

10. SLOVENIAN AND CROATIAN YOUTH AND THEIR CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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This chapter investigates civic and political participation among youth in Croatia and Slovenia, with a focus on trends before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using survey and qualitative data, it reveals persistently low levels of institutional political engagement, particularly in Croatia, where trust in political institutions remains among the lowest in the EU. Slovenian youth demonstrate slightly higher but still modest levels of electoral participation, with generational disillusionment evident in both contexts. At the same time, non-institutional forms of engagement, such as protests, online activism, and issue-based mobilisation, have grown, especially around environmental, social justice, and corruption-related concerns. The pandemic accelerated the use of digital tools for political expression, though digital activism rarely translated into sustained offline participation. Structural barriers, including precarious employment and weak civic education, further limit youth engagement, while many express feelings of political inefficacy and marginalisation. Policy implications call for stronger investment in civic education, mechanisms for youth-inclusive decision-making, and platforms that bridge online and offline participation to revitalise democratic trust and empower young citizens.

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This chapter draws on Almond and Verba's (2000) classic definition of political or civic culture, which refers to the attitudes, values, and beliefs people hold about politics, institutions, and their own role as citizens. Almond and Verba argued that political systems are not sustained by institutions alone, but by the culture that surrounds and supports them. In their framework, Almond and Verba outlined three ideal types of political culture that help explain how citizens relate to political systems. In a *parochial* political culture, people rarely see themselves as political actors and this type is often found in traditional or tribal societies where politics is distant from everyday life. Second, a *subject* political culture is one in which citizens are aware of political authority but are largely passive, accepting decisions made from "above", which tends to emerge in more centralised or authoritarian regimes. The third type, a *participative* political culture is a democratic ideal: citizens are engaged, informed, and see themselves as capable of shaping political outcomes. They not only follow politics in general but also believe that through participation in various forms of participation (unconventional and conventional) they can influence political sphere in their society. The participatory element is particularly important in democratic systems. Citizens in a participatory political culture tend to trust institutions, support democratic norms, stay informed, vote, join civil society organisations, and feel that their voices matter. These attributes are important for the functioning and resilience of representative democracy. In this line, the stability of democracy depends not just on political structures, but also on the ways in which citizens think and feel about politics. Specifically, a democratic or civic political culture, in this sense, involves trust in institutions, support for democratic principles, a sense of political efficacy, and active political and social participation.

The chapter explores how young people in Slovenia and Croatia experience and express these values, especially in the face of growing uncertainty and political tension. By comparing Slovenia and Croatia, the aim is to establish and analyse similarities and differences of young people's views on politics today.

During the early months of the pandemic, there was a surge in civic engagement, particularly in the form of community-based aid, volunteering, and digital activism. Young people, in particular, turned to social media platforms to learn about, engage with, and share information on political and social issues. For instance, research conducted by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2024: n.p.) indicates that young people are increasingly using

social media not only to consume but also to create political content. Notably, over 60% of youth reported that producing such content made them feel more informed, represented, and heard - though these perceived benefits vary by gender and race/ethnicity. Data from the World Values Survey (2023) suggest that while online political engagement (e.g., petitions and social media activism) increased, traditional civic participation such as demonstrations and volunteering saw a decline, due to strict measures regarding physical distancing. In short, it may be said that the COVID-19 pandemic initiated new forms of political activism, mainly increased digital engagement and online political discourse, while traditional forms of participation, such as demonstrations, faced limitations due to health measures. However, as Roberts (2015) points out in his analysis of the 2008 financial crisis aftermath, the capacity of such crises to mobilise young people for protests or other political actions remains uncertain. Rather than sparking widespread political engagement, many young people responded to growing social inequalities with resignation and deepening disillusionment toward political elites. A similar pattern has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic: while some youths have become more politically active and committed to driving change, others have withdrawn from public life, disheartened by what they see as the systemic failures of political leadership.

Political attitudes and behaviours, both at the individual and collective level, are shaped by the broader social and political context (Ilišin, et al., 2013). With this in mind, it is important to recognise that several trends in youth political engagement had already emerged prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, democracies around the world have been exposed to a series of destabilising pressures, including democratic backsliding, declining institutional trust, and the resurgence of political authoritarianism (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Bieber, 2019). Youth have often been seen as both indicators and agents of these processes, with studies consistently showing that younger generations are more distant from formal politics, display lower levels of institutional trust, and participate less frequently in conventional political processes (Zukin et al., 2006; Sloam, 2010; Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Pickard and Bessant, 2018). This youth's distance from politics is particularly pronounced in post-socialist societies, where perceptions of corruption, exclusion, and institutional inefficacy further reinforce disengagement (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš, 2017; Stanojević and Petrović, 2020; Lavrič et al., 2019). Youth in Croatia and Slovenia are no exception. They are

often politically marginalised and self-marginalised, with a critical stance towards authorities and limited channels for political representation. In addition to their insufficient civic and political role in respective societies, recent comparative studies suggest that young people in the region of Southeast Europe tend to express stronger authoritarian attitudes than both older generations and previous youth cohorts (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš, 2017; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić, 2019; Lavrič and Bieber, 2021; Gvozdanović and Stanojević, 2024). This tendency may point a gradual shift in youth political culture, in which democratic values seem to be increasingly challenged or overshadowed by authoritarian and populist orientations.

In addition to these emerging value shifts, the pandemic that started in 2020 disrupted everyday life, altered political discourse, and reshaped modes of political engagement. Emergency measures, restrictions on public gatherings, and the expansion of executive powers led to debates about democratic backsliding and the role of government in crisis management (Butković, 2021). In both Slovenia and Croatia, as in most of European Union states, the government responses to the crisis included strict lockdowns, curfews, and limitations on public gatherings. These policies led to heated debates about the balance between public safety and civil liberties (Maldini, 2021). The stringent measures, coupled with concerns about transparency in government decision-making, contributed to increased dissatisfaction with political leadership (Butković, 2021). Another aspect of the pandemic's influence was the increased polarisation of political opinions. Numerous authors (e.g. Flores, Cole, Dickert & Van Boven, 2021; Schmid, Treib & Eckardt, 2022) found that COVID-19 deepened divisions between those who supported strict health measures and those who opposed them, either for economic or ideological reasons. The rise of digital activism and online misinformation further added to these divisions, leading to increased political fragmentation.

In Slovenia, the pandemic appeared as a particular context, as reported by Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI, 2024: 4):

“The period through the end of 2021 was still strongly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Janša's government continued to rule through decrees rather than parliamentary acts, despite the warnings of the Constitutional Court not to resort to the use of decrees, particularly on decisions that would restrict citizens' rights. Demonstrations continued to be a standard routine of political life throughout the

year. Besides anti-government “Friday protests,” a new wave of occasionally violent protests by anti-vaccination activists and COVID-19 deniers occurred.”

Apart from that, it should be noted that there were some specificities of this period in Croatia. The period between 2018 and 2023 was marked not only by the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the devastating earthquakes in the Zagreb and Petrinja area in the midst of the pandemic in 2020. These crises exposed institutional weaknesses and intensified social vulnerability (Bužinkić and Šelo Šabić, 2024). While these events may have further eroded trust in public institutions particularly among young people in Croatia, they also opened new spaces for civic action and bottom-up mobilisation (Gvozdanović et al, 2024).

A recent study of youth in Croatia (Gvozdanović et al., 2024) and Slovenia (Rutar, 2024) shows a strong support to these findings. Both of these studies point to a marked increase in political engagement among youth in respective countries, coupled with an ideological shift to slightly right-of-centre, which points to a rightward drift among the youth population. While overall interest in politics remains moderate, it has increased across nearly all youth demographics. Despite the increase in political awareness and rightward shift, traditional predictors of ideological orientation -such as views on nationalism, economic egalitarianism, and climate change - remain relevant. Right-leaning youth are more likely to exhibit nationalist and authoritarian attitudes, while left-leaning youth tend to emphasise tolerance, equality, and environmental concern. Interestingly, trust in institutions was found to correlate more strongly with right-wing identification than with left-wing alignment.

While political engagement among Slovenian and Croatian youth has been on the rise, it is increasingly accompanied by growing political polarisation (Rutar, 2024; Gvozdanović et al., 2024). Situating these tendencies within the broader context of the 21st century, particularly in relation to major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent tragic events, including the war in Ukraine and the ongoing violence in Gaza, offers important insight into how such global disruptions have intensified young people's awareness of and responsiveness to political issues.

This chapter explores the level of democratic or civic political culture among young people in Slovenia and Croatia during a period marked by overlapping crises. Based on Almond and Verba's (2000) framework, political culture refers to the collection of attitudes, values, and beliefs individuals hold about political institutions, the functioning of the political system, and their own place and agency within it. In this context, political culture is analysed through several of its dimensions: attitudes toward the political system (political trust and satisfaction with democracy), (pro)democratic orientation (support for democracy and political authoritarianism), political behaviours (both formal and informal forms of participation) and internal political efficacy (e.g. self-perceived political knowledge). However, prior to that, the basic features of young people as political actors will be outlined, particularly their interest in politics, perceptions of political representation, and their ideological self-positioning.

The results presented in this chapter reflect these broader social and political changes. Over the five-year period, political interest has increased, with fewer people expressing complete disengagement. However, at the same time, dissatisfaction with democracy and political representation has also grown.

10.1 Personal interest and representation of youth in politics

Young people's personal interest in politics and their representation within political systems are crucial for ensuring a responsive and forward-looking democracy. When youth are interested in political issues and see themselves reflected in political leadership and decision-making, they are more likely to engage actively and feel that their voices matter. However, low levels of interest or perceived underrepresentation can lead to disengagement and a sense of alienation from the political process. Exploring these aspects helps us understand the barriers young people face in connecting with politics and highlights the importance of creating more inclusive and youth-oriented political spaces. As part of the broader structure of attitudes, beliefs, and orientations that define political culture (Almond and Verba, 2000), political interest refers to the extent to which citizens are attentive to political affairs and in that sense it can be viewed as important predisposition to political participation in general.

The majority of young people in Croatia express no political interest (Figure 10.1). It is only almost 8% who are personally interested in political events, which points to the fact that for a significant part of young people in Croatia, politics remain outside the realm of personal concern.

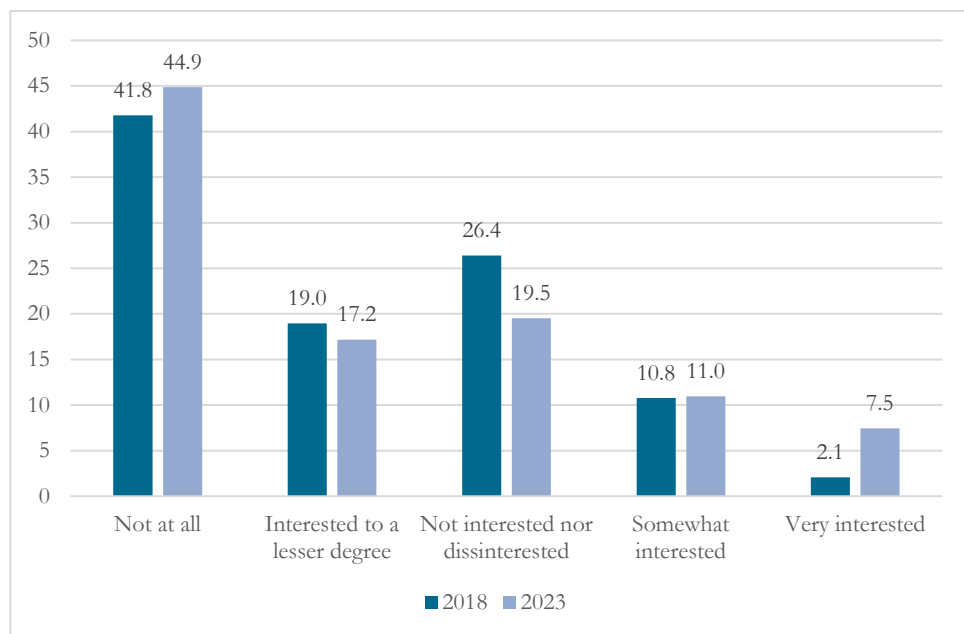


Figure 10.1: Interest of Croatian youth in political eve, 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Over the six-year period, a slight increase in political interest among young people has been recorded, particularly among those expressing a high level of interest. However, this increase is not sufficient to be statistically significant. In this regard, there have been no substantial shifts in the political interest of youth in Croatia, since the largest share of young people (44%) still report complete disinterest in politics.

The low political interest observed among young people in Croatia may, at least in part, stem from their perception of poor political representation, which contributes to further disengagement and creates a vicious circle of political marginalisation and self-marginalisation. In Croatia, young people remain structurally underrepresented in political institutions, which reinforces their already existing political

marginalisation. In 2023, a relative majority believed that youth are not represented at all within the political system (Figure 10.2), which may indicate a widespread sense of political exclusion among youth.

The perception of strong political underrepresentation among Croatian youth reflects the view of political institutions as distant and unresponsive to youth needs, further contributing to disengagement and eroded trust in democratic processes.

On the other hand, results regarding personal interest in the political situation among Slovenian youth show a clear and statistically significant ($t(2046.83) = -8.740$; $p < .001$) increase over time:

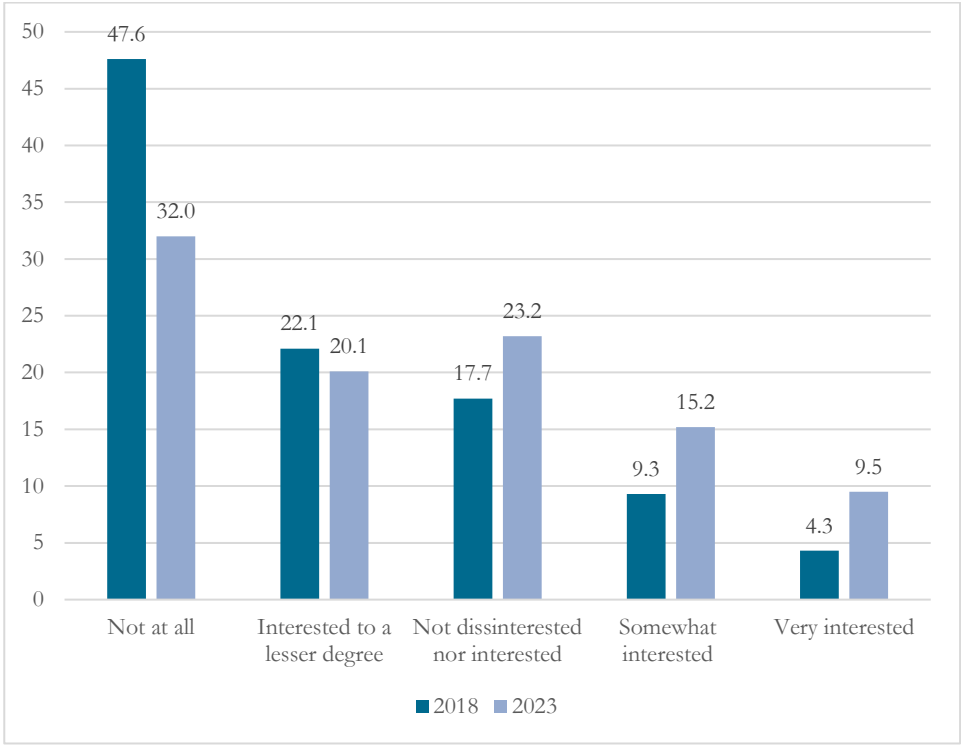


Figure 10.2: Interest in political situation in Slovenia, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The comparison of political interest reveals a notable shift in engagement over time. In 2018, nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) reported having no interest in politics, whereas by 2023, this figure had dropped significantly to 32.0%. At the same time, the proportion of those who are interested or highly interested in politics has almost doubled, increasing from 13.6% in 2018 to 24.7% in 2023. Additionally, the percentage of individuals with neutral political interest increased from 17.7% to 23.2%, while those who described themselves as somewhat interested rose from 9.3% to 15.2%.

Interest in political situation has improved among Slovenian youth - from 2018 until 2023 political apathy has reduced, and there is a significant rise in active political interest.

Overall, the data suggest a positive shift in political engagement between 2018 and 2023. While a significant portion of the population still expresses low interest in political matters, there is clear movement away from complete disinterest toward at least moderate engagement. This trend could indicate changing social or political dynamics, greater accessibility of political discourse, or increased public awareness over time.

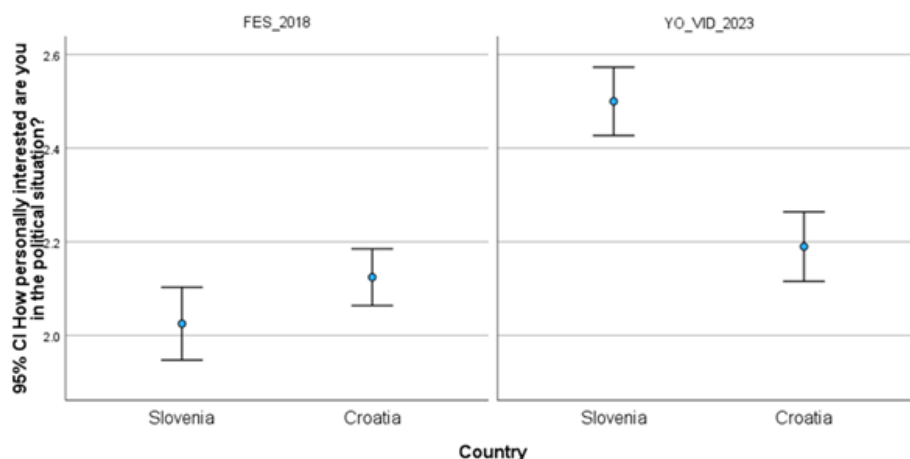


Figure 10.3: Interest in political situation in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The figure illustrates changes in youth interest in the political situation in Slovenia and Croatia between 2018 and 2023, and reveals a clear and significant increase in political interest among Slovenian youth during this period. In contrast, Croatian youth show only a modest rise, with overall interest levels remaining lower than those observed in Slovenia. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely influenced political awareness and engagement. In Slovenia, the pandemic appears to have catalysed greater interest in political affairs, possibly due to intense public debates around civil liberties, government measures, and democratic accountability during the crisis. The increased use of digital platforms and greater exposure to political discourse may have further contributed to this upward trend. On the other hand, Croatian youth exhibited a more subdued change. Despite facing similar pandemic-related disruptions, the relatively low increase in political interest suggests a deeper and more persistent sense of disconnection from formal political processes. This interpretation aligns with broader findings of institutional mistrust and a feeling of political non-representation among young people in Croatia.

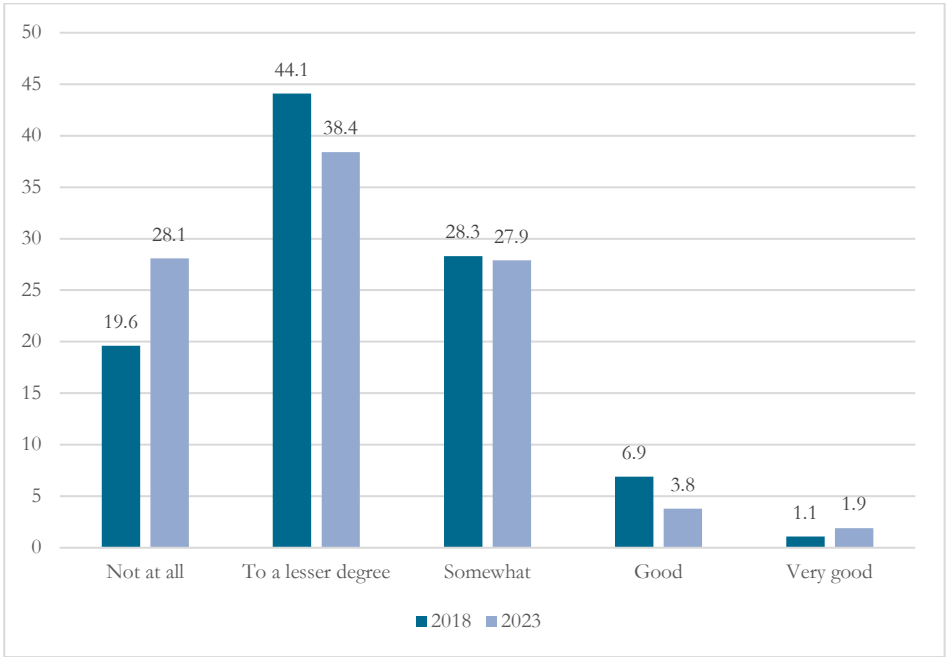


Figure 10.4: Representation of youth in politics in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Within the same context, results from Slovenia also reveal a growing perception that the interests of young people are not adequately represented in national politics ($t(1930) = 2936$; $p < .001$). In 2018, 19.6% of respondents believed that young people's interests were "not at all" represented and by 2023, this figure had risen to 28.1%, reflecting an 8.5 percentage point increase in dissatisfaction:

Data from focus groups reflect a similar situation:

"Eh, they (politicians) only talk and then do nothing.
They don't pay attention to anybody."

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

The increase in negative perceptions suggests that youth may feel increasingly marginalised or unheard within political institutions. This trend could have important implications for youth political engagement, voter turnout, and activism, as disillusionment often leads to decreased participation in traditional political processes. Addressing these concerns by improving youth inclusion in decision-making and fostering policies that reflect their interests may be crucial for reversing this trend.

Indeed, according to some experts, interviewed during the project, the inclusion of young people in politics emerges as a priority, particularly while developing into youth policies with direct consequences:

"Developing policies together with practitioners and users increases their successful implementation /.../ These are activities that significantly support young people, helping them to resolve their difficulties without being stigmatised with the label of mental health or mental illness; these policies cover a wide range of young people, not just those with diagnoses."

(Youth counsellor and youth worker, NGO, Slovenia)

Similar situation could be observed among Croatian youth (see Figure 10.2). There has been a significant increase ($t(2372) = 11.727$; $p < .001$) in the perception of political non-representation among young people, with the proportion of those who believe that youth are not represented at all in politics doubling since 2018. At the same time, there was a significant decline in the share of respondents who

considered youth interests to be moderately or well represented. Consequently, by 2023, a relative majority of young people perceived themselves as unrepresented within the Croatian political system.

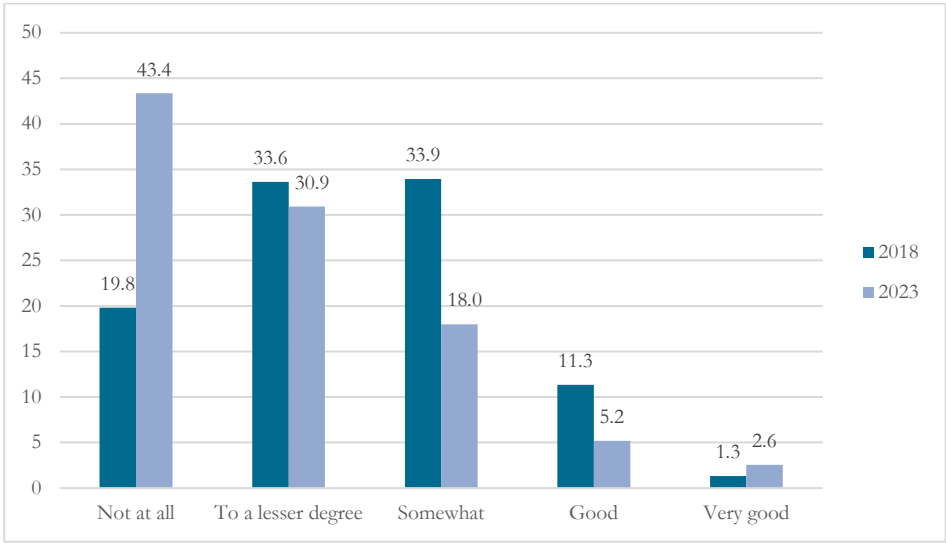


Figure 10.5: Representation of youth in politics in Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019, YO-VID22, 2023

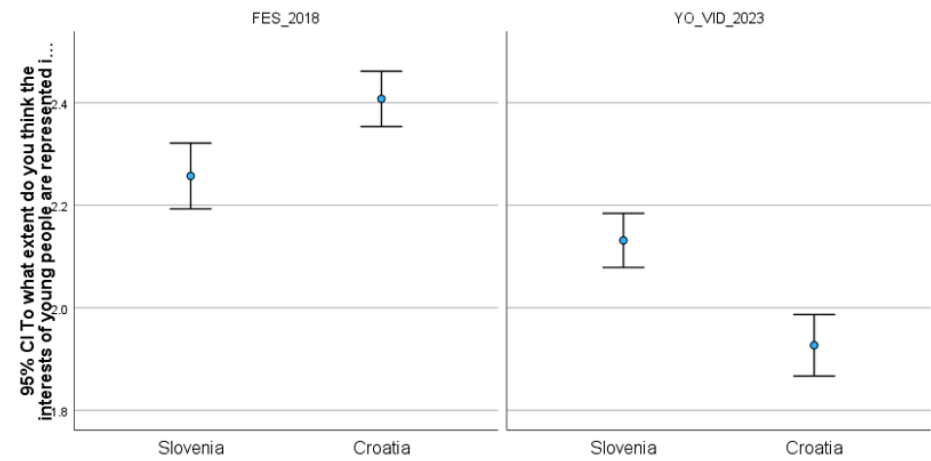


Figure 10.6: Representation of youth in politics in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The figure compares youth perceptions in Slovenia and Croatia regarding the extent to which they believe the interests of young people are represented in politics, based on data from 2018 and 2023. In 2018, Croatian youth reported higher levels of perceived representation compared to their Slovenian counterparts, however, by 2023, perceptions in both countries declined, with the decrease being particularly steep in Croatia. This downward trend suggests a growing sense of political exclusion among youth, likely intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the crisis, top-down decision-making, limited public consultation, and the marginalisation of young voices may have contributed to feelings of neglect and disempowerment. In Croatia, where institutional trust was already low, these dynamics appear to have significantly eroded the belief that youth interests are taken seriously in the political arena. In contrast, while Slovenian youth also experienced a decline in perceived representation, the shift was more moderate, possibly reflecting a somewhat more resilient civic infrastructure or greater access to digital and participatory platforms during the pandemic.

Overall, the figure highlights a troubling decline in youth confidence in political representation, particularly in Croatia. It underlines the need for targeted measures to increase youth inclusion in decision-making processes, restore institutional trust, and re-establish meaningful channels for political engagement in both countries.

10.2 Self-identification of political views and satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia and Croatia

Understanding how young people identify politically and how satisfied they are with democracy is crucial for assessing the health and future of democratic societies. Youth perspectives offer valuable insights into levels of political engagement, trust in institutions, and emerging ideological trends. By examining these attitudes, we can better anticipate shifts in political behaviour, address potential disillusionment, and inform policies and educational efforts aimed at strengthening democratic participation among future generations.

When it comes to ideological self-positioning, young people in Croatia tend to place themselves near the centre of the left-right spectrum, which ranges from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right), with a slight tilt to the right (see Figure 10.3). In 2018, the average position was 5.36, while in 2023 it was a bit closer to the centre: 5.26. However, this

change is not statistically significant. What is noteworthy is the increase at both extremes of the ideological spectrum, which may point to a possible trend of political polarisation. In 2023, 14% of young respondents placed themselves at the far ends of the scale, with the combined share of those identifying as far left or far right rising from around 2% in 2018 to approximately 7% in 2023.

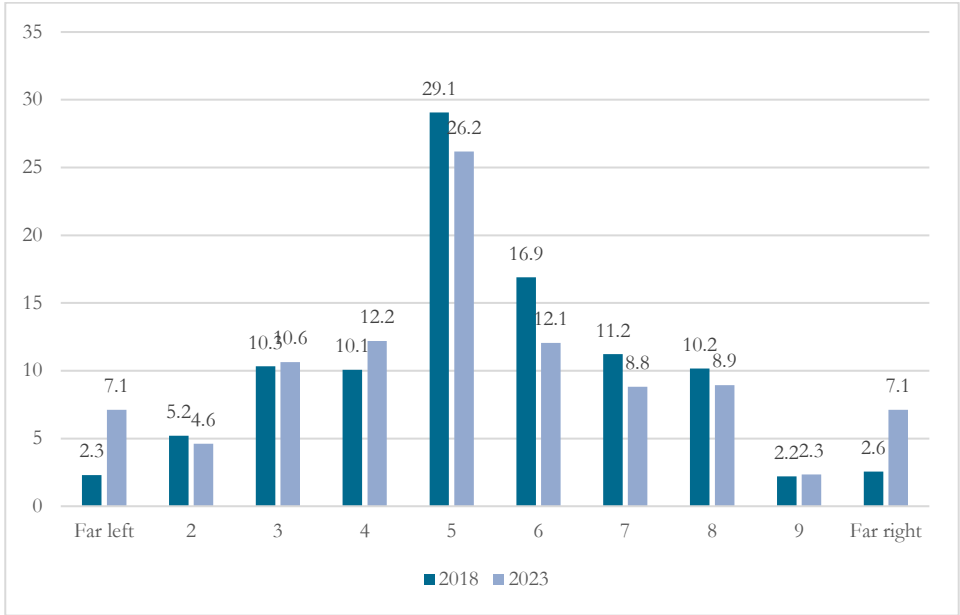


Figure 10.7: Ideological self-positioning of Croatian youth 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Similar situation was observed among Slovenian youth, however several important differences within this population were observed. Firstly, there is a noticeable rightward shift in political orientation over time ($t(1465) = 2.936$; $p < .001$) (see Figure 6.3.). The mean political position in 2023 is higher than in 2018, indicating that young people in 2023 identify as slightly more right-leaning compared to their counterparts in 2018.

One of the most noticeable changes is a decrease in strong left identification. In 2018, 5.1% of respondents positioned themselves at the far left, while in 2023, this percentage dropped to 4.3%. Similarly, the proportion of respondents placing themselves in category 2 decreased from 7.1% to 3.8%, indicating a decline in those

who lean more toward leftist ideologies. The centrist positions, also show some shifts. In 2018, the largest group (30.5%) positioned themselves with a moderate or neutral stance and by 2023, this percentage decreased to 25.9%, indicating a slight polarisation of political views. When looking at the right-leaning positions (categories 7-10), a slight increase in self-identification with right-wing views is evident. In 2018, 4.0% of respondents identified as far right ("10 - Far right"), while in 2023, this increased slightly to 4.3%. More notably, category 7 increased from 8.1% to 11.9%, and category 8 from 3.8% to 6.8%, suggesting a gradual rightward shift in political orientation.

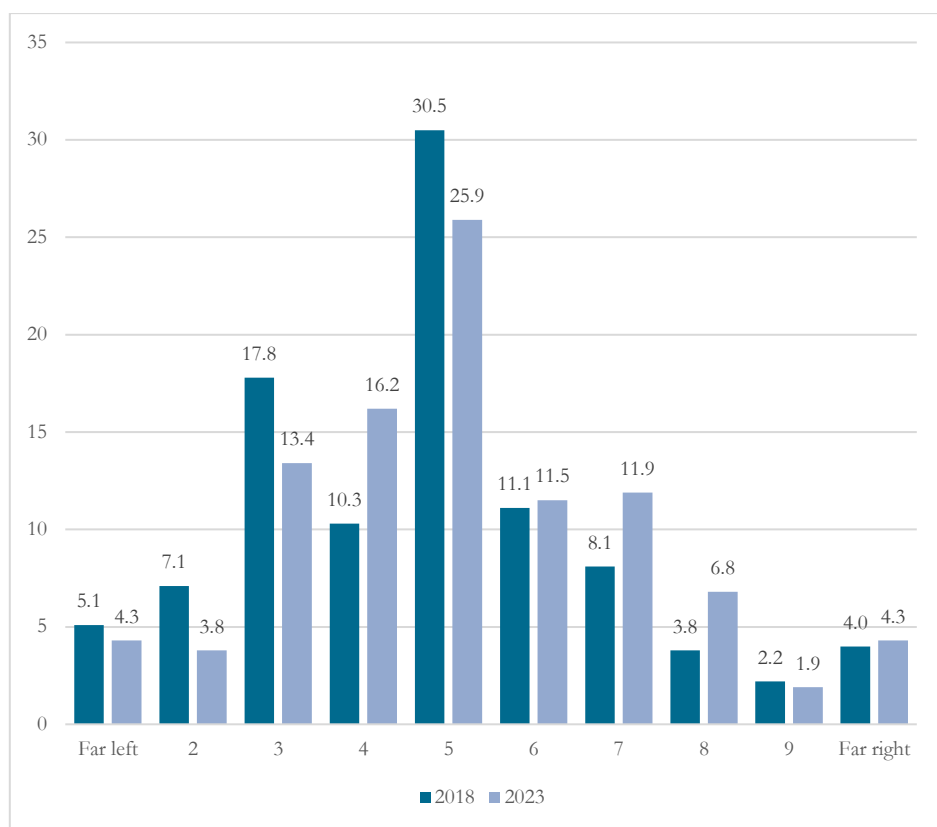


Figure 10.8: Self-positioning of Slovenian youth according to their political beliefs 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Results suggest a slight decrease in left-wing identification and a gradual increase in right-leaning self-placement between 2018 and 2023. While the majority of Slovenian youth still identify around the centre, there is some indication of polarisation, with fewer people identifying as strongly leftist and a small but notable increase in right-leaning identification. These changes could reflect societal trends, shifts in political discourse, or evolving generational attitudes toward political ideologies.

10.3 Perceptions of democracy

Another important topic are young people's perceptions of democracy. Understanding how young people identify politically, perceive democracy, and evaluate their satisfaction with it is crucial for assessing the health and future of democratic societies. Youth perceptions offer valuable insights into their trust in institutions, sense of political efficacy, and belief in democratic principles. By examining these attitudes, we can better anticipate shifts in political behaviour, detect early signs of disengagement or polarisation, and inform policies and educational initiatives aimed at fostering stronger, more inclusive democratic participation among future generations.

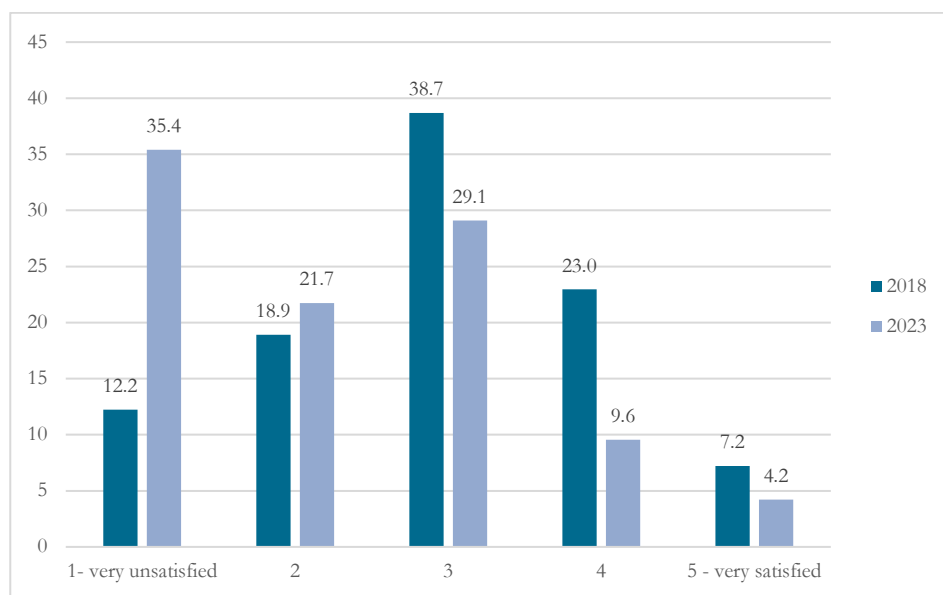


Figure 10.9: Satisfaction with the state of democracy in Croatia (%), 2018 and 2023

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Youth assessments of how democracy works makes it a sensitive barometer of a polity's legitimacy and institutional long-term stability. Data collected in 2023 (Figure 10.4.) point to pronounced scepticism and critical attitudes among young people toward the functioning of democracy in Croatia.

Nearly 58% of youth expressed dissatisfaction, while only 15% expressed any degree of satisfaction with the current state of democracy. Compared to 2018, the distribution of responses has changed significantly: in 2018, 12.2% of respondents reported being very dissatisfied with democracy, whereas in 2023, this figure has tripled - which is a substantial increase in the intensity of dissatisfaction. Statistical analysis confirms that the difference in satisfaction with democracy between the two observed years is significant ($t(2203.923) = 14.635; p < .001$).

This shift in evaluation of democratic functioning in Croatia may be linked to broader social and political developments that characterised the period in question, most probably the institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes that affected parts of Croatia. These events can be understood as “stress-tests” for the democratic system, where public perception of the outcome has likely been shaped by perceived rather questionable quality of institutional efficiency, accountability, and inclusiveness.

Unsurprisingly, the decline in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is accompanied by a corresponding decline in political trust - and vice versa. The extremely high level of political distrust, with more than 80% of young people expressing no trust in the Croatian Parliament (Figure 10.10), may reflect not only a widespread perception of institutional inefficacy and political marginalisation (Ilišin et al., 2013; Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš, 2017; Gvozdanović et al., 2019), but also a broader judgment on how political institutions responded to recent societal crises, including the pandemic.

Over the six-year period, political distrust has not only grown but also intensified, as seen in the doubling of respondents choosing the most extreme expression of distrust in 2023 ($t(2508) = 13.835; p < 0.000$). This deepening scepticism raises important questions about the legitimacy and responsiveness of democratic institutions as perceived by younger generations.

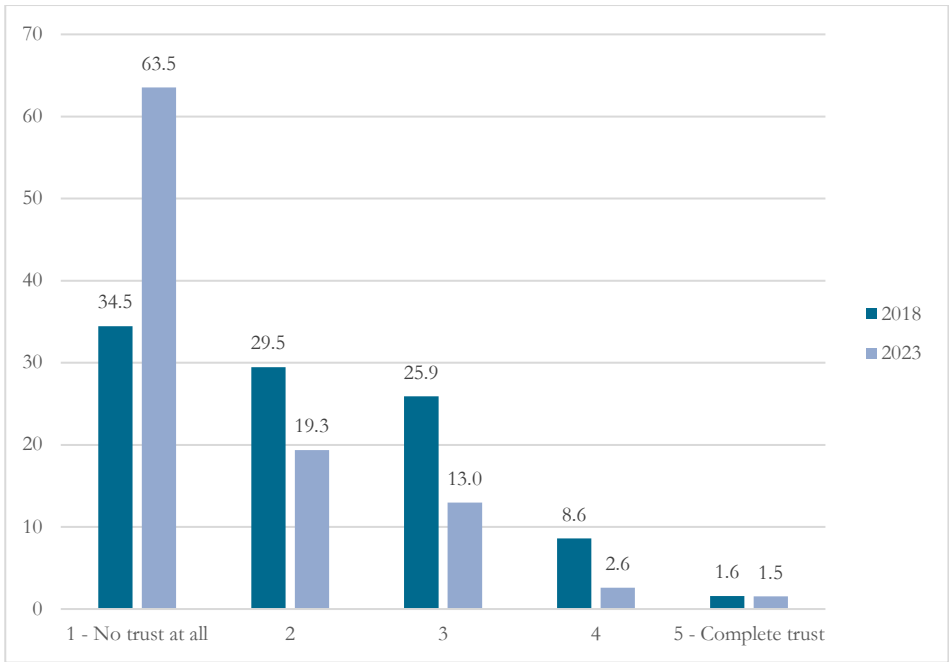


Figure 10.10: Trust in Croatian Parliament, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Another important question is also whether increased criticism of institutions and the functioning of democracy is reflected in attitudes of Croatian youth toward democracy as a form of government. As shown in Figure 10.10, support for democracy remains relatively high, with 60% of young people in 2023 agreeing that it is a good form of governance. However, a statistically significant decline in support is evident when compared to 2018 ($t(2154.201)=7.364$; $p<.001$). In 2018, a larger proportion of respondents strongly agreed with this statement (36%), and there was an extremely small number of those who completely rejected the idea of democracy (2%).

These findings suggest that while democracy still holds majority support among young people, the intensity of that support has weakened, and outright rejection, though still marginal, has begun to appear. This may signal an early shift in normative orientations that merits close attention in future research.

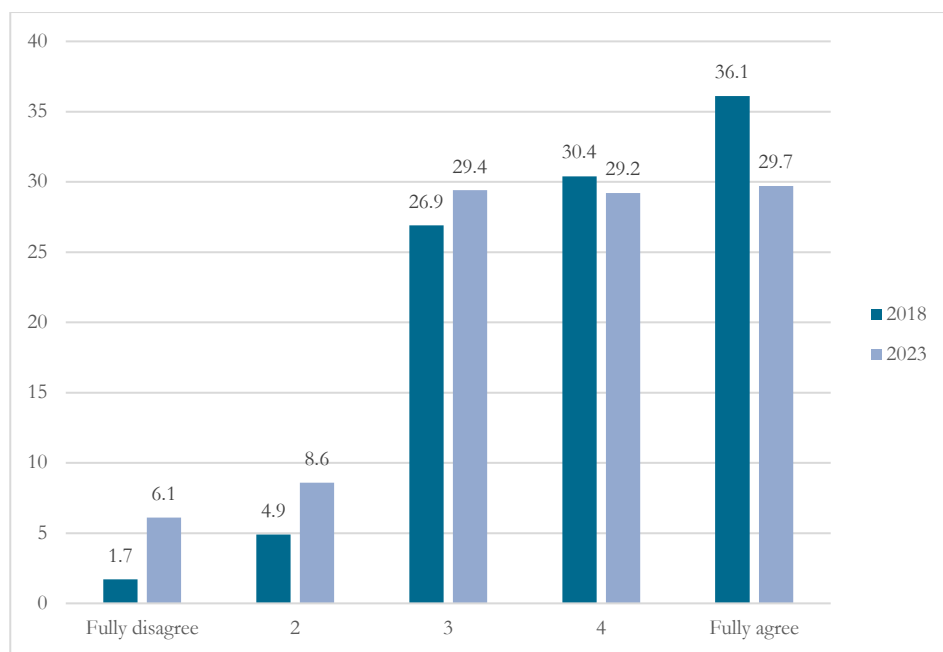


Figure 10.11: Prodemocratic attitude in Croatia 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In the context of widespread dissatisfaction with how democracy functions and low levels of trust in key institutions, authoritarian discourse may appear attractive as a seemingly more effective response to social and political challenges. Similar trends are observable in other European countries, where part of young people is increasingly drawn to political actors who offer simple solutions to complex problems when faced with a sense of political powerlessness, economic insecurity, and recurring crises (Foa and Mounk, 2019; Lavrič and Bieber, 2021; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz and Kennedy, 2022; Körner, Eckstein, and Noack, 2023).

Although a direct comparison of satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023 showed no statistical significance, results also indicate a decline in overall satisfaction with democracy over time. Respondents in 2018 reported a higher average level of satisfaction compared to those in 2023, suggesting that confidence in the state of democracy has weakened and a growing disillusionment with democracy emerged in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023. The increase of dissatisfaction and the decline of those who view democracy positively point to a

potential crisis of confidence in political institutions, governance, or democratic processes. These findings could have implications for political engagement, trust in institutions, and voter participation, making it crucial to investigate the underlying causes of this dissatisfaction. Similarly, no statistically significant correlations were found regarding the comparison of perceptions of democracy between 2018 and 2023. Nevertheless, it is important to note that youth maintain a generally positive view of democracy ($p=0.085$).

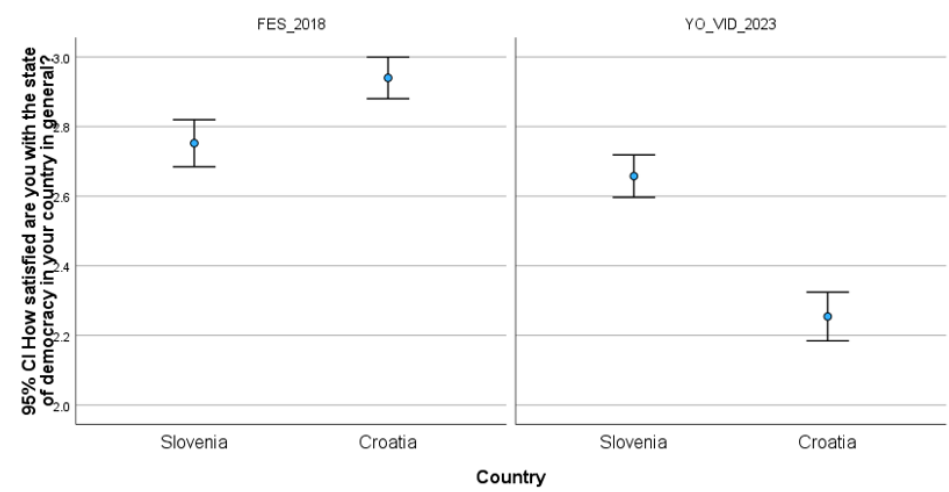


Figure 10.12: Satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The error bar above illustrates changes in youth satisfaction with the state of democracy in Slovenia and Croatia between 2018 and 2023. In 2018, young people in both countries reported relatively high levels of satisfaction, with Croatian youth expressing slightly greater contentment than their Slovenian counterparts. However, by 2023, satisfaction declined in both countries, with a particularly sharp drop observed in Croatia. In Slovenia, the decrease in satisfaction with democracy is moderate, suggesting a growing but measured disillusionment. In contrast, the decline in Croatia is substantial, indicating a deeper erosion of trust in democratic institutions and processes among young people. By 2023, Croatian youth reported significantly lower satisfaction levels compared to both their previous responses and their peers in Slovenia. This trend likely reflects the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic and its aftermath, which placed considerable strain on democratic governance. The use of emergency powers, perceived inefficiency of institutions, and limited youth involvement in decision-making may have contributed to a sense of political alienation - particularly in Croatia, where institutional distrust was already widespread.

We extended our analysis by focusing the next step on attitudes towards support of a strong leadership. Data from Slovenian sample show a significant shift toward greater support for strong leadership ($t(2005) = -10.148$; $p < .001$):

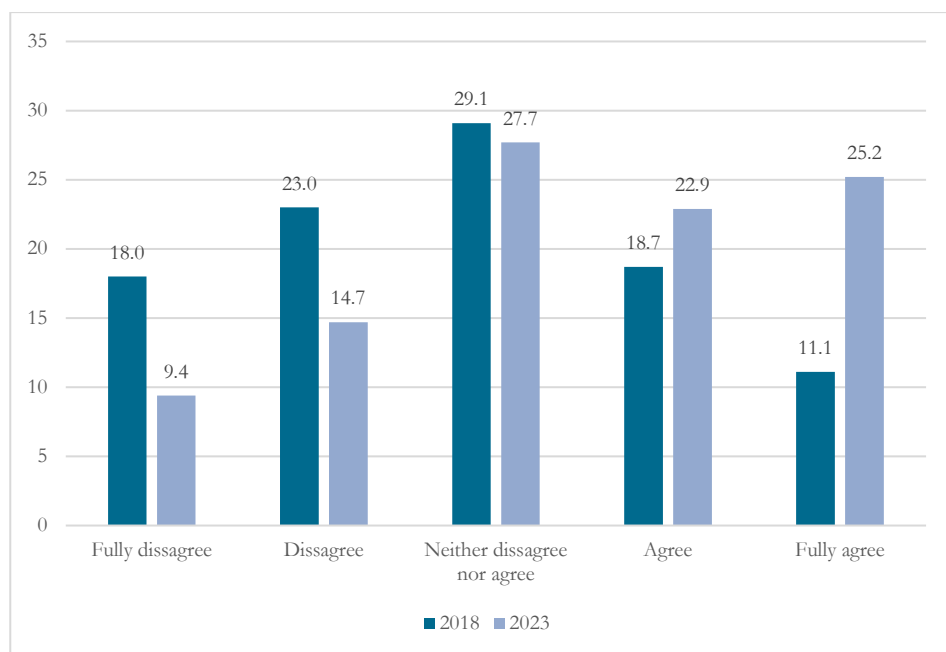


Figure 10.13. Perceptions of strong leadership in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In 2018, 18.0% of Slovenian respondents fully disagreed with having a strong leader who rules Slovenia, while in 2023, this percentage dropped to 9.4% and a mild disagreement decreased from 23.0% in 2018 to 14.7% in 2023. At the same time, support for a strong leader has increased. In 2018, 11.1% of respondents fully agreed, whereas in 2023 this percentage more than doubled to 25.2%. Similarly, moderate agreement rose from 18.7% in 2018 to 22.9% in 2023. This suggests that

more young people now believe a strong leader may be beneficial for Slovenia. The neutral category remains relatively stable, with 29.1% in 2018 and 27.7% in 2023. This indicates that some respondents continue to hold a balanced or undecided position on this issue.

The data reveal a clear shift toward stronger support for authoritative leadership between 2018 and 2023. Fewer young people strongly oppose the idea, while significantly more fully agree that Slovenia should have a strong leader. This trend could be influenced by political dissatisfaction, economic instability, or a perceived inefficiency in democratic processes. It suggests a growing preference for decisive leadership, possibly as a response to contemporary political challenges, stemming from the pandemic period.

These results appear to be even more profound among Croatian youth, where more than 66% of young people express some degree of support for authoritarian leadership in Croatia. In contrast, only 15.3% of young people explicitly disagree with such a position. This orientation has become significantly more widespread and accepted among youth in 2023 compared to 2018 ($t(2382) = -4.561; p < .001$):

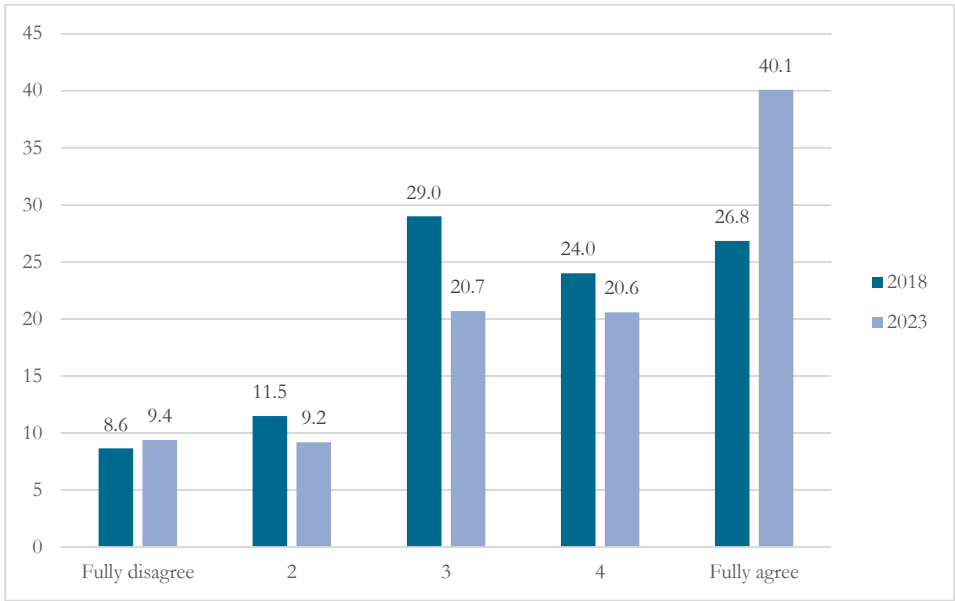


Figure 10.14: Croatian youth's support for political authoritarianism 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

These findings point to an important dynamic in the political culture of youth: a weakening of commitment to democratic values and a rise in authoritarian tendencies. Such tendencies require careful interpretation within the framework of political socialisation on the one hand, and in the context of long-term societal and political issues of the effectiveness of democratic institutions on the other.

10.4 Political knowledge

Political knowledge among young people plays a vital role in shaping the quality and sustainability of democratic societies. It influences how youth understand their rights, engage with political processes, and make informed decisions about issues that affect their lives. Examining the level and sources of political knowledge in younger generations helps identify gaps in civic education, barriers to engagement, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions in reaching and informing all citizens. By focusing on youth political knowledge, we gain insight into how prepared and empowered the next generation is to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

The comparison of self-perceived political knowledge between 2018 and 2023 reveals a shift toward greater confidence in political knowledge ($t(1857.553) = 6.377$; $p < .001$):

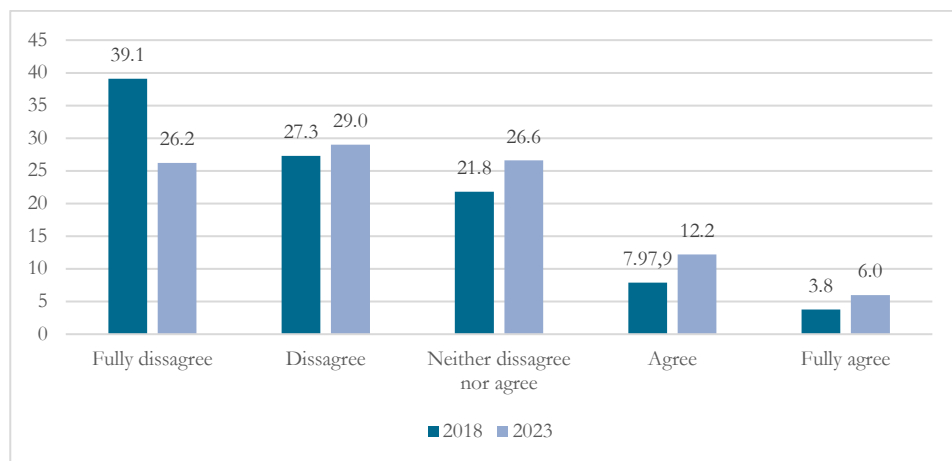


Figure 10.15: Perceptions of a strong leadership in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

One of the most notable changes is the decline in strong disagreement with the statement "I know a lot about politics." In 2018, 39.1% of respondents fully disagreed, while in 2023, this figure dropped to 26.2%. At the same time, mild disagreement increased slightly, from 27.3% in 2018 to 29.0% in 2023, while the neutral category saw an increase from 21.8% in 2018 to 26.6% in 2023, together suggesting that more people now consider themselves to have a moderate understanding of politics. Furthermore, a share of those who agree with the statement rose from 7.9% in 2018 to 12.2% in 2023, and who strongly agree from 3.8% to 6.0%, showing that more people in 2023 confidently claim to know a lot about politics.

The data suggests a positive trend in political self-confidence among Slovenian youth, with fewer respondents feeling completely uninformed and more people considering themselves moderately or highly knowledgeable about politics. This could be influenced by increased access to political information, greater youth engagement in political discussions, or a more politically aware generation. However, a large portion of respondents still feel uncertain or somewhat lacking in knowledge, highlighting the need for continued civic education and political engagement initiatives.

A somewhat different picture emerged among Croatian youth:

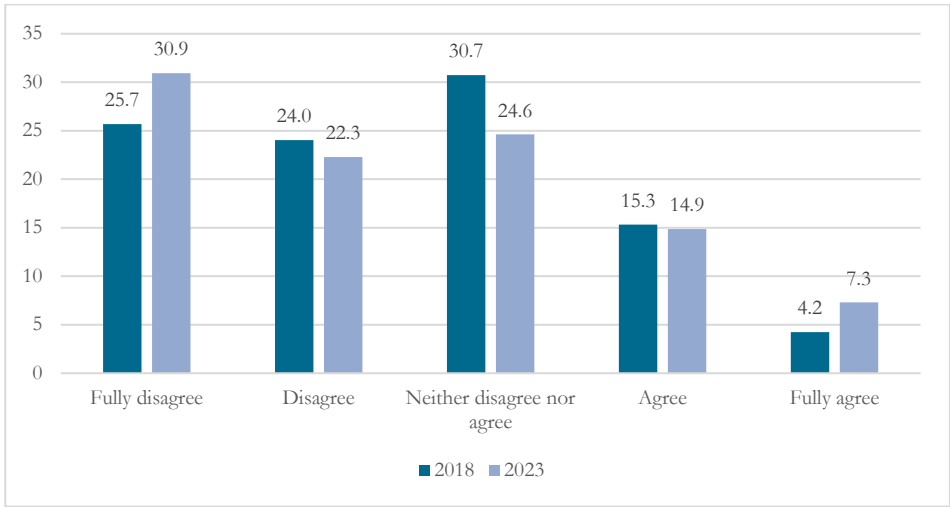


Figure 10.16: Self-assessment of political knowledge among Croatian youth, 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In 2023, a majority of young people expressed low confidence in their political knowledge, with approximately 53% rejecting the statement *I know a lot about politics* (Figure 10.7). This suggests that self-perceived political competence remains quite limited among youth, and that a substantial part of youth likely feels ill-prepared to understand or actively engage with political processes. When compared to 2018, there is no significant change in the overall distribution of responses, which points to a continued pattern of low political self-efficacy among young people in Croatia. Such an evaluation may be symptomatic of their political and socialisation context, including persistent trends of political disengagement, insufficient civic education, and a lack of inclusive or youth-oriented political communication.

10.5 Political and civic participation

Youth political and civic participation is a key indicator of the vitality and inclusiveness of a democracy. As emerging members of the political community, young people contribute fresh perspectives, energy, and innovation to democratic processes. Examining their levels of engagement - such as voting, activism, volunteering, and involvement in community or political organisations - provides insight into how connected they feel to political life and how effectively democratic systems are supporting their involvement. Understanding the factors that encourage or hinder youth participation is essential for fostering a more engaged, representative, and resilient democratic society.

Table 10.1: Youth political and civic engagement - share of respondents who already participated in selected activities 2018 and 2023 (%)

	2018 (%)	2023 (%)
Signing a list of political demands or supported an online petition	19.5	42.0
Volunteered or worked for the common good (helping children/the elderly/refugees/other people in need)	1.0	31.5
Stopped buying certain things for political or environmental reasons	7.5	28.9
Participation in volunteer activities or activities of civil society organisations	1.0	26.1
Shared news, music, or video with social or political content on social media (e.g. TikTok, Twitter, etc.)	-	23.8
Participation in demonstrations	7.8	16.6

In 2023, petition signing was the most common form of participation among young people, with more than two out of five reporting engagement. This was followed by volunteering for the common good, undertaken by nearly a third of young people, and boycotting products for political or environmental reasons, reported by slightly more than a quarter. Around a quarter were involved in civil society organisations, while almost every fourth young person had shared political content online. Participation in demonstrations was less frequent but still present, with about 17% reporting involvement.

Compared to 2018, participation increased across all comparable activities. Petition signing more than doubled, volunteering and engagement in civil society grew significantly, political consumerism increased nearly fourfold, and participation in demonstrations more than doubled.

The rise in participation between 2018 and 2023 should be understood in the context of major societal disruptions during this period, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes that struck Croatia in 2020 and 2021. These events exposed institutional shortcomings in crisis response and emphasised already existing social vulnerabilities and inequalities (Bužinkić and Šelo Šabić, 2024). They have probably heightened young people's awareness of collective challenges and the importance of civic engagement. The increase in volunteering, involvement in civil society, and political consumerism probably reflects a reactive form of participation, which serves to express solidarity or respond and even replace perceived failures of public institutions' measures to manage the crises.

Numerous interesting insights were also found through the examination of various aspects of the political and civic participation of Slovenian youth. Firstly, the comparison of political petition signing between 2018 and 2023 shows a notable increase in active political participation over time ($t(1818.793) = -2.845$; $p = .004$). One of the most significant changes is the rise in the number of people who have already signed a political petition.

In 2018, 33% of respondents reported that they had signed a petition, whereas by 2023, this figure increased to 44.9%. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had not signed a petition but were willing to do so decreased from 28.7% in 2018 to 16.2% in 2023. This decline suggests that many individuals who

were previously open to participation but had not yet acted may have transitioned into active engagement. Meanwhile, the proportion of people who have never signed a petition and do not intend to remained relatively stable (38.3% in 2018 and 38.9% in 2023).

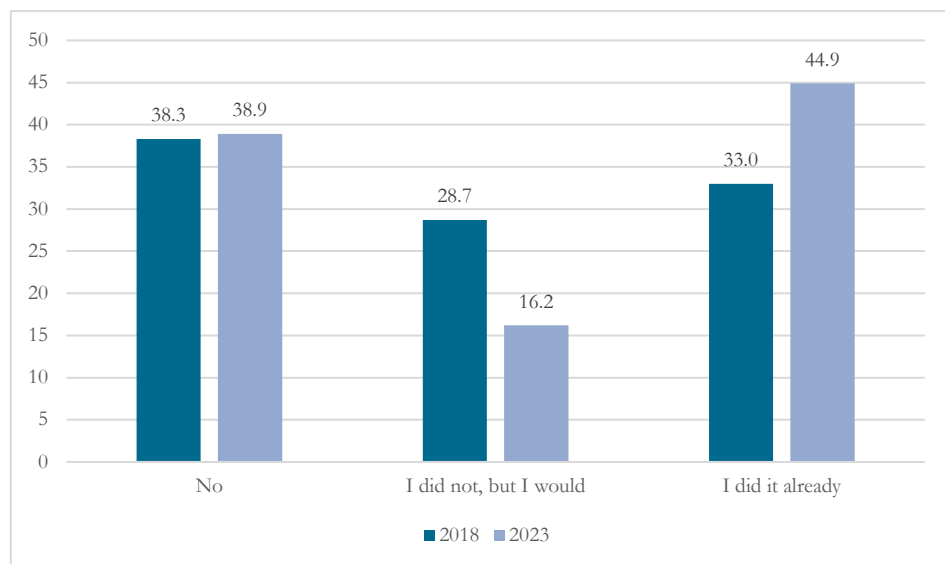


Figure 10.17: Conventional political participation – petition 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Among Slovenian youth, there is a positive shift toward increased conventional political activism. This change may reflect greater political awareness, pressing social and political issues, or increased accessibility to petitions, particularly through digital platforms. However, the stability in the proportion of those who remain disengaged suggests that while activism is rising, a segment of the population continues to refrain from participation in political petitions.

On the other hand, the comparison of political participation between 2018 and 2023 shows a decline in willingness to participate in demonstrations over time ($t(2008) = 4.295$; $p < .001$):

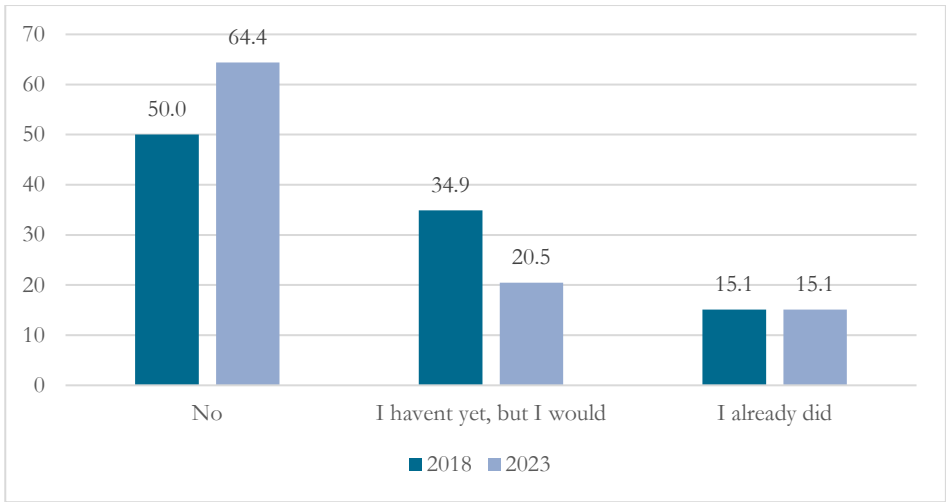


Figure 10.18. Participation in demonstrations 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

One of the most significant changes is the increase in non-participation, rising from 50% in 2018 to 64.4% in 2023, suggesting a growing proportion becoming disengaged from political involvement. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had not participated but were willing to dropped from 34.9% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2023. This indicates that fewer people express interest in becoming politically active, signalling a potential decline in political motivation or opportunities for engagement. However, the percentage of those who had already participated remained stable at 15.1% in both years.

This suggests that while the most engaged young Slovenians continue to participate, the pool of potential future participants has shrunk, as more people move toward disengagement rather than activism.

While these results indicate a decline in preparedness for demonstrative political engagement, the stability in those who are already active suggests that a core group remains politically engaged and broader participation is weakening. This shift could be influenced by political dissatisfaction, lack of trust in institutions, or a feeling that individual participation has little impact.

We extended our research by focusing on participation in volunteering or activities of civil society organisations. Although lacking a statistical significance ($t(1847.218) = 1.787$; $p = .074$), the results showing a decline in willingness to volunteer between 2018 and 2023 (alongside a slight increase in actual participation), with the most notable changes is the increase in non-participation (37.2% in 2018 to 47.2% in 2023) and a drop in willingness to participate (from 41.1% in 2018 to 27.4% in 2023). Nevertheless, support towards volunteer work or community service remains strong. The comparison of 2018 and 2023 regarding volunteer work participation reveals a shift in engagement trends over time ($t(1860.110) = -2.436$; $p = .015$).

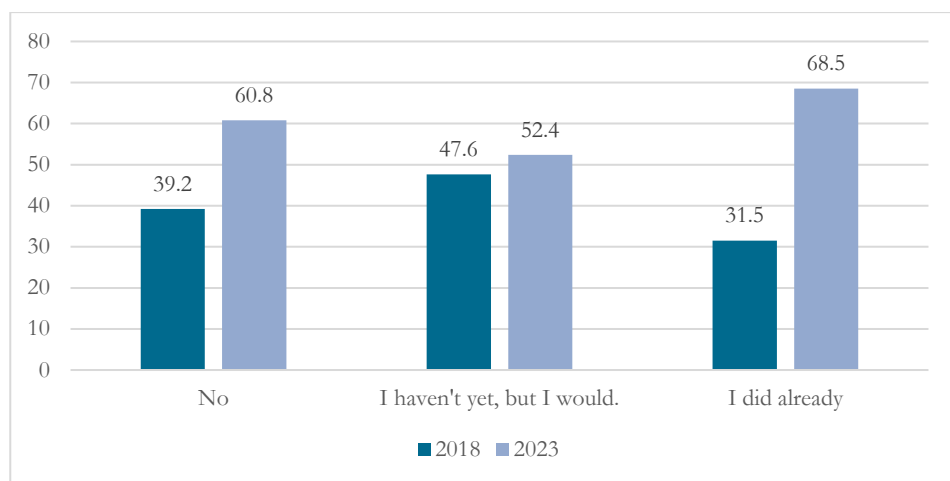


Figure 10.19: Participation in demonstrations 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The results reveal a significant shift in public engagement with voluntary or community service activities, such as helping children, the elderly, refugees, or others in need. In 2018, 31.5% of young respondents reported that they had already participated in such activities and by 2023, this figure more than doubled, rising to 68.5%, suggesting a notable increase in civic participation and social responsibility over the five-year period. At the same time, the percentage of youngsters who stated they had not participated in any such activities also increased, from 39.2% in 2018 to 60.8% in 2023. This apparent contradiction may be due to changes in how the question was interpreted or how the options were presented, and it warrants further clarification. Meanwhile, the proportion of people who had not yet engaged in

voluntary work but expressed willingness to do so remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 47.6% in 2018 to 52.4% in 2023. This consistency indicates a continued openness among the population to participate in socially beneficial activities, even among those who have not yet taken action.

Overall, the data suggest a growing awareness and willingness to engage in community service, with a significant portion of the youth actively participating by 2023. This trend reflects positively on the development of civic culture and social solidarity within the community.

10.6 Perceptions of the future economic situation

The final step of this chapter focuses on the perception of youth and the economic situation in Slovenia and Croatia, as connected to political situation. While the level of economic optimism or pessimism is not itself a dimension of political culture, it can reflect perceptions of societal well-being and confidence in the state's ability to ensure economic security. The comparison of perceptions regarding the economic situation between 2018 and 2023 reveals a significant shift toward a more negative outlook over time ($t(1753.780) = 10.825; p < .001$):

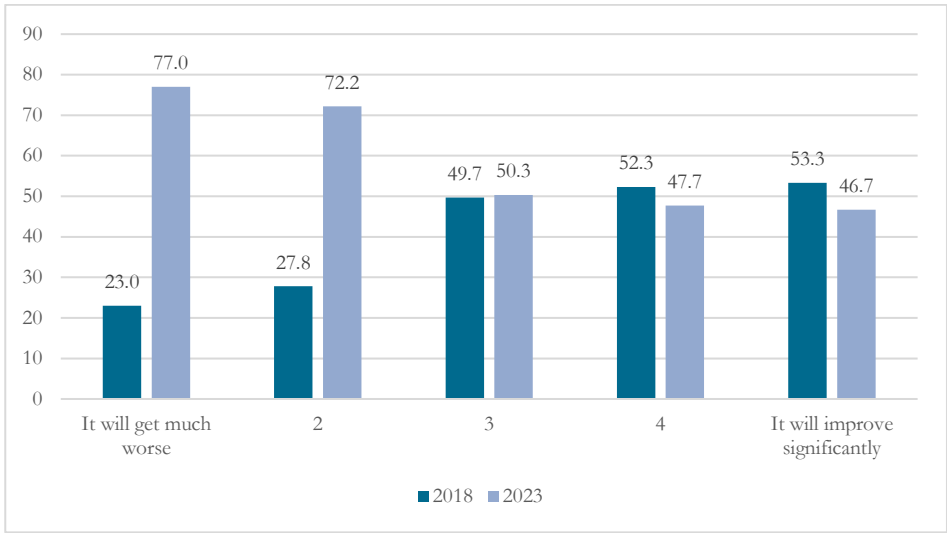


Figure 10.20: Perception of economic future, 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The results show a noticeable shift toward pessimism in 2023. Among those who believed the economic situation would get significantly worse, 77% were from the 2023 survey, while only 23% were from 2018. A similar trend is observed in responses rated as somewhat worse (2), with 72.2% coming from 2023 and 27.8% from 2018. This suggests a growing sense of concern or dissatisfaction with the anticipated economic trajectory. In contrast, responses reflecting more optimism have declined. For example, among those who believed the economic situation would significantly improve, 53.3% of responses came from 2018 and only 46.7% from 2023. Likewise, slightly more optimistic views also saw a higher share in 2018 (52.3%) than in 2023 (47.7%). Interestingly, views in the middle of the scale (3) remained nearly evenly split between the two years, indicating that overall uncertainty has not changed much.

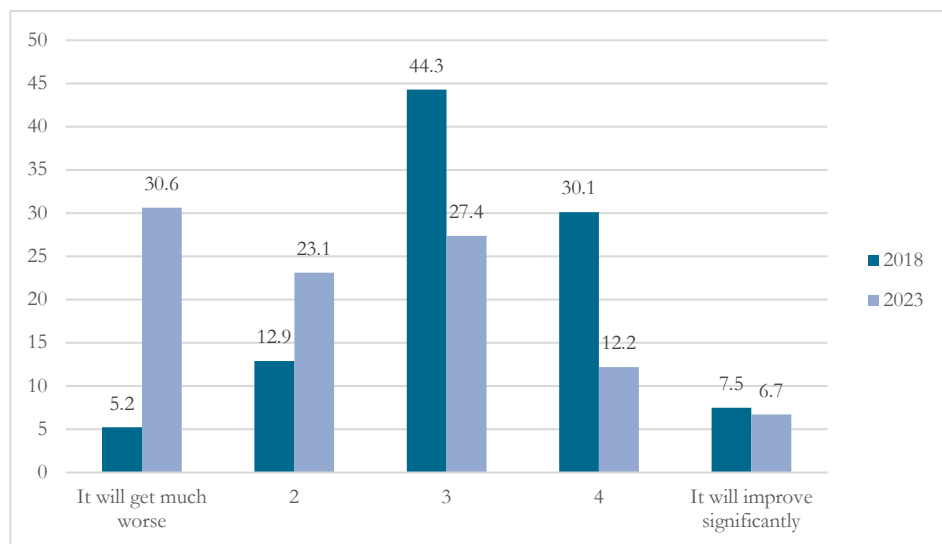


Figure 10.21: Expectations about the future economic situation in Croatia over the next 10 years 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Similar picture emerges among Croatian youth. A generally pessimistic view of economic future prevails, as reflected in the 2023 findings (Figure 10.21). The largest share of respondents (31%) believes the economic situation will get much worse, while an additional 23% selected the second most negative response. This means that over a half of the respondents (54%) hold a predominantly negative view of the

country’s economic future. Compared to 2018, there has been a marked shift toward economic pessimism, as the share of respondents expecting deterioration has increased significantly, particularly among those choosing the most negative option (from 5% in 2018 to 31% in 2023).

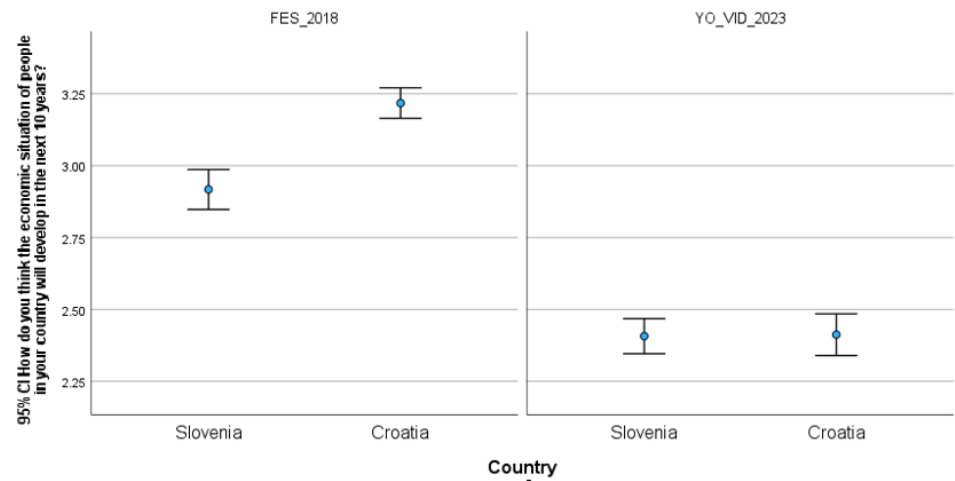


Figure 10.22: Perceptions of the future economic situation in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The figure compares youth perceptions in Slovenia and Croatia regarding how they expect the economic situation in their countries to develop over the next 10 years. In 2018, young people in both countries expressed relatively optimistic views, with Croatian youth showing a more positive outlook than their Slovenian peers. However, by 2023, this optimism had significantly declined in both countries, with the drop in economic expectations being particularly pronounced in Croatia. In Slovenia, a more moderate but still notable decline occurred and by 2023, the economic outlook of youth in both countries had converged at similarly low levels. This shift likely reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises. Economic instability, rising inflation, job market disruptions, and the increasing cost of living have contributed to a sense of uncertainty and pessimism. In Croatia, additional factors such as the introduction of the euro and the aftermath of natural disasters have likely deepened these concerns. Overall, the figure highlights a growing sense of economic insecurity among youth in both Slovenia and Croatia. This pessimistic outlook may have wider implications for political trust, civic

engagement, and youth retention, underscoring the need for targeted economic policies that restore confidence and support young people's aspirations for a stable and prosperous future.

In summary, while some optimism and neutrality persist, the data indicates that youth expectations about the economic future in Slovenia and Croatia have become significantly more negative in 2023 compared to 2018.

10.7 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter has explored the civic and political culture of youth in Slovenia and Croatia during a time marked by crisis, uncertainty, and change. The majority of young people in both Slovenia and Croatia still express support for democracy as the preferred form of government. This baseline normative commitment is an essential element of civic political culture (Almond & Verba, 2000). However, support for democracy has weakened in intensity particularly in Croatia and satisfaction with how democracy works is low in both countries. This indicates a growing gap between democratic ideals and the lived experience of young people within democratic institutions. Youth in both countries are engaging more in civic and issue-based participation, such as petition signing, volunteering, and political consumerism especially online. These are all positive signs of democratic engagement. However, low trust in parliaments and political elites, alongside a strong perception of underrepresentation, points to fragile institutional trust, which is a core component of a stable democratic political culture. Support for strong, even authoritarian leadership has significantly increased, particularly in Croatia, where nearly two-thirds of youth now express some degree of support for this idea. In Slovenia, similar trends, though somewhat more moderate, are also detected. It could be said that these can be signs of possible erosion of liberal-democratic orientations and that a segment of the youth population is open to non-democratic solutions, particularly when democratic institutions are perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. The data show both an increase in ideological polarisation (particularly the rise in far-left and far-right self-identification) and a persistence of political apathy, especially in Croatia. It can be argued that the political culture of youth in both Slovenia and Croatia is neither fully consolidated nor outright anti-democratic. While democratic values and civic engagement are present, they coexist

with elements of disillusionment, institutional distrust, and, in some segments, openness to authoritarian alternatives.

To keep young people engaged in building democratic societies, they need more than just invitations to participate - they need real influence, better representation, and a sense that their concerns are taken seriously. If that happens, there is a strong foundation for a more open, fair, and participatory political culture in both Slovenia and Croatia. But if not, there is a risk that many will continue to turn away - frustrated, unheard, and politically disillusioned.

To counter growing dissatisfaction and prevent long-term disengagement, a coordinated approach is needed in both contexts. Strengthening civic education and media literacy is vital for building political knowledge, resilience against disinformation, and democratic values. Institutional mechanisms that ensure youth representation - such as youth councils, participatory budgeting, and inclusion in policymaking - should be implemented and supported. Investment in inclusive digital tools, support for grassroots initiatives, and targeted strategies to address ideological polarisation and economic insecurity will also be crucial. Rebuilding trust in democracy requires not only addressing structural deficits but also empowering youth as active stakeholders in shaping their political futures.

While both Slovenia and Croatia demonstrate increased civic engagement among youth, key differences emerge in the depth of political interest and trust in democratic institutions. Slovenian youth show a notable increase in political interest and self-assessed political knowledge, despite declining satisfaction with democracy and rising support for strong leadership. In contrast, Croatian youth display persistent low political interest and political self-efficacy, with alarmingly high levels of distrust in institutions like the Parliament and a more severe decline in democratic satisfaction. Ideological polarisation is evident in both, though Croatia shows a more marked shift toward the extremes of the spectrum.

In general terms, for Slovenia, the priority is to translate the rising political interest into sustained engagement by investing in youth-inclusive political mechanisms and civic platforms, while addressing ideological polarisation and dissatisfaction with representation, while for Croatia, the focus must be on the rekindling of political interest and confidence by strengthening civic education, combating political authoritarian tendencies, and improving the responsiveness and performance of democratic institutions.

In both contexts, media literacy, support for youth-led initiatives, economic empowerment, and digital engagement tools are essential to improve youth trust and participation in democracy. Tailoring these strategies to each country's unique challenges will be critical for fostering resilient, inclusive democratic societies. To address the shared challenges of declining democratic satisfaction, political underrepresentation, and growing authoritarian sentiments among youth, Slovenia and Croatia should adopt a comprehensive and multi-level strategy. Based on the here presented findings, several policy directions are recommended:

- Strengthen civic education and political literacy: 1) integrate modern, interactive civic education into both formal curricula and informal learning environments, 2) focus on critical thinking, democratic values, rights and responsibilities, and institutional functioning, and 3) include simulations, debates, and youth parliaments to enhance practical understanding of democratic engagement.
- Improve youth representation and inclusion in decision-making: 1) establish and institutionalise youth advisory councils at local and national levels, 2) potentially introduce quotas or dedicated seats for youth within political parties and policymaking bodies, and 3) enable regular consultation with youth through participatory budgeting, town halls, and digital forums.
- Expand and support digital civic engagement: 1) develop secure, user-friendly platforms for youth participation, including e-petitions, digital consultations, and interactive civic education tools, and 2) fund and promote digital campaigns by youth NGOs and movements to foster engagement and raise awareness of political issues.
- Foster inclusive political dialogue and reduce polarisation: 1) create safe, moderated spaces (online and offline) for open political discussion and dialogue across ideological divides, and 2) support non-partisan initiatives aimed at political tolerance and collaboration, particularly among youth from diverse backgrounds.
- Counter disinformation and authoritarian appeals through media literacy: 1) implement national media literacy programmes in schools and communities to help youth critically evaluate information sources, and 2) train educators and youth workers to address conspiracy theories, populist rhetoric, and manipulative political messaging.

- Revitalise volunteering and civic engagement beyond politics: 1) provide incentives such as academic loans, scholarships, or stipends for civic and volunteer activities, 2) encourage flexible models like micro-volunteering or hybrid (online/offline) formats to suit youth lifestyles, 3) recognise and publicly celebrate youth civic contributions through awards or media campaigns.
- Address youth economic insecurity: 1) develop targeted policies to support youth employment, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship, and 2) improve access to affordable housing and social protections for young people to foster independence and reduce existential stress that hinders political participation.
- Promote gender-inclusive civic and political engagement: 1) address the gender divide in political interest and participation by promoting female leadership and mentorship programmes, and 2) integrate gender equality into civic education and policy planning to ensure inclusive democratic development.
- Rebuild trust in institutions through transparency and accountability: 1) increase transparency in decision-making, particularly in times of crisis, and 2) involve youth in designing emergency response protocols to ensure policies reflect diverse experiences and priorities.

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