

**POLICY PROPOSAL - 2021 No.5**

# **HOW DO WE TEACH DEMOCRACY?**

The Equilibrium Institute's  
policy proposals for reforming  
civic education



**Equilibrium**  
Institute

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 01

For democracy to work reliably and for voters to effectively assert their interests, a set of specific norms, behavioural patterns, attitudes and skills need to prevail in society. It is up to the education system to convey the relevant skills, knowledge and norms to the general public.

## 02

There are at least five broad problems that apply in the context of the prevailing model of civic education/education for democracy in Hungary: the low number of class hours; the lack of the relevant qualifications, skills and preparation on the part of many teachers; the absence of methodological preparedness; the frontal character of elementary and secondary education; as well as the hierarchic and authoritarian operation of schools.

## 03

To reform civic education, we must first define the output we expect public education to provide, in other words we must specify what our ideal of a “good citizen” is. As the output goal, we need to define a vision of the democratic individual, which includes the following characteristics/elements:

1. an ability of civic autonomy/self-governance;
2. the ability to form nuanced judgments;
3. a self-confident use of rational reasoning and a culture of engaging in democratic debate;
4. intellectual curiosity and openness to the world;
5. empathy and social skills;
6. a sense of civic responsibility and the ability to follow social norms;
7. the ability to cooperate.

## 04

Civic education/civic skills need to be taught at every age level of education spanning the period from the first school year all the way to the twelfth year. It needs to be taught as a distinct subject starting with at least one class hour a week, which should increase to two hours over time. Rather than the standard frontal instruction, education for democracy should use a project and experience-based learning approach that draws on the students’ engagement. Students should get to experience the power of democratic participation – including the possibility of peaceful disagreement and the importance of influencing public affairs – in practical situations that resemble real-life conditions.

## 05

Teachers need to be properly prepared for teaching democracy. The teaching of democratic competencies needs to receive a proper emphasis in the education of teachers, while the teaching of civic studies classes should not be forced on history teachers as an additional burden but should instead be entrusted to faculty members who either have a state certifying exam in civic studies and/or a

requisite higher education degree (e.g., in law, economics, political science or sociology).

## 06

Let’s use the experience we have already amassed in education for democracy! The state should organise and make publicly available all the relevant experience accumulated by alternative education institutions and NGOs over the past decades.

## 07

Let’s democratise our schools! It’s impossible to learn the relevant civic competencies for democracy in hierarchically-organised and authoritarian institutions which want students to be passive and obedient. Just as democratic practices have established themselves in the more developed education systems across the world, Hungarian education, too, must learn to better involve students in the decision-making concerning the institution overall and their classes specifically, to allow them to experience collective action and responsible civic behaviour.

# 1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The foundation and essence of democracy is that everyone can be involved in making the decisions that affect their lives. However, institutions in and of themselves are not enough to achieve this; it also takes autonomous, legally conscious and responsible action on the part of citizens – this is the most important pillar of democracy.

In the substantial rather than formal sense of the word, no one's born a citizen: **for democracy to work well, a whole set of norms, behavioural patterns, attitudes and abilities need to prevail, and we have to learn these in the course of our socialisation.** These skills are not only essential in ensuring that individuals can act autonomously in their capacity as voters, but they are also needed for creating mutual trust and social cohesion. Furthermore, while they also provide the most potent antidote to political polarisation, disinformation and the susceptibility to political manipulation.

In the United States as well as in the majority of the established European democracies, the education systems focus a great deal on fostering democratic culture. In **Hungary, by contrast, the state has left the task of**

**democratic socialisation up to the families and the media – or to the alternative school system and the NGOs that are willing to step up** – while it has shied away from the dangerous conflicts that would accompany the efforts to regulate this area.

**That is why in the following we will formulate proposals on how democratic/civic education can be institutionalised in Hungary and accompany students along their entire pathway in elementary and secondary education.**

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# 2. CIVIC EDUCATION IN HUNGARY

For the most part, Hungary has never experienced the **political, social and professional debates that would have allowed for a consensus to emerge on how political culture and the citizens' democratic competencies could be developed in order to shore up the institutions that have made the democratic transition possible.** Civic education never emerged as a policy issue, **with the vital function of political socialisation being left up to the family and peer groups instead.**

Although the National Curriculum published in 2020 **has introduced a subject called civic studies,** it is only present as a conclusion of sorts of elementary and secondary education, respectively, **in the final year of elementary education and the final year of secondary education, with one class hour a week.** Furthermore, teaching civic studies

is still primarily up to history teachers, who are often not trained in the social sciences and lack the knowledge and pedagogical methods which they would need to properly teach civic education.

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**Four key problem areas arise in the context of the current model, and a reform of our education for democracy needs to focus on remedying these problems:**

## 01 THE LOW NUMBER OF CLASS HOURS

In the current system, students need to learn a rather wide array of materials within the very limited timeframe provided by a mere one-hour class over a span of two years. Such a limited time of teaching hours is not sufficient for the classes to work as they should and for the students and their instructors to properly address the issues in the curriculum. **In the absence of a sufficient emphasis on the subject, there is a risk that teachers pressed for time will use the civic studies class hours to make up for the time they lack on other subjects.**



## 02 THE LACKING PROFESSIONAL PREPAREDNESS OF TEACHERS

**Civic studies education is still widely seen as a complementary element of history classes,** which history teachers – who tend to struggle with a shortage of class time and an abundance of topics they must address – are rarely able to teach properly because this is an area that requires **entirely different contents, as well as a distinct pedagogical and student perspective.** Furthermore, a substantial majority of young people who study to be teachers come from **schools where they never had the chance to learn the competencies that they are subsequently asked to teach as specialised civic studies teachers.**



## 03 FRONTAL INSTRUCTION

Hungarian elementary and secondary education is generally based on frontal instruction, which impedes student creativity and initiative. Ideally, however, democratic participation is based on **initiative, creativity, critical thinking, the cooperation between equal parties – and in fact occasionally even on questioning authority.** **The dominant pedagogical practice in Hungary, by contrast, tends to educate youths to be passive and to engage in rote learning and to slavishly regurgitate facts.** **This** does not serve the development of the abovementioned skills, in fact, it makes it harder for students to acquire them.



## 04 HIERARCHICAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

The hierarchical pedagogical practice of Hungarian education institutions and the absence of a democratic climate in schools is another obstacle. Educating youths for democracy and civic responsibility involves a complex system. Creating the framework for teaching it as a distinct school subject is a necessary element of this system, but in and of itself it is not a sufficient condition for bringing it about. Values that highlight the equality and autonomy of human individuals cannot be credibly conveyed in the framework of an educational system that is rigidly hierarchical and centred on frontal instruction.



# 3. THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EQUILIBRIUM INSTITUTE

## 3.1. LET'S DEFINE THE UNDERLYING VISION OF THE IDEAL CITIZEN OF OUR EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY!

As a school subject that is of pre-eminent importance with respect to both, the political community and the socialisation of the individual, the ultimate goal of civic education is to help educate “good citizens”. In reforming civic education, policy decision-makers should primarily focus on the anthropological values below as output goals:

nanced and difficult social problems in their own complexity and they can assess the impact of these problems on themselves and their immediate environment. Youths with some level of completed mandatory education must be capable of critically evaluating the norms and narratives that they receive from the outside – or even norms they may have already internalised – and they must be capable of coming up with their own position based on rational reasoning.

### 01 THE ABILITY FOR AUTONOMY/ SELF-DIRECTION

Participation is the foundation of democracy, and the quality of participation in turn is defined by the citizens' ability to think and act independently. **Autonomous citizens can render decisions that reflect their own values and interests, and they can deflect outside attempts at manipulating their thinking. Initiative, creativity, a willingness to act, an ability to express one's values and interests, and a sense of competence** are all components of individual autonomy – together, they make a citizen want to influence public affairs while they also enable them to do so.

### 03 THE ABILITY TO REASON AND DEBATE CULTURE

Democracy is *deliberation*, in other words it is a system involving continuous consultations and discussions in which the clashing of arguments is the primary instrument not only of decision-making but also of peaceful coexistence. **A “good citizen” is capable of formulating, justifying or defending their own position in response to arguments presented by another person, and they are willing to engage in a dialogue with fellow citizens.**

### 02 NUANCED JUDGMENT

This involves **well-informed decision-making as well as the ability to grasp and analyse complex ideals, ideologies and problems.** The citizen is capable of understanding

### 04 CURIOSITY AND OPENNESS TO THE WORLD

As opposed to a passive and subordinated attitude, an active and self-conscious understanding of citizenship is contingent on **an interest in public affairs, a desire for regular and diverse information, as well as the**

**ability to process such information critically and in a nuanced manner.** Sentiments play an important and ineradicable role in the voters' decision-making, but at the same time in situations when someone is guided *only* by their emotions, they become incapable of rendering well-informed decisions; the pre-dominance of emotions in decision-making impedes an individual's ability to render informed judgments.

### 05 EMPATHY

A key aspect of one's engagement as a conscious citizen is a **sense of responsibility and empathy towards the other members of the community and a sensitivity to social problems.** A “good citizen” is aware of the diversity of life situations and of the differences in individual motivations this gives rise to, and they are also capable of empathising with those fellow citizens who are in an underprivileged situation.

### 06 CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND COMPLIANCE WITH SOCIAL NORMS

The individual always exists as part of a community and they experience their own individuality through their relationship with others. **A good citizen is aware of the collective mutual dependence of citizens on one another and they view themselves as part of a greater whole.** The internalisation and voluntary compliance with the basic norms of coexistence – complemented by critical thinking – are not the same as blindly and unreflectively following the rules. Instead, they reflect the individual's capability to influence the lives of others through their actions.

### 07 COOPERATION

An essential feature of modern democracies is that it involves the coordination of the actions of individuals who are strangers and hold a diverse range of different values and motivations. **To work well, society needs both competition and cooperation, in fact even the practice of altruism.** If democratic citizenship is to mean more than a mere formality, if we conceived of it as a model of meaningful action with a social impact, then it can only achieve real results when citizens trust each other and can work together to realise their goals.

## 3.2. A DISTINCT SCHOOL SUBJECT WITH AT LEAST TWO CLASS HOURS EACH WEEK

The pre-eminent importance of preparing youths for a life as citizens justifies and necessitates the teaching of the requisite skills as a distinct subject in elementary and secondary education – not only for two years, but across the entire span of the students’ educational pathway. That is why a civic education/education for democracy can only achieve its goals if it meets all of the criteria below:

- 01** It is integrated into the curriculum and influences the students’ education throughout their entire educational pathway, from the first year in elementary education all the way to the final year of secondary school.
- 02** It is taught for at least one class hour each week in elementary education and for two hours a week in secondary education.
- 03** Instead of frontal instruction and indoctrination, it emphasises exploration, independent opinion-formation and autonomous self-orientation.
- 04** It is taught by teachers who have degrees in relevant fields (sociology, law or political science) and/or have completed further education which qualifies them to teach the distinct subject of civic studies (that is they have a certifying state examination in the field).

## 3.3. EXPERIENCING DEMOCRACY RATHER THAN MERE KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

Hungarian education must overcome the Prussian/ frontal model of education which continues to prevail to date. The idea that the emphasis needs to be on developing the students’ skills and competencies, as well as on involving and engaging them, rather than on rote learning is especially pertinent when it comes to the teaching of the abilities that prepare the students for participation in democratic life. Based on international and domestic best practices, we can identify several common features of the methodologies that follow this model.

### PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The passive role of students as the recipients of information needs to be replaced by an approach that emphasises the acquisition of **skills needed for problem-oriented thinking, collaboration and patterns of cooperation, as well as new social competencies**. One aspect of this model is that students need to learn to identify real solutions to real problems.

### INDUCTIVE LEARNING

Rather than cramming abstract definitions, students study the way society and democratic decision-making operate based on everyday experience, learning to extrapolate from individual experience to the social experience in general. As part of inductive education, students **are presented with problems that resemble real-life issues, which they then jointly analyse and try to resolve together**.

### ACTIVE STUDENTS AND INTERACTIVITY

Good examples for the direct involvement of students are classroom simulations of democratic decision-making through situational exercises and role-playing games. Students should be able to solve problems based on **parliamentary debates and votes held in the classroom**, where the outcomes of the debate and the subsequent vote have real consequences. This could involve, for example, laying down the rules of conduct to be followed in the classroom; the cleaning up of the school grounds; or the

use of a portion of the class budget. **In this context, the educator plays the role of facilitator:** They provide the opportunity for students to create knowledge together, as well as to freely debate arguments and counterarguments.

### A FOCUS ON RELEVANCE

The simulations we referred to above should not centre on fictitious dilemmas but on **issues of actual relevance in the everyday life of students!** Students should be deciding about real problems in their classrooms, at the school or even their residential neighbourhoods.

### AN EMPHASIS ON COOPERATION

A pre-eminent goal of civic education is to **educate people to be able to function as members of a community, in cooperation with other members of the community**. The teaching of civic studies should be suffused with cooperation, problem-solving and learning from one another.

## 3.4. LET’S PROPERLY EDUCATE THE EDUCATORS!

Rather than asking history teachers – who are overburdened as it is – or the teachers of other subjects to teach democracy, it should be left to teachers who have degrees in a relevant field (that is either sociology, law, political science or economics) or who have completed some specialised further education that qualifies them to teach the dedicated subject of civic studies.

Teachers’ education in general should focus more on the **pedagogic principles of civic education**, and it should make use of the existing domestic, EU and other learning materials on the subject. In training the teachers of tomorrow, we must – at least for the time being – also compensate for the deficiencies of our existing education system.

### 3.5. LET'S USE THE EXPERIENCE THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN AMASSED!

A vast amount of experience on civic education has been amassed already both here in Hungary as well as internationally. Enthusiastic teachers, alternative schools, and international and domestic NGOs have experimented with a wide variety of ways to teach students democratic competencies, drawing on diverse pedagogic principles in the process. The accumulated knowledge that has emerged as a consequence of their efforts needs to be used in establishing the framework for the introduction of civic studies as a mandatory school subject.

**We need to create the possibility and institutional framework for using this experience in drafting study materials for classrooms and for extracurricular (informal) education; in the training and further education of teachers; as well as in the locally adapted practice of individual educational institutions.** The methodological repository that thus emerges would allow

properly qualified teachers to decide themselves – rather than being compelled to follow a centrally mandated uniform curriculum – what elements of the civic education arsenal are most ideally suited for the specific needs and abilities of their students, which best reflect their everyday experience.

### 3.6. DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

Civic education only makes sense if it is not limited to one or two hours of classroom teaching each week but also suffuses the entirety of education, its formal, non-formal and informal dimensions alike. It obviously does not serve to strengthen the ideal of democratic civic-mindedness when the democratic experience is limited to a single school subject, which immediately ends as the school bell rings to announce the end of the class: **the entire life at school should be suffused by a democratic climate which fosters the ideal of a democratic citizen as outlined above, in other words the emergence of a competent citizen.**

Students (and occasionally the parents, too) should be given the opportunity to be involved in formulating the rules that apply to their classrooms and schools, to define common goals and to solve problems together, and not least to experience civic responsibility and the consequences of

Creating democratic schools also means that the depoliticization of elementary and secondary education needs to end. A democratic framework will also redefine the relationship between teachers and students since on many levels of decision-making they will become stakeholders on equal footing.

their own decisions. In this respect, the most important institutions outside the classroom are the **school assembly and the student government**. However, in many schools these are show institutions with no substantial impact or authority on the issues that matter.

Creating democratic schools also means that the **depoliticization of elementary and secondary education needs to end**. This does not imply that we must bring party politics into the schools. It merely means that students must have the opportunity to openly debate the issues

that impact their lives; they need to acquaint themselves with a democratic debate culture and must experience as early as possible what it means to express and assert their own interests.

A democratic framework will also **redefine the relationship between teachers and students** since on many levels of decision-making they will become stakeholders on equal footing. Thus, for example, in coming up with the common rules that need to be followed at school, their votes and their voices need to weigh equally.

# THE EQUILIBRIUM INSTITUTE'S PROPOSALS

# FOR REFORMING CIVIC EDUCATION

AREA	RECOMMENDATION	AREA	RECOMMENDATION
THE IDEAL DEMOCRATIC CITIZEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is up to the elementary and secondary education system to educate citizens who are capable of forming autonomous and nuanced judgments; who can debate with civility and are open-minded; who have empathy and a sense of responsibility, and are cooperative in their interactions with their fellow citizens.</li> </ul>	METHODOLOGY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frontal education needs to be replaced by an education focused on improving skills and competencies based on the proactive inclusion and engagement of students in shaping their education.</li> </ul>
INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Civic education should be a mandatory school subject from the first year all the way to year 12.</li> <li>Civic studies need to be taught for at least one class hour each week in elementary education and for two hours a week in secondary education.</li> <li>Democratic schools - more rights and responsibilities for students!</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We need an education that involves project-based learning, relies on an inductive approach and is interactive and relevance-centred. Let's encourage our students to cooperate.</li> <li>Let's make it possible for the domestic and international experiences accumulated thus far in education for democracy to become part of the public domain and to be integrated into elementary and secondary education!</li> </ul>
QUALIFIED TEACHERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Civic studies should only be taught by teachers who have degrees in relevant fields and/or have completed further education to train them specifically as civic studies teachers.</li> <li>The training of teachers needs to feature a greater emphasis on the pedagogic principles underlying a civic education.</li> </ul>		

## **ABOUT US**

The Equilibrium Institute is a future-oriented Hungarian think tank. We are writing political, economic, and cultural visions and policy proposals for Hungary. We are establishing an intellectual background to underpin the success of Hungarians in the rapidly changing 21st century.

We are discussing topics that are underrepresented in public discussions. These topics include robotization, the transforming labour market, the air quality and the pollution of freshwater, national identity and the role of communities in a society, the future of education, the country's economic take-off, or the changing world order.

The Equilibrium Institute's research team and its advisory board consist of a wide variety of economists, sociologists, political analysts, climate experts, foreign policy experts, and researchers with extensive experiences in their academic fields being theoretical or applied sciences.

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