

Education as a Tool for Civic Participation in the Danube Region

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Abstract

Education has always played multiple roles for both individuals and society. In today's world, education is no longer limited to the transmission of knowledge, but has also become a fundamental tool for promoting civic participation and engagement, especially in regions marked by cultural diversity and shared challenges, such as the Danube Region.

This paper explores the capacity of educational systems to encourage civic engagement among students, highlighting how universities in the Danube Region actively integrate civic engagement into their curricula or provide platforms and facilitate student involvement in community-based initiatives. The analysis is complemented by a survey conducted among students in the Danube region exploring their perceptions and experiences related to education and civic engagement.

The findings emphasize the potential of civic participation to promote pathways to unity and mutual understanding across multicultural communities in the Danube Region, while also offering strategic recommendations for improving civic engagement through education.

The topic is particularly relevant, given the importance of civic participation for sustainable development in the region, but also at the EU level, as well as the need to involve citizens as much as possible in decision-making processes and to promote intercultural dialogue.

This study is limited by the availability and accessibility of data from the various key stakeholders, particularly universities within Danube region.

Keywords: education, students, civic participation, Danube Region, universities

JEL Classification: I21, D72, P16, R58

1. Introduction

Throughout history, education has served a variety of functions for both individuals and society. In today's world, education is no longer limited to the transmission of knowledge (Niazi, A. 2025), but has also become a fundamental tool for promoting civic participation and democratic engagement. Civic participation refers to the active involvement of individuals in their communities, by contributing to the social, political and civic life of their societies. This involvement can also be through activities such as voting, volunteering, participating in public debates and engaging in community initiatives (Galston, 2007; Qiao et al., 2017).

The Danube Region is characterized by a rich diversity of ethnic, linguistic and religious communities (Simionescu, 2018; Crețan, 2006). Considered one of the most complex regions in Europe (Gál et al., 2013), the Danube Region follows the course of the Danube River (Padło et al., 2021), often regarded as a symbol of Europe (Koller, 2010), from Germany through ten countries to the Black Sea (Sommerwerk et al., 2009). The region encompasses countries with different historical legacies, political systems, cultural traditions and educational structures (Schmid et al., 2023).

This context represents a unique framework for examining the relationship between education and civic participation. In this area with a population of over 80 million inhabitants (Miklós, 2010), promoting active citizenship is particularly relevant due to shared historical experiences, economic disparities and varying levels of democratic development (Ribeiro et al., 2016).

This paper explores how education can function as a tool for increasing civic participation in the Danube Region, focusing on students' perceptions, educational experiences and institutional

practices. The research combines a student survey with an exploratory institutional mapping analysis of universities affiliated with the Danube Rectors' Conference network¹.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- How does education influence civic participation among young people in the Danube Region?
- To what extent do universities integrate civic participation within educational and institutional practices?
- What are students' perceptions regarding active citizenship and regional participation?

2. Literature Review

The literature review for this article was structured around four distinct but interconnected parts. The first part focuses on the concept of civic participation and its role in democratic and community life. The second examines the Danube Region from both geographical and political perspectives. The third direction addresses civic participation within the Danube Region at a scalar level. Finally, the fourth focuses on education and civic participation among young people and students.

The literature review was based on key theoretical approaches related to civic participation, community development and cultural integration, particularly Putnam's theory of social capital (2000) and the civic voluntarism model proposed by Brady et al. (1995).

Civic participation is generally recognized as a central component of democratic governance and community development (Cnaan & Park, 2016; King & Hustedde, 2001). It may involve both formal and informal actions and activities of engagement, including volunteering, activism, political participation and community involvement.

In the Danube Region, level of engagement reflects the complex socio-political climate and cultural dynamics. At scalar level, Bitusikova (2018) examines civic activism in Slovakia, while Lütgenau (2010) highlights the role of civil society in the European Danube Strategy framework.

¹<https://www.drc-danube.org/>

Regional and territorial trends in the Danube Region regarding collective involvement and regional identity were also taken into account, as reflected in the study conducted by Mayer and Langer (2015) and in the studies by Römisch et al. (2024).

The literature highlights that bridging the information gap between citizens and authorities is essential for effective participation, as evidenced by civic programs that enhance transparency and communication (Protik et al., 2018). In the context of community planning, participatory approaches add value in terms of legitimacy, local ownership and sustainability (Langton, 1987; Simmons, 1994; Tosun, 1999).

Overall, the literature emphasizes that inclusive, transparent, and collaborative mechanisms are critical for building resilient and empowered communities in the Danube region.

Also, this study integrates official documents that support civic participation and governance. It is normal for the presence of public authorities to play a significant role in participatory governance (Bonini et al., 2015), thus creating the necessary circumstances to represent a state of support or favorability (Foster, 2011).

Previous studies (Bomberg, 2001; Grote & Gbikpi, 2002) emphasize that a democratic institutional framework is needed to develop participatory governance. In this sense, the support given by the European Union, through Decision No. 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, to cultural governance and the European Capitals of Culture programme (Council conclusions on the participatory governance of cultural heritage) is evident. Within this framework, the official recognition of European cultural heritage was integrated through the European Parliament resolution: “Towards an integrated approach to European cultural heritage”. This element of policies, which considers cultural heritage as a common good, reflects the principles of polycentric governance as stated in the study by Stephan et al. (2019). Compared to traditional top-down models, this approach is considered more flexible, resilient and capable of providing more practical solutions.

The literature clearly shows that education is closely linked to higher levels of civic engagement. Dee (2020) explains that education increases individuals’ understanding of society and strengthens their capacity to engage in the community.

Similarly, Manning & Edwards (2014) explain that civic education, when interactive and encouraging critical thinking, can increase political participation among young people. The

education system also plays a key role in shaping civic behaviour. Reichert and Print (2018) show that students who have participated in civic learning activities at school over time are more likely to become active citizens later in life. At the university level, Medne et al. (2024) emphasize that higher education helps the individual develop civic competences and ultimately supports the creation of a more sustainable and responsible society.

Furthermore, in many countries, civic education is considered essential for building inclusive and democratic societies. Borhan (2025) argues that education, and especially civic education, encourages young people to actively participate in social and political life, while Golubeva (2018) emphasizes that education is closely linked to active citizenship and community involvement.

However, social and regional factors are important in the development of civic participation, as noted by Jeleva (2021), who shows that young people are more easily involved in civic life if the opportunities and environment in which they live are favourable.

Recent literature highlights three major trends that are particularly relevant for this study:

First, digital citizenship has become an increasingly important dimension of civic participation, highlighting the role of online platforms and social media in shaping political awareness, civic engagement, and mobilization among young people (Loader et al., 2014).

Second, service-learning and experiential education are widely recognized as effective pedagogical approaches that connect academic learning with community engagement and practical civic experience (Biesta, 2011; Schulz et al., 2018).

Third, the internationalization of higher education is expanding opportunities for cross-border civic learning, particularly within European macro-regions, where universities function as hubs for transnational collaboration, intercultural exchange, and identity formation (Hoskins et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

This paper is part of a comprehensive research study developed within the National Research Program (Program Nucleu) and analyzes, at this stage, how education can serve as a tool for increasing civic participation in the Danube Region. The study focuses on two main research directions: theoretical perspectives and practical applications (Bocsi et al., 2020; Musteață-Pavel & Lixăndroiu, 2024; Rădoi & Lixăndroiu, 2025).

The exploratory approach is based on mixed methods and relies on multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data in order to ensure a double-layered analysis: bibliographic research, document analysis, civic participation materials, project reports, and survey-based data collection. In this context, the article explores students' experiences and perceptions regarding civic education and civic engagement through an exploratory online survey conducted among students from the Danube Region. In parallel, universities from the Danube Region were contacted in order to gather information highlighting how these institutions integrate civic engagement into their curricula or provide platforms for students to participate in community initiatives.

Sampling and recruitment

The questionnaire was distributed online between April and May 2026 using a purposive sampling strategy targeting youth leadership and higher education networks within the Danube Region. The survey was administered in English, selected as a common language to facilitate participation among respondents from different countries.

A total of 48 contact points across 43 distinct institutions and organizations were directly invited to participate and redistribute the survey link. This network included 18 university student union sand student parliaments, 7 regional pan-European youth networks, 4 specialized Danube regional initiatives, and 14 youth NGOs and academic administrative bodies. Geographically, the recruitment covered 11 countries, specifically: Austria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and regional European secretariats.

Because the survey was disseminated through institutional and student networks, it was not possible to determine the exact number of individuals who received the invitation; therefore, a precise response rate could not be calculated. However, a total of 121 valid completed responses were received, forming the final data set used in the analysis.

Survey instrument

A quantitative social research questionnaire was developed in order to investigate young people's perspectives on civic participation and education in the Danube Region (Zahariev & Yordanov, 2024). The structured cross-sectional survey questionnaire consisted of 18 items, using predominantly closed-ended questions, including single-choice and multiple-response formats, along side one open-ended question to provide additional qualitative insights.

The questionnaire was designed to collect opinions, attitudes, and experiences related to civic participation, education, regional awareness concerning the Danube Region, and civic engagement. The aim was to identify trends among students and young people's perspectives on civic participation and the role of education in promoting active citizenship in the Danube Region.

Ethics

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personal or identifiable data were collected. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and that the data would be used exclusively for academic research purposes. All data were processed and stored in accordance with applicable data protection regulations.

Institutional mapping methodology

In parallel with the survey research, an institutional mapping exercise was conducted in order to identify whether universities affiliated with the Danube Rectors' Conference network include topics related to civic participation, civic education, democratic engagement, volunteering, sustainability, service-learning, or community development within their curricula, study programmes, or extracurricular activities.

The institutional mapping analysis was conducted using qualitative document analysis combined with structured coding procedures. Data sources included publicly available information: university websites, course catalogues, study programme descriptions and official educational materials. Each university was coded across three dimensions: Civic-related courses/themes; Volunteering / student engagement; Cross-border / Danube-related projects.

A category was coded as "Yes" only when explicitly supported by institutional documentation. Coding was conducted by one primary researcher and verified through secondary cross-checking of all entries. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, no statistical inter-coder reliability coefficient was calculated, but all ambiguous cases were re-checked.

4. Results and Discussions

The survey included 121 respondents from several countries within the Danube Region, providing an exploratory perspective on young people's civic participation and educational experiences. The collected quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, while qualitative responses were

examined through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring perceptions, motivations and challenges related to civic participation and education.

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Regarding age distribution, respondents were relatively evenly distributed across age groups, with 29.8% aged 23-26, 28.9% aged 18-22, 28.1% over 26, and 13.2% under 18, reflecting a diverse mix of adolescents, students, and young adults with varied educational and professional backgrounds.”

In terms of educational level, nearly half of the respondents held a Bachelor’s degree (47.1%), followed by Master’s students (29.8%), while 23.1% reported high school as their highest level of education. The distribution reflects diverse educational backgrounds among respondents, with a predominance of academically engaged young people.

The respondents represented a diverse range of countries from the Danube Region. Romania accounted for the largest share of participants (20.7%), followed by Germany and Austria (10.7% each), and Slovakia (9.9%). Bulgaria, Hungary, and Croatia each represented 8.3% of the sample, while Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine each accounted for 7.4%. Montenegro was represented by 0.8% of respondents. Although not geographically balanced, the sample includes respondents from multiple Danube Region countries, supporting the transnational and exploratory dimension of the research.

A significant majority of respondents (91.7%) stated that they live in a region located near the Danube River, while only 8.3% reported living outside the immediate Danube area. This finding highlights the strong geographical relevance of the sample and suggests that most participants are directly connected to the social, cultural, and regional dynamics of the Danube Region.

4.2. Civic awareness and perceptions of participation

Overall, 52.9% of respondents rated civic participation as “important” and 47.1% as “very important”. No responses were recorded in the “neutral” or “not important” categories, indicating a uniformly positive perception of civic engagement and highlighting its perceived relevance for democratic and community life in the Danube Region.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Very important	47.1	57
Important	52.9	64
Neutral	0.0	0
Not important	0.0	0
Total answers	100	121

Table 1. Perceptions of the importance of civic participation

Source: processed by authors

Respondents identified several forms of civic participation, with voting being the most frequently recognized activity (57%), followed by volunteering (49.6%), community-based projects (44.6%), online activism (43%), and participation in protests (31.4%). These findings suggest that respondents tend to associate civic engagement primarily with institutional and community-oriented forms of participation, while more direct or less conventional forms of engagement are recognized by a smaller share of participants.

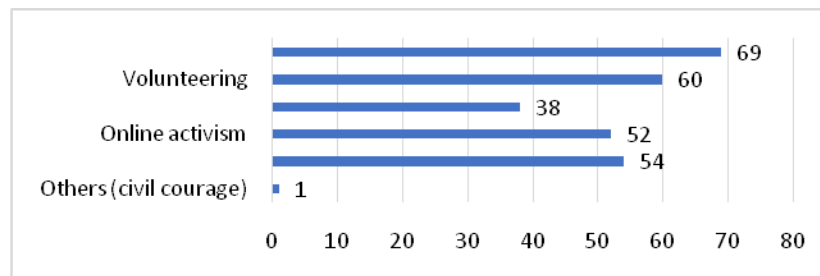


Figure 1. Forms of civic participation identified by respondents

Source: processed by authors

Regarding the perceived importance of civic participation in their own countries, 56.2% of respondents considered it “important”, while 40.5% rated it as “very important”. A small proportion of respondents selected “neutral” (2.5%) and “not important” (0.8%). Overall, these results indicate a strongly positive perception of civic engagement at the national level.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Very important	40.5	49
Important	56.2	68
Neutral	2.5	3
Not important	0.8	1
Total answers	100	121

Table 2. Perceived importance of civic participation at national level

Source: *processed by authors*

Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of respondents (95.9%) declared that they are aware of civic issues related to the Danube Region, including environmental protection and cross-border cooperation, indicating a very high level of regional awareness among participants and reinforces the relevance of transnational civic education within the Danube macro-regional framework.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	95.9	116
No	4.1	5
Total answers	100	121

Table 3. Awareness of civic issues related to the Danube Region

Source: *processed by authors*

4.3. Role of education in promoting civic participation

When asked whether their educational experience had prepared them to become active citizens, the majority of respondents (74.4%) answered “yes”, while 24% stated “partially” and 1.6% selected “no”, suggesting that, for most participants, education plays a significant role in fostering civic readiness, though there is still room for further strengthening of civic education components in formal education systems.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	74.4	90
Partially	24.0	29
No	1.6	2
Total answers	100	121

Table 4. Respondents' perceptions of education in preparing active citizens

Source: *processed by authors*

Regarding educational methods, debates and project-based learning were each considered most effective for fostering civic participation (28.9%), followed by group work (23.1%) and lectures (18.2%), highlighting the importance of combining interactive and collaborative learning methods in order to effectively support civic engagement among young people.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Lectures	18.1	22
Debates	28.9	35
Projects	28.9	35
Group work	23.1	28
Others	0.8	1
Total answers	100	121

Table 5. Educational methods perceived as most effective by respondents

Source: *processed by authors*

A significant majority of respondents (93.4%) reported having participated in civic activities organized by their schools or universities, while only 6.6% stated that they had not taken part in such activities. This finding suggests that educational institutions play a very important role in facilitating civic engagement opportunities.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	93.4	113
No	6.6	8
Total answers	100	121

Table 6. Participation in civic activities organized by educational institutions

Source: processed by authors

Respondents also identified several civic-related themes included in their educational experiences. Environmental protection was the most frequently mentioned topic (48.8%), followed by European cooperation (44.6%) and civic rights and responsibilities (43%). Overall, the findings suggest a relatively balanced exposure to key civic themes, with a slight emphasis on environmental issues, reflecting the growing relevance of sustainability within educational contexts in the Danube Region.

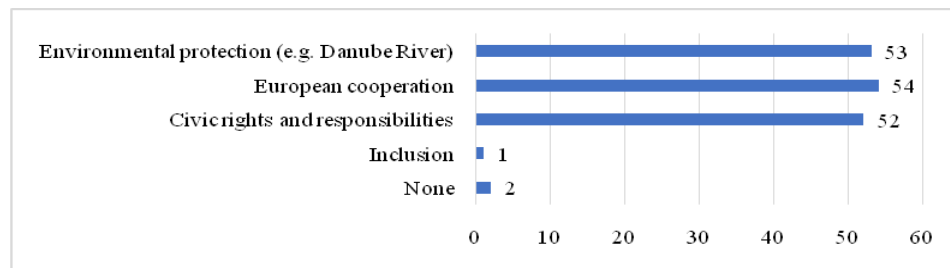


Figure 2. Civic-related topics included in respondents' educational experience

Source: processed by authors

Regarding institutional support, most respondents (84.3%) stated that schools and universities encourage civic participation, while 14.9% believed that this support is only partial and 0.8% reported that such encouragement is not present. These findings suggest that civic participation is largely perceived as being supported at the institutional level, although a small proportion of respondents still see room for further integration of civic engagement within educational practices and academic culture.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	84.3	102
Partially	14.9	18
No	0.8	1
Total answers	100	121

Table 7. Perceptions of educational institutions' role in encouraging civic participation

Source: processed by authors

4.4. Regional participation and cross-border engagement

The results suggest a very high level of interest and involvement in regional initiatives related to the Danube Region, as 91.7% of respondents stated that they had previously participated in activities connected to the Danube Region. These findings indicate that the Danube Region is perceived not only as a geographical area, but also as a space for educational, civic, and transnational interaction.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	91.7	111
No	8.3	10
Total answers	100	121

Table 8. Participation in activities related to the Danube Region

Source: processed by authors

Furthermore, respondents expressed a high level of interest in future cross-border cooperation, with 81.8% interested in participating in cross-border projects with students from other Danube countries, while 11.6% answered “no” and 6.6% responded “maybe”. These results indicate a general openness toward transnational collaboration, although a small proportion of respondents remain either uncertain or not interested in engaging in such initiatives.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	81.8	99
No	11.6	14
Maybe	6.6	8
Total answers	100	121

Table 9. Interest in cross-border student projects

Source: *processed by authors*

4.5 Digital participation and online civic engagement

Most respondents (86%) believe that digital platforms facilitate connections between young people across countries, while 9.9% are uncertain and 4.1% disagree, indicating a strong overall perception of their role in supporting cross-border communication, although a small proportion of respondents remain sceptical or uncertain about their effectiveness.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	86.0	104
Not sure	9.9	12
No	4.1	5
Total answers	100	121

Table 10. Perception of digital platforms in facilitating cross-country connections among young people

Source: *processed by authors*

A large majority of respondents (82.6%) declared that they use digital platforms for civic engagement activities, including petitions, awareness posts, and online civic initiatives, while 17.4% reported that they do not use such platforms for these purposes. These findings suggest that digital tools are widely integrated into young people's civic practices, although a notable minority remains disengaged from online forms of civic participation.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	82.6	100
No	17.4	21
Total answers	100	121

Table 11. Use of digital platforms for civic engagement among respondents

Source: *processed by authors*

The vast majority of respondents (99.2%) considered that social media contributes to increasing civic participation, while only 0.8% disagreed. These findings indicate a near-unanimous perception of social media as an important tool in supporting and amplifying civic engagement among young people.

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	99.2	120
No	0.8	1
Total answers	100	121

Table 12. Perceived impact of Social Media on civic participation

Source: *processed by authors*

Online participation appears to complement traditional forms of civic engagement and may facilitate transnational communication and cooperation within the Danube Region.

4.6. Students' perspectives on education and civic participation

The qualitative responses indicate that students perceive education as a key driver of civic participation, particularly when it moves beyond theoretical instruction toward practical, experience-based learning. Across responses, a central theme is the need for more hands-on and participatory approaches, such as community projects, volunteering, civic simulations, and field activities that connect students with real social issues and civic institutions. Many respondents emphasized that civic education becomes more meaningful when it is directly linked to local community challenges, environmental initiatives, and real-world problem-solving.



Figure 3. Summary of key terms

Source: processed by authors (<https://www.wordclouds.com/>)

A key idea is the importance of partnerships between schools, universities, and local organizations, including NGOs and public institutions. Respondents highlighted that such cooperation could strengthen youth engagement through environmental campaigns, volunteer programs, and student-led civic initiatives. Several answers also stressed the need to empower and support youth organizations and NGOs working with young people, particularly in professional or vocational education contexts, as well as to encourage universities to organize more civic forums and awareness campaigns.

Digital competence and media literacy emerged as another important theme. Many respondents underlined the need for education to teach students how to critically evaluate information, recognize misinformation, and engage responsibly online. This includes promoting respectful online communication and understanding both the positive and negative impacts of social media on civic participation.

In addition, respondents frequently pointed to the importance of critical thinking, dialogue, and debate-based learning. Interactive methods such as discussions, group work, and debate activities were seen as effective tools for developing civic awareness, democratic understanding, and communication skills. Early civic education was also emphasized, with several participants arguing that civic responsibility and empathy should be nurtured from a young age to build long-term civic habits.

Overall, the responses consistently suggest that civic education should be practical, interactive, and closely connected to real-life experiences. Education is perceived not only as a space for learning about civic values, but also as a platform for actively practicing citizenship through participation, collaboration, and engagement with both local and broader societal issues

4.7. Preliminary institutional mapping of universities in the Danube Region

The institutional mapping analysis indicates that many universities affiliated with the Danube Rectors' Conference integrate civic participation-related themes within curricula, extracurricular activities and institutional strategies. The analysis identified recurring themes such as: active citizenship, democratic governance, sustainability, volunteering, community engagement, European cooperation and social responsibility. To visualize the geographical distribution of the universities united in this consortium from a spatial, geographical perspective, we used Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The data were collected from the GIS database for the country borders, and the route of the Danube River was extracted from Open Street Map. The member cities were digitized based on the official membership page of the consortium, and the country labels were applied for clarity.

Figure 4 illustrates the spatial distribution and the formation of clusters by country. For example, a major concentration is noted in Romania, which includes the largest number of institutions in the consortium (18 universities) and features the highest spatial density. This is followed by Germany and Austria, each with 8 members. Another important concentration is represented by institutions in the middle sector of the Danube, comprising universities from Hungary, Serbia, and Croatia. At the opposite pole, a lower presence is recorded in Italy, with only two universities included, and in the Republic of Moldova, which is represented by a single institution, highlighting the more peripheral areas of the Danube Region network.

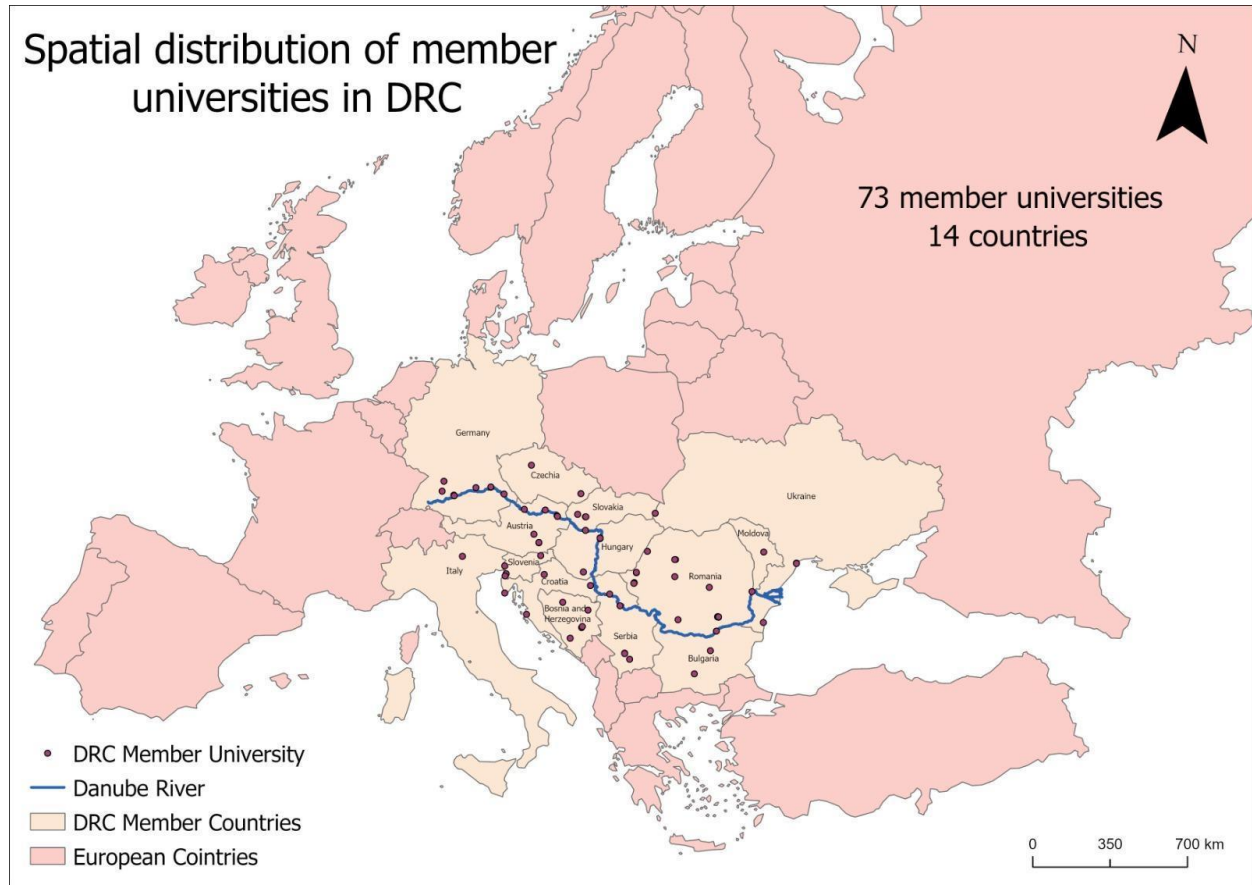


Figure 4. Spatial distribution of university members within the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC)

Source: processed by authors

In order to visualize the preliminary institutional mapping of civic participation and engagement in universities in the Danube Region, a database was created with elements showing how universities in the Danube Region actively integrate civic engagement into their study programs or provide platforms and facilitate student engagement in community initiatives.

Universities such as Babes-Bolyai University, the National School of Political Science and Public Administration Bucharest, the University of Vienna, Corvinus University of Budapest, the University of Belgrade and the University of Novi Sad demonstrate visible engagement in civic education, regional cooperation and student participation initiatives.

The analysis also indicates that civic participation is frequently integrated through non-formal educational activities, volunteering programmes and international cooperation projects rather than exclusively through dedicated academic courses.

Although the integration of civic participation differs significantly between institutions and countries, the preliminary findings suggest that universities increasingly function as facilitators of democratic participation and regional cooperation within the Danube Region.

Nr.crt.	University	Country	Civic-related courses/themes	Volunteering / Student Engagement	Cross-border / Danube projects	Observations
1.	Babes-Bolyai University	Romania	Civic education, European studies, governance, sustainability	Yes	Erasmus+, Service-learning projects	Active involvement in civic and regional initiatives
2.	National School of Political Science and Public Administration	Romania	Public participation, governance, citizenship, democracy	Yes	European cooperation projects	Strong focus on democratic governance and public administration
3.	West University of Timisoara	Romania	Civic engagement, inclusion, sustainability	Yes	Danube and EUSDR initiatives	Active regional cooperation profile
4.	University of Bucharest	Romania	Political participation, European citizenship, civic rights	Yes	Erasmus and NGO partnerships	Civic-related themes mainly in social sciences
5.	University of Vienna	Austria	Democracy studies, civic education, European governance	Yes	International and Danube cooperation	Strong interdisciplinary civic education environment
6.	University of Graz	Austria	Sustainability, social responsibility, democratic participation	Yes	Regional cooperation projects	Civic participation linked with sustainability agendas
7.	Corvinus University of Budapest	Hungary	Governance, European studies, public participation	Yes	International student projects	Focus on public policy and civic governance

Nr.crt.	University	Country	Civic-related courses/themes	Volunteering / Student Engagement	Cross-border / Danube projects	Observations
8.	University of Pécs	Hungary	Community engagement, social inclusion	Yes	Cross-border cooperation	Regional academic cooperation visible
9.	University of Belgrade	Serbia	Democracy, public policy, civic studies	Yes	DRC and international partnerships	Strong institutional international engagement
10.	University of Novi Sad	Serbia	Civic responsibility, sustainability, European cooperation	Yes	Danube regional projects	Important actor in Danube academic cooperation
11.	University of Zagreb	Croatia	Citizenship education, inclusion, social participation	Yes	Erasmus and regional initiatives	Civic themes integrated mainly in humanities and social sciences
12.	University of Maribor	Slovenia	Sustainability and civic engagement	Yes	Cross-border educational cooperation	Active participant in regional academic networks
13.	University of Primorska	Slovenia	Intercultural dialogue, European cooperation	Yes	International partnerships	Strong transnational orientation
14.	University of Ruse	Bulgaria	Environmental protection, European cooperation	Yes	Danube-related activities	Civic themes linked to regional sustainability
15.	Constantine the Philosopher University	Slovakia	Citizenship education, social responsibility	Yes	Service-learning initiatives	Participated in civic engagement educational projects
16.	Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt	Germany	Service learning, civic engagement	Yes	Erasmus+ Service-learning projects	Direct involvement in civic engagement programmes

Table 13. Preliminary institutional mapping of civic participation and engagement in Danube Region Universities

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on institutional websites, Erasmus+ project databases, Danube Rectors' Conference documentation, publicly available curricula, and institutional reports. The categories reflect themes identified in publicly accessible documentation and are not intended as exhaustive institutional evaluations.

In order to visualize the preliminary institutional mapping of civic participation and engagement in universities in the Danube Region, database was created using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). This database highlights how these universities actively integrate civic engagement into their study programs, provide platforms, and facilitate student engagement in community initiatives. The data for countries was downloaded from diva-gis and the universities layer was digitized manually, later added the attributes. This map is created in a choropleth method by the distinct colour of the countries and overlay symbols by the 2 types of data that the universities have. The map features a legend and a list of all member universities.



Figure 5. Institutional mapping of civic participation and engagement in Danube Region Universities

Source: processed by authors

This map shows that civic engagement is not uniform. What we have found is that higher education institutions are transforming their status from isolated “ivory towers” to active civic actors. We

can visualize how universities in the Danube region are moving beyond traditional academia to act as anchors for civic society. By mapping these 16 institutions, we can see a clear regional ecosystem where civic education, democratic governance and cross-border collaboration intersect to address common European challenges.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of civic participation in a macro-regional context, with a focus on the Danube Region as a transnational space of educational and civic interaction.

The findings show that civic participation is highly valued among respondents and is primarily expressed through voting, volunteering, and community engagement. These results confirm a pattern consistent with a mixed model of civic engagement, where traditional forms and emerging digital practices of participation coexist. At the same time, the high level of perceived importance attributed to civic participation suggests a sustained normative commitment to democratic values among young people in the Danube Region.

The findings also underline the central role of education in shaping civic attitudes and competences. While most respondents reported that their education has prepared them for active citizenship, they also emphasized the need for more experiential, practice-based and participatory learning approaches, suggesting a gap between formal civic education and lived civic experience. A particularly relevant contribution of this study is the strong evidence of regional and transnational civic awareness. The Danube Region emerges not merely as a geographical space, but as a socio-educational and civic framework in which young people develop shared concerns and collaborative practices. This supports macro-regional approaches to identity formation and civic learning, as highlighted in European Union policy frameworks on regional cooperation and youth engagement.

Digital engagement further represents a key dimension of contemporary civic participation. While respondents widely recognize the role of social media and digital platforms in facilitating civic mobilization and cross-border interaction, the difference between perceived usefulness and actual civic use suggests the persistence of a “participation gap” in digital environments.

The preliminary institutional mapping suggests that universities in the Danube Region increasingly integrate civic participation through both formal curricula and non-formal educational practices,

including volunteering programmes, service learning, sustainability initiatives, and cross-border cooperation projects. This confirms the role of higher education institutions as facilitators of democratic participation, civic responsibility, and regional cooperation within European educational frameworks.

Furthermore, the visible engagement of universities affiliated with the Danube Rectors' Conference indicates that civic education is becoming progressively connected to internationalization strategies, European cooperation, and community engagement initiatives, reinforcing the role of universities as important actors in the development of active citizenship and transnational civic networks in the Danube Region.

In conclusion, the study reinforces the idea that civic education is most effective when it is embedded in participatory, practice-based, and digitally informed learning environments. Strengthening collaboration between schools, universities, civil society organizations, and regional institutions may significantly enhance young people's capacity for active citizenship and democratic participation in an increasingly interconnected European context.

Overall, the study highlights that civic education in the Danube Region is evolving at the intersection of three major contemporary trends: digital citizenship, service-learning, and internationalized higher education.

The transnational nature of the Danube Region provides a distinctive framework where these trends converge, creating new opportunities for civic learning and participation across borders.

The novelty of this study lies in its macro-regional perspective, as it examines civic participation not only within individual national systems, but also through the shared educational and social dynamics of the Danube Region. In this sense, the paper positions education as a strategic instrument for fostering active citizenship, regional cohesion, and democratic participation across diverse cultural and institutional environments.

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