Inclusive education remains one of the biggest challenge for Bulgaria, which has still a significant rate of early school drop outs in particular from the Roma ethnic community. Despite having improved its legal framework and national system on citizenship education and validation of NFIL, little coordination and trans-sectorial cooperation between stakeholders translates into weak national, regional and local educational structures. The need to improve its transparency mechanisms related to funding and increased civil participation in monitoring the electoral process and the media must be more persistent and more developed.
1. Ensuring that people acquire civic and intercultural competences

Bulgarian students’ civic knowledge has increased since 2016 but still remains below average, with the gender gap and socio-economic status having a strong impact on students’ performance. Furthermore, negative perceptions on questions of equal opportunities for women and men along with equal rights for ethnic minorities are to be tackled in Bulgaria according to responses given by students on values and attitudes towards these groups¹. Recent measures have attempted to increase the amount and level of citizenship education in schools with the revised Education Act in force since August 2016, which includes plans to introduce European citizenship and knowledge of European institutions in citizenship education in upper secondary². In Bulgaria, citizenship education is integrated into social sciences in primary and secondary education, and in 2018 the Ministry of Education announced that civic education would be introduced as a new subject in the curriculum starting from 2020³.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>EU average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2017</td>
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Our members have highlighted the lack of interest and/or quality teaching within the general curriculum in citizenship education due to its perception as a minor subject to be studied for students’ high school graduation and also towards higher education. Furthermore, our members pointed at the lack of governmental and national authorities’ strategies for combatting discrimination and hostile attitude towards vulnerable groups, an initiative mostly filled by civil society organisations when working with local communities and leaders on projects related to Roma minorities and newly arrived migrants. Our members have also stressed the lack of transectorial partnerships to promote civic and intercultural competences, drawing attention to the minimum framework public authorities take on as the subject is again not perceived as a major competence needed in the curriculum. Besides, our members have also called for more public financial support to complement qualitative citizenship education, along with a whole school approach between learning institutions and civic society organisations. For example, the Bulgarian Youth Forum develops training on non-formal educational programs on civic competences through cooperation with different levels at the Ministry of Education and Science, along with secondary schools⁴. However, our members have highlighted the often tense political climate which can refrain a whole school approach such as gender equality campaigns in the midst of the 2018 Istanbul Convention⁵.

Inclusive education remains one of the biggest challenge for Bulgaria, with very high rates of early school drop outs, in particular from the Roma communities.

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². Ibid.
Validation of NFIL

In Bulgaria the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVEC) functions in cooperation with the Centers for Vocational Training, which are registered and certified centers that are either state governmental, municipal or private ones. Funding comes from combined state-level, municipal and European ones which for the latter encourage a project-based approach. Our members have highlighted the under-development of the validation process for competences and skills acquired by non-formal and informal learning due to the strong focus on vocational education and training (VET). With the 2012 Council Recommendations on arrangements for each member state to have a validation process by 2018 for non-formal and informal learning, Bulgaria still has no cross-sectoral coordinating mechanisms at national level, in particular between educational, labor institutions and civil society organisations as mentioned by our members. The need to have a comprehensive framework around the validation of NFIL learning outcomes is still relatively new for Bulgarian society as it needs to be perceived as ‘normal practice’.

According to 2016 figures from the National Statistical Institute, only 15 percent⁶ of Roma children complete secondary school while mistrust and ethnic tension aren’t treated in the classroom despite public discussion on the need for a coherent public policy to tackle discrimination. According to our members, other factors delaying the process of inclusiveness include rising populism and the extreme right-wing narrative, longing towards scapegoating minorities for public support. However, civil society organisations remain at the forefront when it comes to intercultural dialogue and inclusion between society and Roma ethnic minority groups, such as the Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance (Amalipe) working with more than 260 schools and 15 municipalities on integrating the Roma community in Bulgaria⁷, along with the Areté Youth Foundation which offers Forward Together Camps, camps which encourage the Roma youth to complete their education and take a more active role in their communities, helped in part with educational grants and scholarships⁸.

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2. Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly regarding the use of the internet and social media

In regards to hate speech and fake news, civil society organisations are closely related to developments in Bulgarian media, itself prone to increasing dissemination of disinformation through online social media and networks. Campaigns to tackle hate speech such as the Bulgarian Youth Forum’s involvement in the Council of Europe’s No Hate Speech Movement helps prevent, counter and produce alternative narratives at national and local levels. Furthermore, CSOs such as Foundation Media Democracy aims specifically at tackling fake news and hate speech through annual, periodic and specific reports related to the media environment, media freedom and media pluralism.

CASE STUDY
Tackling fake news through civil observers for monitoring fair elections

The Institute for Social Integration (ISI) is an organisation that supports trainings, educational courses, research and scientific studies, monitoring along with organizing discussion forums and publishing. ISI mostly aims at reinforcing greater integration in society and bridging social and economic gaps in Bulgaria. Since 2011, ISI and the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) dedicated a joint project to monitor the electoral process due to a crisis of public confidence in the latter and a dissatisfaction of a great number of Bulgarians to public institutions and political parties. The main objective was to increase civil participation in voting and observing the elections, while also encouraging civil society to denounce any abuse as regular problems include buying votes, abuse of office, physical retribution or raids along with widespread disinformation. Young people were trained to monitor and act as watchdogs as ISI used its own Alumni network of almost 400 members. The monitoring took place in 27 areas of the country and noted ignorance of the electoral legislation from the election administration itself, compiled in a detailed report. Young civil observers were also tasked with monitoring the media environment during a two-month span, for which the trained team followed the main national and regional online media to evaluate public narratives prior to election campaigns.

Recommendations

- Improve access to citizenship education through quality of education and training systems
- Develop a national strategy for combatting discrimination in formal education and increase equal opportunities, in particular towards the Roma community and women
- Reinforce citizenship education in curriculum through transectorial partnerships to increase active participation of young citizens
- Build a comprehensive framework for the validation of NFIL along with cross-sectoral coordination between relevant stakeholders

This Monitor is a contribution to further examine the relationship between citizenship and lifelong learning experiences and policy outcomes in and outside of the classroom in various European countries. Mapping the different approaches that SOLIDAR Foundation members have taken in promoting EU values in relation to citizenship education and lifelong learning for greater democratic participation of citizens, the outcomes will be disseminated towards European and national policy-makers and offers an array of best practices to collect, use and transfer among networks. The SOLIDAR Education and Life-long Learning Forum will further work on the topic and develop a long term sustainable advocacy strategy for CSOs towards national and EU-wide authorities to influence the debate and revision of national curricula and education systems.

Through its member and partner organizations, SOLIDAR Foundation engages citizens in EU decision making processes, empowers people through lifelong learning and VET, and voices their concerns to the EU institutions by carrying out active lobbying, project management and coordination, policy monitoring, research and awareness-raising.