



Fostering Active European Citizenship: An Educational Research to Promote Eu History, Values, and Priorities in Adult Learning

Ewa Grzesiak¹

Isabel Vieira²

Gert Hurkmans^{3*}

¹Jan Dlugosz University, Poland.

¹Email: ewamaria11@gmail.com

²University of Minho, Portugal.

²Email:

isabel.vieira@casadoprofessor.pt

³University of Antwerp, Belgium.

³Email: gert.hurkmans@gmail.com

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(* Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This paper presents the rationale, implementation, and outcomes of targeted educational research in Belgium, Poland and Portugal designed to strengthen the European dimension in adult education. The research project had five primary aims: to expand the knowledge and competences of adult educators regarding the history, priorities, and fundamental values of the European Union (EU); to create a tangible offer of educational activities for adults that actively promote these EU values; to promote wider participation in adult education; to shape aware, responsible, and tolerant EU citizens; and to leverage the symbolic power of key EU anniversaries, such as the 20th anniversary of Poland's accession and the 40th anniversaries of Portugal's accession and the Schengen Area. The intervention employed a multi-faceted methodology, including specialized training for educators and the development of innovative pedagogical resources. The research project's impact was evidenced by a measurable increase in knowledge about EU history, values, and priorities among both adult education staff and their students. Furthermore, educators reported a significant enhancement of their professional competences and skills in integrating European themes into their curricula. A key tangible output of the project is a comprehensive set of EU-related educational materials, published and freely accessible on the partners' websites, providing a sustainable resource for practitioners in the field of adult education. The findings underscore the critical role of targeted educator training and resource development in fostering active European citizenship and strengthening the democratic fabric of the Union through adult learning.

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1. Introduction

European citizenship grants a suite of fundamental rights, a timely example of which is the right to vote in European Parliament elections, as witnessed in the 2024 elections where over 370 million citizens were invited to participate (European Parliament, 2019a). This act of democratic engagement, including by citizens voting outside their home countries, highlights the practical relevance of these rights (European Commission, 2018a). However, a crucial question remains: are these citizenship opportunities primarily significant for mobile Europeans, or are they equally vital for those who remain in their country of origin? This publication advocates for an inclusive interpretation of European citizenship that applies to all Europeans, irrespective of their mobility (Menéndez & Olsen, 2019).

Despite widespread identification as EU citizens, a knowledge gap persists; many lack a full understanding of their rights or the competence to apply them effectively (European Commission, 2016). The

recent rise in electoral turnout offers a beacon of hope, yet there is a clear need to bridge this gap between awareness and action.

This publication, seeks to illuminate the rights conferred by EU citizenship in Belgium, Poland and Portugal. It moves beyond notions of mere identity or free movement, presenting citizenship as a legal status enshrined in the European Treaties that has evolved to confer a set of civil, social, political, and economic rights (European Commission, 2017). The concept of 'active citizenship' is a central theme, serving as a call to action for Europeans to engage with and take responsibility within their political community (Habermas, 1964).

2. Historical Foundations and European Integration of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal

2.1. The Path to Independence: Three European Narratives

The nation-building processes of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal represent distinct yet interconnected narratives of European state formation. Their journeys toward sovereignty and international integration provide critical context for understanding the evolution of European identity and the values underpinning the European Union's educational priorities.

2.1.1. Belgium's Constitutional Emergence

Belgium's path to independence exemplifies a deliberate constitutional creation in post-Napoleonic Europe. Following the defeat of Lieven (2006) the Congress of Vienna amalgamated the Southern Netherlands (Approximately modern-day Belgium) with the Northern Netherlands (Modern Netherlands) to create the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, intended as a buffer state north of France. This union proved inherently unstable due to significant religious, linguistic, and economic divisions. The predominantly Catholic, French-speaking southern provinces resented the dominance of the Protestant, Dutch-speaking north under King William I, who favored the Dutch in political representation and public administration despite Belgium's larger population.

The Belgian Revolution erupted on August 25, 1830, following a performance of the patriotic opera "La Muette de Portici" in Brussels, which ignited long-simmering tensions into open rebellion. The conflict culminated in the Declaration of Independence on October 4, 1830. The Belgian National Congress then established one of Europe's most progressive constitutional monarchies, adopting a constitution on February 7, 1831, that emphasized liberal principles and ministerial responsibility. The international community formally recognized Belgian independence and its perpetual neutrality through the Treaty of London in 1839, establishing a model of internationally guaranteed statehood that would later influence European political structures.

2.1.2. Poland's Resilient Statehood

Poland's journey represents a distinct case of resilient national rebirth following extended periods of foreign domination. Unlike Belgium, Poland possessed a long history of statehood dating to the 10th century, formally established as a kingdom under the Piast dynasty in 1025. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth emerged as one of Europe's largest political entities during the 14th-16th centuries, developing a unique noble democracy with an elective monarchy. This golden age ended with the three partitions of 1772-1795 by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, which eliminated Poland from the map for 123 years.

The opportunity for sovereignty emerged only with the collapse of the partitioning powers during World War I. Poland regained independence in 1918 as the Second Polish Republic, though this hard-won sovereignty was interrupted two decades later by the dual invasion of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939. After World War II, Poland re-emerged as a satellite communist state within the Soviet sphere, unable to exercise full self-determination until the democratic transitions of 1989-1990. The establishment of the Third Polish Republic marked the culmination of Poland's struggle for genuine sovereignty, enabling its subsequent integration into European structures.

2.1.3. Portugal's Sustained Sovereignty

Portugal presents the case of a continuous sovereign state with the oldest stable borders in Europe. The country established its independence through a different process than either Belgium or Poland, with its foundational period occurring much earlier in European history. Portugal emerged as an independent kingdom in 1139 under Afonso Henriques, with its borders largely solidified by 1249 with the conquest of the Algarve from the Moors. This makes Portugal the oldest nation-state on the Iberian Peninsula.

However, Portugal experienced a significant challenge to its sovereignty during the Iberian Union (1580-1640), when it was united with Spain under a dual monarchy. The Portuguese Restoration War beginning in 1640 reestablished Portugal's independence, culminating in the accession of the House of Braganza. Portugal maintained its neutrality during the Napoleonic Wars but faced French invasion, followed by political instability throughout the 19th century that culminated in the establishment of the republic in 1910. Unlike Poland, Portugal maintained continuous statehood throughout the 20th century, though it experienced

various regime changes including the authoritarian Estado Novo before transitioning to democracy after the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

2.2. Organization of Solidarity: National Models and European Convergence

The concept of solidarity has manifested differently across these three nations, reflecting their distinct historical experiences and political evolutions, while gradually converging through European integration.

2.2.1. Belgium's Social Partnership Model

Belgium developed a structured social dialogue model characterized by intensive negotiation between employers, trade unions, and the government. This corporatist system emerged from Belgium's historical divisions, creating mechanisms for balancing interests across linguistic and regional lines. The Belgian approach emphasizes social protection and consensus-building, with strong welfare provisions developed through collective bargaining. This model has facilitated the implementation of EU solidarity mechanisms, such as Belgium's active participation in the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism for relocation of asylum seekers (European Commission, 2018b).

2.2.2. Poland's Transformational Solidarity

Poland's modern concept of solidarity is inextricably linked to the Solidarność (Solidarity) movement founded in 1980, which began as a trade union but evolved into a broad social movement that fundamentally challenged communist rule. This experience created a distinctive understanding of solidarity as civic resistance and collective action for democratic change. Following EU accession in 2004, Poland has increasingly engaged with European solidarity frameworks, both benefiting from structural funds and contributing to initiatives like the VSM, through which Lithuania (as a pledging member state) has accepted relocated asylum seekers from Mediterranean countries (European Commission, 2018b).

2.2.3. Portugal's International Solidarity

Portugal's solidarity approach has been shaped by its transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1974 and its subsequent decolonization process. This experience informed Portugal's emphasis on international development cooperation and linguistic solidarity with Portuguese-speaking countries through the Community of Portuguese Language Countries. Within the EU context, Portugal has actively participated in solidarity mechanisms, including serving as a relocation country for asylum seekers under the VSM and receiving support through EU cohesion funds that address economic disparities (European Commission, 2018b).

2.3. Equality and Democratic Development

Each of these three nations has undertaken significant steps to strengthen democratic institutions and promote equality, though their historical trajectories differ markedly.

2.3.1. Belgium's Constitutional Democracy

Belgium established a constitutional monarchy with pioneering features in 1831, including relatively broad suffrage for its time and strong protections for civil liberties. Throughout its history, Belgium has grappled with linguistic equality between Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons, leading to multiple state reforms that transformed Belgium into a federal state with significant regional autonomy. More recently, Belgium has implemented comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and actively participated in EU equality initiatives, demonstrating its commitment to embedding democratic values at both national and European levels (European Commission, 2017).

2.3.2. Poland's Democratic Transitions

Poland's democratic development has occurred through distinct revolutionary phases: the democratic heritage of the Noble Democracy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the interwar Second Republic; and the post-1989 Third Republic. Poland's ** Constitution of May 3, 1791**, was Europe's first modern codified national constitution, establishing a constitutional monarchy with separation of powers. The Solidarity movement's struggle in the 1980s laid the groundwork for Poland's transition from communist rule, leading to the establishment of a liberal democratic system with guaranteed civil rights and regular competitive elections. Poland's EU accession in 2004 further anchored its democratic development within European frameworks, though ongoing debates continue about the balance between national sovereignty and EU values (ALDE Party, 2018).

2.3.3. Portugal's Democratic Consolidation

Portugal's modern democratic development began with the Carnation Revolution of 1974, which ended decades of authoritarian rule under the Estado Novo regime. This transition was notable for its peaceful character and rapid democratic consolidation, culminating in the 1976 constitution that established a

democratic republic with strong social rights protections. Portugal's accession to the European Communities in 1986 provided further impetus for democratic strengthening and institutional modernization. Portugal has implemented significant gender equality legislation and anti-discrimination laws in accordance with EU directives, representing substantial progress from its authoritarian past (European Commission, 2017).

2.4. EU Rights and the Schengen Area: Integration and Free Movement

The integration of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal into European frameworks, particularly regarding rights and border-free travel, demonstrates the deepening of European integration across previously divided regions.

2.4.1. The Schengen Achievement

The Schengen Area represents one of the most tangible manifestations of European integration for citizens. Beginning with an agreement between five member states in 1985, the area has expanded to encompass 29 European countries, including Belgium, Poland, and Portugal. This border-free zone guarantees free movement to over 450 million EU citizens and non-EU nationals legally present in the EU, with more than 3.5 million people crossing internal borders daily for work, study, or tourism without systematic border checks (European Commission, 2019). The Schengen system is supported by compensatory measures including enhanced police cooperation, shared databases like the Schengen Information System (SIS), and common visa policies, creating a sophisticated balance between freedom and security.

2.4.2. EU Citizenship and Fundamental Rights

The European Parliament (2019b) established Union citizenship, granting every national of a member state the right to move and reside freely within the EU (European Parliament, 2019c). This fundamental right has been particularly significant for citizens of newer member states like Poland, which joined in 2004, providing opportunities for educational exchange, professional mobility, and cultural interaction previously limited by political divisions. The Charter of Fundamental Rights, gaining legally binding force with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, further codified a comprehensive range of civil, political, economic, and social rights for EU citizens (European Commission, 2017).

The European Commission's European Democracy Action Plan and the subsequent Defence of Democracy package aim to protect the democratic sphere from covert interference while ensuring full respect for fundamental rights (Von der Leyen, 2019). These initiatives strengthen the ecosystem of rights and democratic participation that forms the foundation of EU citizenship, directly supporting the development of "aware, responsible, and tolerant EU citizens" referenced in this research project's abstract.

3. Materials and Methodologies

3.1. Educational Applications: Connecting History to EU Values

The historical experiences of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal provide rich material for adult education focused on European values and citizenship. Their diverse paths to independence illustrate the value of sovereignty; their solidarity mechanisms demonstrate practical implementation of EU cohesion; their democratic development reveals the ongoing work of perfecting governance; and their integration into EU frameworks shows the benefits of cooperation (Gerstenmeyer, Klein, Plotka, & Tittel, 2018).

3.2. Participants

The project engaged two distinct participant groups:

Adult Educators: Practitioners and trainers from the partner countries underwent specialised training to build their capacity in delivering EU-themed education.

Adult Learners: A diverse group of adult students from Belgium, Poland, and Portugal participated in the developed workshops, providing feedback and demonstrating the practical application of the materials.

3.3. Developed Materials and Workshop Exercises

A core output of the project was the creation of eight innovative, hands-on educational exercises. These materials were designed to be interactive, thought-provoking, and adaptable for use across different European contexts. The exercises are described below.

3.3.1. Historical Memory and Urban Change

This exercise was conducted as a museum scavenger hunt. Participants were tasked with: (1) identifying a photograph of a location now called "Plac Wolności" (Square of Freedom) and documenting its historical name; (2) deciphering a hidden historical street name (the former name of the current "Gdańska" street) from a displayed Polish text by collecting specific letters; (3) examining a model of a historic prison on Gdańsk Street to count the number of cells; and (4) identifying a famous Polish soldier from a set of numbered photographs located near his bust. This exercise aimed to foster critical thinking about historical narratives, political change, and collective memory.

3.3.2. Europe's Ageing Population

This exercise utilized demographic data and simulations to visually and experientially demonstrate the implications of Europe's ageing population. Participants engaged with statistics and projections to discuss challenges related to pension systems, healthcare, and intergenerational solidarity.

3.3.3. Pathways to Independence

A comparative historical analysis activity where participants explored the distinct journeys to national sovereignty of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal. Through guided research and group discussion, learners mapped key events, identified common themes of struggle and identity, and reflected on how these national histories intersect within the broader framework of European integration.

3.3.4. EU Policy Against Human Trafficking

This module presented a case-study-based exercise. Participants analyzed real-world scenarios (Anonymized) to understand the mechanisms, legal instruments, and cross-border cooperation strategies employed by the EU to combat human trafficking, emphasizing the added value of a unified European response.

3.3.5. Equality and Democracy in the EU

An interactive, scenario-based exercise where participants confronted dilemmas related to political representation, gender equality, and minority rights. The activity was designed to provoke discussion and deepen insights into the practical application of democratic principles and the value of equality within the European context.

3.3.6. The Impact of Hate Speech

This exercise employed multimedia resources, including news clips and social media excerpts, to illustrate the real-world effects of hate speech on individuals and communities in Europe. Through guided reflection and group debate, participants explored the boundaries of free speech, the consequences of discriminatory language, and the role of citizens in countering it.

3.3.7. EU Rights and the Schengen Area

A practical workshop focusing on the rights conferred by EU citizenship, with a particular emphasis on the benefits and challenges of the Schengen Zone. Participants engaged in problem-solving tasks related to cross-border travel, work, and residence, critically assessing the impact of border-free movement on European identity and daily life.

3.3.8. Integration Trajectories in the EU

This exercise compared and contrasted the integration policies and outcomes for third-country nationals in different EU member states. Using profiles of migrants and national policy frameworks, participants discussed the varying approaches to integration, fostering an understanding of its complexities and the shared European responsibility in this domain.

4. Results

4.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The evaluation of the project's impact relied on a mixed-methods approach. Data was collected through:

- Pre- and Post-Workshop Knowledge Questionnaires: To quantitatively measure the increase in understanding of EU history, values, and policies among learners and educators.
- Structured Feedback Forms and Focus Groups: To gather qualitative data on the participants' experiences, perceived competence enhancement, and the practical utility of the workshops.

The analysis involved descriptive statistics for the quantitative knowledge data and thematic analysis for the qualitative feedback, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of the project's outcomes against its stated aims.

The implementation of the eight targeted educational exercises across Belgium, Poland, and Portugal yielded significant, multi-faceted results. The outcomes are presented below, structured according to the key aims of the project: the enhancement of knowledge, the development of competences, and the promotion of active European citizenship.

4.2. Quantitative Knowledge Acquisition

Pre- and post-workshop assessments revealed a marked and consistent increase in participants' knowledge across all core thematic areas covered by the exercises. The hands-on, investigative nature of the activities proved highly effective in cementing understanding of complex historical and political concepts.

Table 1. Knowledge improvement following workshop exercises.

Thematic area (Corresponding exercise)	Average pre-test score (%)	Average post-test score (%)	Average gain (%)
EU history & national contexts (I, III)	45	82	37
EU fundamental values (V, VI)	60	88	28
EU rights & freedoms (VII)	55	85	30
Contemporary EU policies (II, IV, VIII)	50	80	30

The most substantial knowledge gains were observed in areas where abstract concepts were made tangible through local examples. For instance, the museum exercise (I) in Poland, which required participants to actively uncover historical name changes and prison structures, led to a profound understanding of how European history of oppression and freedom is embedded in local urban landscapes.

4.3. Qualitative Shifts in Perception and Competence

Beyond factual knowledge, the exercises facilitated a deeper, qualitative shift in participants' perceptions and critical thinking abilities.

4.3.1. From Abstract to Concrete Understanding

Participants reported that exercises like "EU Rights and the Schengen Area (VII)" and "EU Policy Against Human Trafficking (IV)" moved these topics from distant "Brussels policies" to tangible realities with direct impact on their lives and the lives of others. The scenario-based learning allowed them to apply EU principles to real-world situations.

4.3.2. Fostering Empathy and Critical Engagement

The exercise on "The Effects of Hate Speech (VI)" was frequently cited as the most impactful. Analysis of participant feedback indicated a significant increase in the ability to identify hate speech and a heightened sense of personal responsibility to counter it. Similarly, the exercise on "Europe's Ageing Population (II)" transformed a demographic statistic into a relatable challenge, sparking empathetic and solution-oriented discussions.

4.3.3. Developing a Comparative European Perspective

The "Pathways to Independence (III)" exercise was instrumental in breaking down national silos. By comparing the histories of Belgium, Poland, and Portugal, participants developed a nuanced appreciation for the diverse journeys that have converged within the EU, strengthening their sense of a shared, yet diverse, European destiny.

4.4. Enhancement of Educator Competences

Feedback from adult educators confirmed a substantial enhancement of their professional skills. They reported feeling significantly more confident and equipped to integrate European themes into their curricula. The provided materials served not as a rigid script, but as a flexible toolkit.

- Increased Confidence: 80% of educators reported a "high" or "very high" increase in their confidence to teach EU-related topics.
- Adoption of Interactive Methods: Educators valued the shift from lecture-based teaching to the interactive, participatory models exemplified by the exercises. They successfully adapted the principles of the museum scavenger hunt and the scenario-based exercises to other subjects.

4.5. Participant Engagement and Impact on European Identity

The participatory design of the exercises resulted in exceptionally high levels of engagement. Observational data and feedback forms indicated that the active-learning approach was crucial for maintaining interest and fostering a personal connection to the subject matter.

A key outcome was the measurable strengthening of participants' identification with the European project. In post-workshop surveys.

90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel more aware of my rights as a European citizen."

75% of participants reported feeling "a stronger sense of belonging to the European community."

Many participants expressed that understanding the "Integration Trajectories (VIII)" in different countries made them more reflective and critical of integration policies, fostering a more informed and responsible form of European citizenship.

5. Conclusions

This project set out to strengthen the European dimension in adult education through the development and implementation of a targeted, practice-based intervention. The results presented in the previous chapter clearly demonstrate that the methodology of creating and deploying a series of innovative, hands-on exercises was highly effective in achieving its primary aims. The conclusions drawn from this research affirm the critical role of experiential learning in fostering a deeper, more meaningful understanding of European Citizenship.

5.1. Synthesis of Key Findings

The intervention yielded success across three interconnected domains:

Substantial Knowledge Acquisition: The quantitative data, showing an average knowledge increase of over 30% across all thematic areas (e.g., a 37% gain in understanding EU History & National Contexts), provides compelling evidence for the efficacy of the designed materials. The most significant leaps in understanding occurred where abstract concepts were anchored in local, tangible experiences, such as the museum scavenger hunt in Poland. This confirms that connecting EU narratives to local history and personal contexts is a powerful pedagogical strategy.

Development of Critical Competences and Attitudes: Beyond rote knowledge, the exercises successfully cultivated the competences essential for active European citizenship. The qualitative feedback revealed a marked development in critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of responsibility. Participants did not just learn about EU values like equality, tolerance, and the rejection of hate speech; they actively grappled with them through scenarios and debates, leading to a more profound internalization of these principles.

Empowerment of Educators and Sustainable Impact: The project successfully built a sustainable ecosystem for continued education. By equipping adult educators with a robust, adaptable toolkit and enhancing their professional confidence, the impact extends far beyond the immediate participant group. The widespread dissemination and adoption of the open-access materials ensure that the project's core ideas will continue to propagate through the adult education sector.

5.2. Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this research carry significant implications for practitioners and policymakers dedicated to strengthening European identity and democratic resilience.

For Adult Education Practitioners: The study underscores the necessity of moving beyond traditional, lecture-based methods. The success of the exercises proves that active, participatory, and emotionally engaging formats—such as historical detective work, case studies, and scenario-based learning—are far more effective in making the European project relevant and compelling to adult learners.

For EU and National Policymakers: This project serves as a model for how to strategically leverage key anniversaries and shared histories to foster a sense of common destiny. Funding and policy support should be directed towards the creation of such innovative, bottom-up educational resources that translate high-level EU priorities into practical classroom activities. Investing in the training of educators is as crucial as developing the materials themselves.

5.3. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While the project was successful within its scope, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a specific set of partners in three member states, and while the materials are designed for adaptability, their effectiveness in other cultural and linguistic contexts warrants further validation. The primary evaluation was conducted immediately following the workshops; longitudinal studies tracking the long-term retention of knowledge and the enduring impact on civic attitudes would be a valuable addition to the field.

Future research could focus on:

- Quantifying the impact of specific exercise types (e.g., historical vs. policy-focused) on different dimensions of European identity.
- Exploring the digital adaptation of these hands-on exercises for online and blended learning environments.
- Implementing the toolkit in a wider array of EU countries to conduct a comparative analysis of its effectiveness.

5.4. Final Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that a targeted, resource-based approach to adult education can significantly fortify the pillars of active European citizenship. By transforming complex EU concepts into engaging, participatory learning experiences, the project has not only expanded knowledge and competences but has also contributed to shaping more aware, responsible, and tolerant citizens. The freely available educational package stands as a sustainable legacy, offering a proven model for how to weave the European dimension into the fabric of adult learning, thereby strengthening the democratic fabric of the Union from the ground up.

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