



ESREA Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning (ADCAL) Research Network Conference

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

In Ljubljana, Slovenia, 23-24 September 2026

Call for Papers

Learning and practicing active democratic citizenship in the struggle against growing authoritarianism

Active democratic citizenship is one of the ‘classic’ themes in adult learning and education (ALE) theory, research and practice. Many adult educators, especially those who link ALE to progressive social movements, view ALE as a force for social change which can make a significant contribution to maintaining democracy and achieving social justice. Of course, this is understood in varying ways and with various political inflections: learning activism, popular mobilisation from below, learning the principles of democratic reason, acquiring civic competences through communicative action, etc. (e.g. Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999; Hall et al, 2012; Holst, 2018; Horton, 2003; Johnston, 2007; Brookfield, 2010; Lindeman, 1926; Mezirow, 1991 *inter alia*). What is common across this diverse literature is the proposition that a living democracy is a learning democracy and this learning depends on active citizenship.

But what might this mean in present circumstances? One of the recurrent themes in research in recent decades has been the impact of neoliberalism both in general social terms and on the field (Bowl, 2017). At ADCAL’s recent events and conferences the challenge of democratic citizenship in a period of polycrisis – the combination of economic, political, social and environmental crises of recent years – has been a live topic of discussion. We have linked this directly to the remarkable rise of socio-economic inequality within and between countries and the growing power of corporate economic elites that has characterised neoliberalism. It is already well known that within adult education policy and institutions, we have seen the rise of new public managerialism, outcomes-based curriculum and funding, and the increasing alignment with a narrow conception of employability (Allais, 2014; Barros, 2012; Biesta, 2010). Neoliberal governance has also had profound effects on the way citizenship is being reconceptualised and re-articulated in contractual and economic terms. We have witnessed a turn towards more securitised and punitive workfare states with a shift from *social* to *contractual citizenship* that envisages the relationship between the state and its citizens in purely market terms (Somers, 2008). This shift has offloaded responsibility for welfare onto individuals, obscured the existence of and deepened class, ethnic, racial and gender inequalities and divisions and encouraged social fragmentation (Samaluk & Kunz, 2022).

We are not interested in simply repeating these critiques, we want to understand its impact and resistance to this state of affairs (Tett & Hamilton, 2021). We are especially interested in contemporary social movements, grassroot communities and independent and hybrid unions that are centred upon mutual learning and building solidaristic communities of struggle from which collective sense of injustices and organising emerges (Lihtenvalner, 2022; Novelli et al, 2024; Samaluk, 2025; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022; Tarlau, 2019). While there is a rich tradition of research on popular mobilisation in ALE (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012), and a growing body of work on social movement learning (Atta & Holst, 2023) we know far too little about the role adult education plays in the emergence and development of contemporary social movements and grassroot communities struggling against the effects of neoliberalism and growing authoritarianism on various local and global scales. In what ways is ALE reflecting and linking micro experience to structural power relations and in identifying common struggles between diverse populations, where the common 'we' might not be that straightforward? Has ALE become largely disconnected from social movements (Finnegan & Cox, 2023) and to what extent has the marketization, commodification and securitization of public spaces and places and the changing modes of pedagogy caused the shrinkage of spaces for sustained and critical thought (Giroux, 2017)? In these circumstances, where can critical ALE take place and what new spaces and places for learning emerge?

While the 2010s were also a period of extraordinary democratic mobilization worldwide (Bevins, 2023) against the failures of neoliberalism - for example in Greece, Spain, Slovenia, the UK, Ireland, Brazil and in the international Occupy movement- and some of them were styled primarily as mobilizations against authoritarianism and austerity and for democracy and dignity- for example in Egypt and Tunisia, they failed to achieve significant change despite employing similar rhetoric and practices foregrounding the need to renew and deepen democracy through popular participation. The failure of these democratic movements to achieve significant change, the COVID-19 pandemic — which shook many people's trust in established state, media, and scientific institutions — and the intensification of inequality and precarity have created a very different political landscape.

Part of this is due to the enormous power accrued by corporate, especially technological, elites in our societies, and their capacity to shape public opinion and influence political systems. All this has produced a fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right politics, ranging from illiberal, to populist to neofascist (Mudde, 2016). There has been a sharp authoritarian turn in culture and formal politics in many countries (Taylor, 2022). We now frequently hear criticisms of democracy as an idea and denunciations of equality as a principle from politicians, pundits and entrepreneurs. Political authoritarianism, ethnocentric nationalism, racism, misogyny and antifeminism are often combined with neoliberal economic principles (Saidel, 2023; Brown, 2019; Slobodian, 2025). The rhetoric about advancing democracy has been sidelined and is now combined openly with authoritarian political practices. Leaders



such as Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Narendra Modi have reshaped key global economies by consolidating power through promises of national revival based on reindustrialization, and infrastructure development making them defenders of national interests (Arsel, Adaman & Saad-Filho, 2021). The notion of collective participation and deliberation over public affairs is viewed as an unnecessary obstacle to the efficient running of an economy and the effective leadership of society. At the same time international protective institutions and laws are being ignored, undermined and flouted.

In a number of countries we have seen the active suppression of civic and political freedoms, a defining characteristic of authoritarian rule (Popović & Maksimović, 2024). Recent studies indicate that twenty-first-century competitive authoritarian regimes are more sophisticated and complex than the authoritarian governments of the 1990s (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023) and maintain a misleading democratic appearance. In countries like Hungary, Turkey and Serbia such regimes have consolidated power and withstood multiple waves of protests and electoral challenges (Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025). Such governments have employed a wide repertoire of responses to protests ranging from highly repressive measures to strategies of marginalisation of dissidents not least controlling the narrative through the media. The pressing question is how ALE can adequately respond to both old and new forms of oppression and manipulation.

At the last triennial conference in Prague, the ADCAL network organized a symposium on active citizenship and the university, asking what role academics can, or should, play in fostering active citizenship. The discussions highlighted the importance of fostering and supporting democratic citizenship in a university setting but also the stark reality that under the shared pressures of neoliberalisation and authoritarian political shifts, the space for academic freedom has been dramatically shrinking. This contraction is driven both by the marketisation of universities and by more overt forms of oppression and targeted attacks on critical and independent speech. A more conventional strategy employed by authoritarian leaders involves the suppression of press and academic freedom (Arsel, Adaman & Saad-Filho, 2021). We invite colleagues to reflect on this issue and to contribute diverse perspectives and examples of resistance.

At the conference we want to explore these significant changes in policy, statecraft and patterns of mobilization in relation to ALE. We want to return to the question of how neoliberalism relates to democracy and the practice of democratic citizenship. We also want to open up the question of how to think about and respond to increasing authoritarianism. In doing so we wish to explore how neoliberalism relates to authoritarianism and also to consider how these phenomena might be usefully differentiated. The aim here is to make an effort to collectively find adequate terms for the what has occurred in recent years and what is emerging from a period of rapid change in capitalism. In reflecting on these themes, we



invite colleagues to consider local histories and patterns in democratic citizenship and learning of active democratic citizenship in present conditions. While the last decades have brought an unprecedented mobilisation of young, precarious, migrant and minoritized populations (Grayson, 2014; Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022), the question arises how can active citizenship be taught, learned and practiced in increasingly authoritarian conditions that tend to silence, divide or even criminalise these populations. How can these divided populations voice their concerns, enter in dialogue, learn from one another and engage in solidaristic actions? One of the answers might be to go beyond individualised notions of active citizenship and focus on relational, solidaristic, global and critical nature of active democratic citizenship as a collective practice (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023).

We know that social movement learning and education also happens online, through storytelling, engaging in social media, documentary film making, etc. (Drnovšek Zorko, 2022; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Walker & Butterwick, 2023). Therefore, we are also interested to learn about what kind of practices and ideas are emerging from current social movements, grassroot communities and what new 'concerns for the public quality of human togetherness' (Biesta, 2012, p. 693) does it enact. What counter hegemonic and alternative futures of hope are being imagined and put forward against dystopian authoritarian neoliberal hegemony and right-wing populism and how are they being taught and practiced within collective public pedagogy efforts and their engagement in the public sphere that has been characterised by concentrated ownership of traditional and digital media, increasing manipulation of news and fake news? This also brings challenges and questions how to raise the consciousness of the oppressors, who are far less motivated to learn about the experiences of the oppressed or are even revolting against critical reflection on their privileged lifestyles (Grušovnik, 2022). We invite engagement with these topics and questions through empirical research, explorations of methodology, as well as conceptual work.

Besides contributions regarding these specific themes and questions, the ADCAL network welcomes other contributions dealing with the nature, possibilities, and limits of adult education in encouraging active citizenship and promoting democracy as well as relations between and changing roles of adult education and active citizenship, adult education, democracy and democratization, popular education and social movement learning, ALE and (active) citizenship, local, national and global citizenship.

The conference welcomes contributions from researchers from all parts of the world and all disciplines and perspectives relevant to ALE and involved in the full range of sectors and sites of practice linked to ALE. We actively encourage various formats and modes of communication of research at the event, which intends to be convivial, stimulating and dialogical.



Where and when

Hosted by the Department of Educational Sciences at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Aškerčeva cesta 2, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

23-24 September 2026

Abstract submission guidelines

The deadline for the submission of abstracts is **3rd of April 2026** (acceptance will be announced by 8th of May 2026).

The conference language will be English.

- Abstracts should be *maximum 500 words*, using APA style for references and including up to five keywords.
- We also welcome other modes of dissemination apart from written papers (such as panel discussions, film, workshops, drama piece etc.). Please ensure that the content and structure used in such alternative formats are described in the proposal.

Abstracts should be submitted through the online form available on the following link:
<https://www.ff.uni-lj.si/en/esrea-active-democratic-citizenship-and-adult-learning-research-network-conference>

The following criteria will be used to review proposals:

- The relevance to adult education theory, policy and/or practice;
- The relevance to the conference themes;
- The clarity of the theoretical and conceptual framework;
- If the proposal is empirical, the background, method, results and implications should be clearly set

Special issue in Studies in Adult Education and Learning

After the conference, authors will be invited to submit their work for a special issue of the journal *Studies in Adult Education and Learning*, published by the University of Ljubljana (see: <https://journals.uni-lj.si/AndragoskaSpoznanja/index>), on the conference theme. All submissions will undergo the standard double-blind peer-review process.



Conference fees

	Early bird (paid until August 19th 2026)	Regular price (paid after August 19th 2026)
ESREA member	150€	190€
Non-member	210€	250€
Student	80€	120€

The conference fee includes conference materials, lunches and coffee-breaks.

Registration and Payment

The registration form and payment instructions will be communicated in the 2nd Call for Papers.

ESREA PhD bursaries

Three bursaries for PhD students are available. When submitting your abstract, please include a separate document containing information about your academic status and a letter outlining your reasons for applying, such as lack of funding from your institution. Please note that the Secretary of ESREA will verify that applicants (or their institutions) are members of ESREA and check if the applicant has recently received a bursary.

The scientific committee for the conference:

- Barbara Samaluk (University of Ljubljana)
- Borut Mikulec (University of Ljubljana)
- Diana Holmqvist (Linköping University)
- Fergal Finnegan (Maynooth University)
- Maja Maksimović (University of Belgrade)

If you have any further questions or need more information, please email us on: esrea.adcal@ff.uni-lj.si

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