



# FOSTERING DEMOCRATIC VALUES FOR THE FUTURE:<sup>\*</sup> AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF ROMANIA'S PREUNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM

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## Introduction

Everyone'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–Levine 2005; Rowe–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 internalize 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.

In theory, values are considered in numerous disciplines and areas of study, encompassing personal, cultural, biological, and social meanings (Hamilton 2006). When we research values, we explore what is significant to us, such as security, freedom, wisdom, and independence. The various definitions of values, each pointing to what is desirable or not, reflect the interdisciplinary nature of their study, inviting us to appreciate the breadth and depth of a topic.

Values significantly influence most, if not all, motivated behavior. Every behavior has positive implications for expressing, upholding, or achieving specific values, but it also has negative implications for the values in opposing positions. People's behavior balances their opposing values. (Schwartz 2009: 18) Attitudes and values

<sup>\*</sup> <https://doi.org/10.62560/csz.2024.02.11>



are related, but they are different concepts. Attitudes refer to an individual's feelings or opinions about something, while values are the principles or standards of behavior that individuals or groups adhere to. Attitudes can be seen as emerging from or reflecting values. Our values, beliefs, personal circumstances, behavior, education, knowledge, and character influence our attitudes. It is argued that attitudes can change while values and beliefs are less flexible (Appleton 2014). Values world shifts, such as sustainability development, often involve reevaluating societal values and can lead to significant changes in behavior and policy, making them a crucial aspect of sustainability efforts (Horlings 2015: 167).

## The Research Methodology

To pursue research on democratic values of the future, we started from the main hypothesis that even though sustainable development goals have been implemented for almost ten years, their supported values are not yet known. Because of this, the co-creative future is far from what we may want. Education is the central pillar when discussing the future of the next generations. Education for sustainable development gives learners of all ages the knowledge, skills, values, and agency to address interconnected global challenges, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality (UNESCO, 2023).

The research construct of the study is built around quantitative analysis based on bibliometric data and analysis of topic-related Eurobarometer results obtained in the last years on themes such as climate, education, green transition, justice, rights, and values. As a research tool for determining the sustainability values in the literature published in the Web of Science Core Collection, we used van Eck and Waltman's visualization of similarities algorithm – VOSViewer software. Through this tool, we determined the relationship between sustainability value topics by placing direct and indirect connections between them on the same map. Moreover, we used the Web of Science as the primary source for collecting data on sustainability values, as it is one of the most frequently used sources of bibliometrics data. The specific terms used for data collection are provided when the results of the visualization of similarities are displayed. Along with VOSviewer, the Eurobarometer was used to answer two central research questions: Are European citizens ready for a green future? What are the necessary values to co-create a responsible future?

The qualitative content-conceptual analysis was the only possible research tool for Romania's case study due to the lack of databases and information about the content of preuniversity curricula. Through this tool, we determined the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts in qualitative information on each subject taught in the Romanian preuniversity system. The curricula of each preuniversity discipline were collected from the Romanian Ministry of Education using the only available language – Romanian. Because of the language limit, to increase the research level of continuity, the other tool, VOSviewer, we could not use.



Besides the language limit, another limit we did not expect to meet is the dwindling number of research registered in the Web of Science Core Collection. The main keyword on which the research was done was “sustainability values.” Sustainability is not anymore about moving forward according to the state path is more about building together a shared future, and because of this, the government must ponder more on co-creation.

## 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 crucial 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 recognizing 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; a collaboration of schools with state and society organizations 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 (Marinetti 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–Turner 2002). Therefore, we discuss active citizenship as ‘top-bottom’ impunity or ‘bottom-up’ empowerment.

As Isin (2009: 369) argued, citizenship in various stages of social development and based on contextual needs citizenship may encompass both mentioned situations.



Hybridity (Cornwall–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 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.

## 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) emphasized 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–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 organizations 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 three 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 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 21<sup>st</sup> century. We live in a period marked by globalization, 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-realization.

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 organizations' agendas (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). The capability to organize 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 seventeen 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 citizens can realize 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 realize 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 practices 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 (2023: 528), it was emphasized 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 (2021: 514), 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 organizations, 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 organizations, 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 organizations, 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 fifteen 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. While civil society institutions and practices in the region have rapidly and extensively spread, the 'internalization' of the 'norm' of civil society has emerged as a standard in assessing the capacities of civil society to bring or contribute to a change. (Polgár 2023)

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 behaviors (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. Romania 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 especially important (37%) and 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. (Balázs, 2020) Without preuniversity, a higher level of education, such as a bachelor's and further master's degree, cannot be reached.

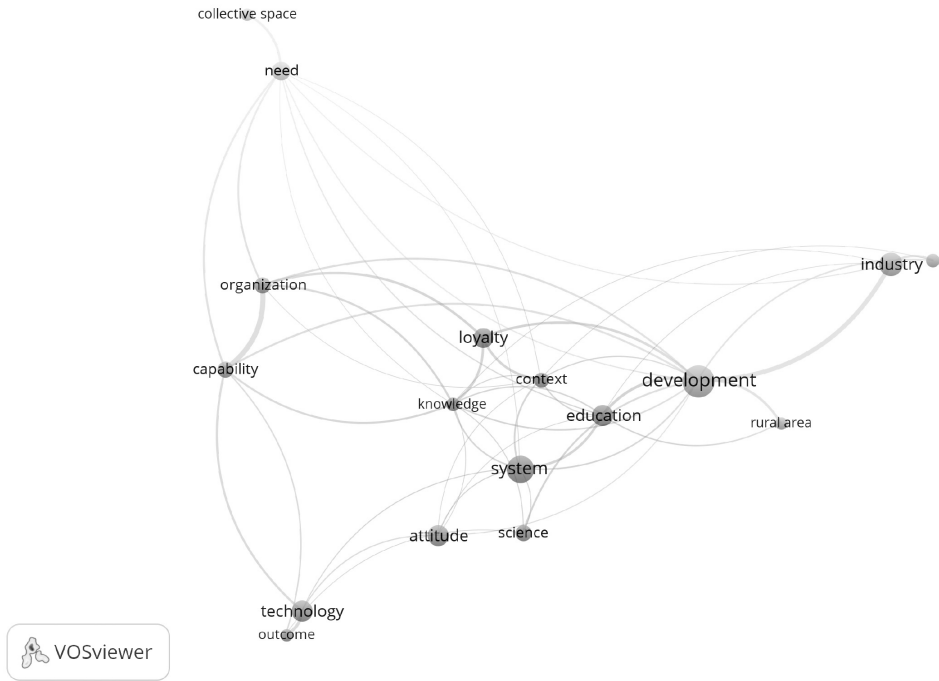
## Education of Future Generations' Values

Within the Web of Science Core Collection, we reflected on 153 studies that resulted from the research with the keyword “sustainability values.” As we already mentioned, we used this bibliometric data to help us establish the correlation among topics and concepts presented in correlation with the values of sustainability. The counting method was full; items were grouped in five clusters with a clustering resolution of one and a minimum cluster size of one. Out of 1507 terms, forty-seven met the threshold five, and at the default choice of 60% most relevant terms, only twenty-eight items remained; among them, only seventeen were correlated.





Figure 1. Sustainability values within the literature review



Source: Author based on the data from Web of Science Core Collection.

The bibliometric data helped us reveal the subjects to which we should pay more attention in the Romanian preuniversity education system. We used the categories with at least two registered articles in the research. The selected subjects from the curricula were correlated to the Web of Science Categories, so selection criteria were established. The intersection of concepts between categories and subjects was established based on their general description.



Table 1. Preuniversity disciplines correlated with the Web of Science Categories

Web of Science categories	Number of them	Related discipline in the Romanian preuniversity curricula
Green Sustainable Science Technology	54	Sciences
Environmental Sciences	51	
Environmental Studies	44	
Management	22	Project management
Business	18	Entrepreneurial education
Engineering Environmental	10	–
Education/Educational Research	9	–
Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism	9	–
Regional Urban Planning	7	European Union Institutions
Development Studies	5	Education for Development
Engineering Civil	5	–
Engineering Industrial	4	–
Ethics	4	Philosophy
Multidisciplinary Sciences	4	–
Public Administration	4	Education for Democracy
Social Sciences Interdisciplinary	4	–
Water Resources	4	–
Business Finance	3	–
Communication	3	–
Economics	3	Economics
Food Science Technology	3	Education for Health
Agriculture Multidisciplinary	2	–
Biodiversity Conservation	2	Biology
Ecology	2	–
Energy Fuels	2	–
Engineering Chemical	2	–
Engineering Manufacturing	2	–
Engineering Multidisciplinary	2	–
Construction Building Technology	2	–
Geography	2	Geography

Source: Author.



The Romanian preuniversity education focuses on developing and diversifying critical skills and forming specific skills depending on the field, profile, specialization, 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. After we selected the disciplines based on the Web of Science categories of the bibliometric data on the “sustainability values,” we managed to search in the curriculum of each one of them for the items determined because of VOS Viewer analysis. The research was done on the Romanian education framework, plans, and school programs (2023), all available only in Romanian. This meant that we had to translate the terms from English to Romanian to find them in the syllabus. Among the fields, profiles, and specializations, we wanted to determine which subjects/disciplines will educate the future generation about green development and co-democratic society.

The Romanian preuniversity system within the curriculum areas includes counseling 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. To test the research hypothesis, we studied all the disciplines that were supposed to raise inner values in young students by gaining competencies for a better and more sustainable democratic future.

Table 2. Sustainability values within the disciplines of the preuniversity system in Romania

Values	Mandatory Subjects (1)	Dependent subjects on the school management (0.5)	Attributed value
Attitude	– Philosophy	– Education for democracy – EU institutions	2.0
Capability	–	– Education for health – Education for democracy	1.0
Collective/Community	– EU institutions – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for health – Education for democracy – Project management	3.5
Development	– Sciences – Economics – Geography – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – Education for health – Project management	5.5
Environment	– Biology – Sciences – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – EU institutions	4.0
Loyalty	–	–	0.0
Organization	– Biology – Geography – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – Education for health – Education for democracy – Project management	5.0
Outcome	– Biology – Economics – Geography	– Education for health	3.5
System	– Biology – Sciences – Geography	– Education for development – Education for health – EU institutions – Project management	5.0
Technology	– Biology – Sciences – Geography	– Education for health	3.5

Source: Author

A value was given for each discipline in which an item was identified: 1 for mandatory discipline and 0.5 for elective disciplines. The sum of them is the level of value in the path to reach Romania's future co-creation and sustainable development. As revealed in Table 2, the most common use of the items as sustainable values is within the elective disciplines, which means only some students have access to them, which directly depends on the high school management.



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, repetition, already mentioned. Education for Development, and Entrepreneurial Education. Moreover, no references were discovered in one discipline within which we were expected to find references to sustainability and environmental impact – Project Management. As a result of the entire research path, we hypothesized that the low participation of citizens in this process of development of co-creation and sustainability is the consequence of the low level of values, more precisely, sustainability values.

## Conclusion

By exploring the disciplines that contribute to the democratic values frame, we managed to find an answer to the lack of involvement of Romanian citizens as active actors in the democratic system. The study emphasized 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 analyzed. 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 (for 2022, it was 15.6%, 6% higher than the European average), 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, society, and the world.

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