establish a National Committee for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship as an advisory body tasked with, inter alia, providing guidelines for making a new Civic Education curriculum. In 2010, a National Curriculum Framework was adopted, in which Civic Education was defined as a separate educational field, and in 2012, the Ministry of Science,

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Education, and Sports adopted the Civic Education Curriculum for experimental implementation. In the 2012/13 school year, the curriculum was experimentally introduced in 12 schools as an inter-curricular field, or as a separate school subject, depending on the age of pupils. However, instead of Civic Education being introduced as a mandatory and independent school subject after the experimental phase, the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports issues a new Civic Education program (introducing it in schools in 2014/15), which explicitly implies its inter-curricular implementation. This was neither in accordance with the recommendations from teachers and pupils obtained during the experimental phase nor does it recognize the results of many studies conducted in the meantime, which showed a great need to expand the content of this school subject. Some of the related studies conducted in the past decade worth mentioning are the researches conducted by the Human Rights Centre [3], GONG and the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb [4], IDIZ and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation [5], which have shown that young people in Croatia, but also adults, possess an insufficient amount of civic competence, and that they lack basic knowledge of politics, political processes, and human rights. Teacher proficiency is also crucial for the development of civic competences. This area was found lacking as well since the research conducted at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb in 2009/2010 showed that not only the political knowledge of future educators and teachers was insufficient, but also that there existed a link between ignorance and non-democratic attitudes [6]. At the same time, we need to point out that one of the central competencies for participating in political and social life is reading literacy [7], and that reading literacy acquired during school is extremely important for acquiring political knowledge [8]. If we take a look at the 2015 PISA study, in which Croatia finds itself in the below-average cluster of countries, we need to take this as an additional argument supporting the need to systematically introduce Civic Education to Croatian schools. Politics are done and mediated through language. As stated earlier, reading literacy is a prerequisite for political deliberation and action, it requires the gathering of information from texts, constructing meaning, and reaching conclusions [9]. Informed citizens are crucial to a democratic society. However, in order for political participation to even occur, and for it to be founded on rational thought in light of their interests and values, citizens need to possess at least basic degree of political awareness [10]. Many studies show that political knowledge acquired in adolescence is a deciding predictor of political awareness reached in adulthood [11] and that the political views acquired in adolescence mostly remain the same in adulthood [12]. The results of the study conducted in 2017/18 at the Faculty of Teacher Education showed how familiar future teachers (who should implement the content of Civic Education) are with EU bodies (inter alia).

### 3. Knowledge of European Union bodies at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb

Croatia joined the EU in 2013. During their compulsory education, all students in Croatia were supposed to learn about European integrations and the bodies of the EU. According to the Curriculum of Civic Education, one of the competencies required from teachers in order to promote democratic values is professional skills. In 2017/18, at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, a study about the European identity of future school- and preschool teachers was conducted, and several questions were related to political awareness. The sample included 288 participants. The data was collected from a survey questionnaire and statistically processed. The respondents needed to answer the following questions (inter alia): During your schooling, how much did you learn about the EU? Are Croatian elections for the European Parliament important? (both questions on the scale: 1 – Not at all, 5 – A significant amount), and Name three EU bodies (apart from the European Parliament).

Table 1. During your schooling, how much did you learn about the EU (the role of Parliament, laws, politics, etc.)?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	1	24	8.3	8.4
	2	91	31.6	31.7
	3	104	36.1	36.2
	4	58	20.1	20.2
	5	10	3.5	3.5
	Total	287	99.7	100.0
Missing	System	1	.3	
Total		288	100.0	

Table 2. How important are the elections for the European Parliament in Croatia?



	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid 1	8	2.8	2.8
2	26	9.0	9.2
3	95	33.0	33.5
4	95	33.0	33.5
5	60	20.8	21.1
Total	284	98.6	100.0
Missing System	4	1.4	
Total	288	100.0	

Table 3. Name three bodies of the EU (apart from the European Parliament).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid Unfamiliar with a single body of the EU	104	36.1	36.1
Familiar with one body of the EU	63	21.9	21.9
Familiar with two bodies of the EU	60	20.8	20.8
Familiar with three bodies of the EU	61	21.2	21.2
Total	288	100.0	100.0

Graphics 1. Number of respondents naming specific bodies of the EU

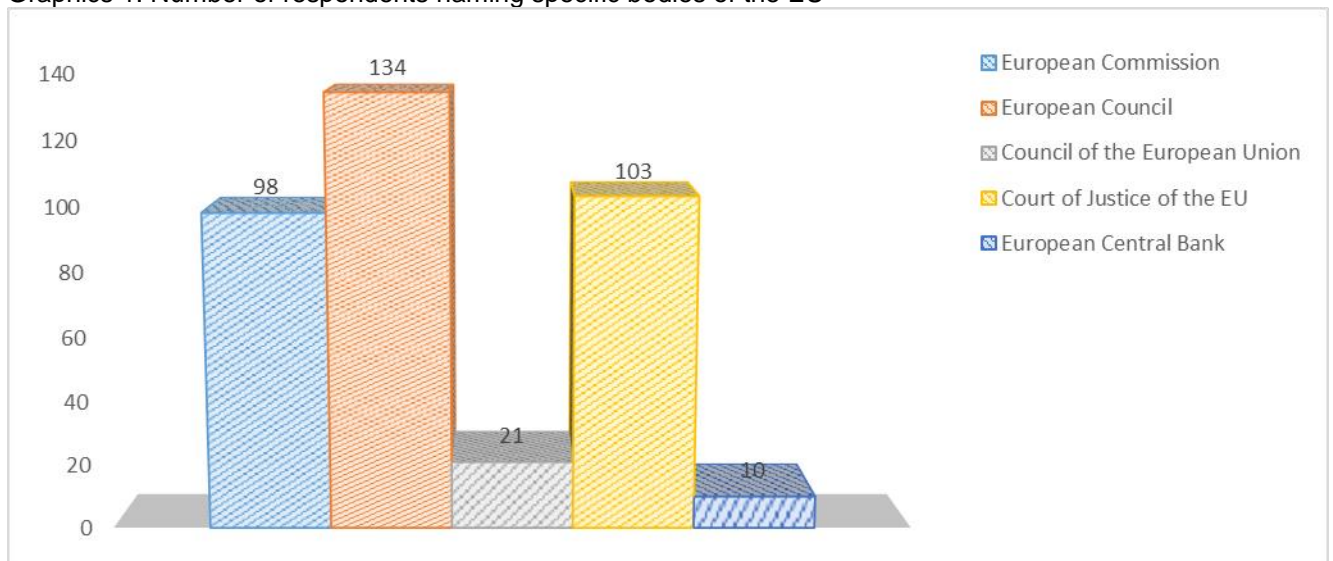


Table 4. Correlation between learning about the EU and familiarity with the bodies of the EU

			bodies of the EU
Spearman's rho	Learning about the EU	Correlation Coefficient	.199**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
		N	287

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Only 23.6% of the respondents stated that during their schooling they learned a lot, i.e. a significant amount about the European Union. A positive and statistically significant correlation ( $r=0.199$ ,  $p>0.01$ ,  $df=286$ ) was discovered between the self-assessment of the respondents about the scope of learning about the bodies of the EU and factual knowledge, which means that the students who learned more

about the European Union also show a significantly better familiarity with the bodies of the EU. Out of the total of 288 respondents, over a third (36.1%) could not name a single institution of the European Union, while 21.2% of the respondents were able to name three institutions of the European Union. Out of those who were able to name 1-3 EU bodies, the majority was familiar with the European Council (134), while 98 respondents knew about the European Commission. Today (2018), Civic Education in the Republic of Croatia does not hold the place it deserves within the Croatian school system. Teacher proficiency is a key factor in the development of civic competences, and the obtained results show that even future teachers, the ones who should very soon educate the generations that follow, lack political knowledge themselves. Factual knowledge of politics is an unavoidable prerequisite for understanding political problems, as well as active and responsible participation in political processes. The results of the studies shown in this paper show that teaching Civic Education in Croatia needs to be intensified, both during compulsory education, and in universities.

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