

Slovenia

*What Young People Want and Need:
Values, Fears and the General Situation
of Slovenian Youth*

2024



5 KEY POINTS ON WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA WANT AND NEED

1 An increasing share of young people feel stressed, alienated, and pessimistic about their personal future and the future of Slovenian society. These trends are accompanied by a sharp rise in fears related to issues such as immigration, war, and experiencing physical violence in everyday life.

2 Young people's primary concerns regarding potential political priorities are the quality of public services, particularly healthcare and housing systems. Immigration emerged as an almost equally important issue, followed by corruption and unemployment.

3 Trust in public institutions remains low, though there has been some improvement, particularly among boys. While the EU continues to be seen as a trustworthy entity, the perception of the situation in Slovenia is catching up to that of the EU.

4 On average, nationalism and national pride have increased substantially. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in strong disagreement with some nationalistic statements, indicating ideological polarization. This polarization is also increasingly evident in attitudes toward marginalized groups, especially women.

5 Regarding personal values, young people are increasingly reluctant to take on responsibilities, including attending university or starting a family. This reluctance can be partially attributed to increasingly bleak visions of the future and deteriorating psychological wellbeing. Conversely, values such as becoming rich and looking good have been growing, especially among boys, indicating an increasingly consumerist approach to life.



Introduction

Recent studies in Slovenia (e.g., Lavrič and Deželan, 2021) indicate that the primary concerns of youth have shifted from issues like employment, emigration, and political disengagement to challenges related to mental health and housing. During the late 2010s, the employment situation for young people rapidly improved, both in terms of unemployment and job precarity. These positive trends were driven by demographic decline, an increasing shortage of labour force in the market, a significantly improved economic situation, and effective policy measures supporting youth in their transition to the labour market. These changes also alleviated the problem of youth emigration from the country.

Conversely, factors such as the increasing use of digital devices, especially time spent on social networks, individualization, pressures to succeed in school and life, the erosion of family ties, as well as the effects of the pandemic, have contributed to a severe crisis in the psychological wellbeing and mental health of young people. Additionally, the lack of housing capacity,

combined with increasing real estate prices and rents, has created a serious crisis in addressing the housing needs of young people (Uršič, 2021). The latest national survey (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021) also revealed pronounced trends of increasing ecological awareness and liberalization of values, particularly regarding topics like homosexuality and abortion. However, these trends are accompanied by increasing ideological polarization among the youth¹.

¹ For further insights into political and ideological dynamics, refer to the parallel report on political orientation and participation (Rutar, 2024).

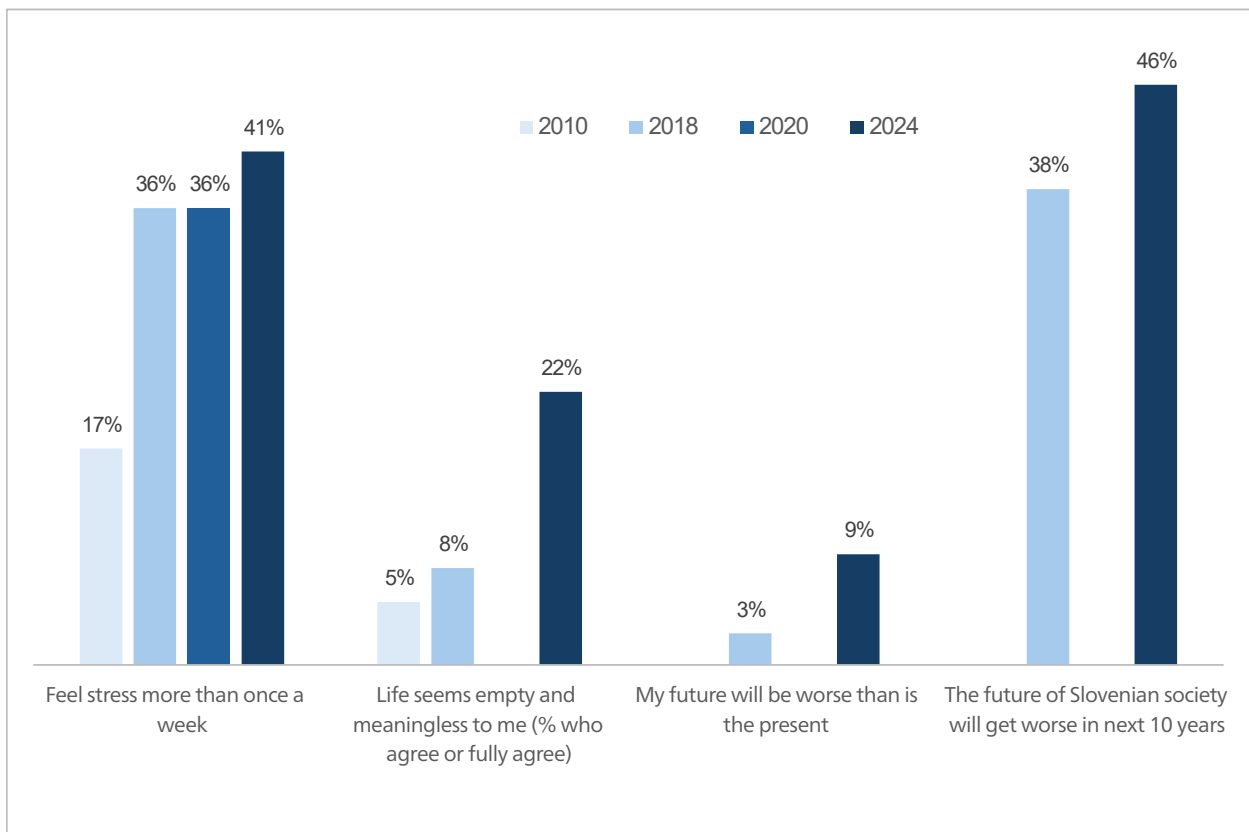
1st key point: The increase in pessimism, mental health problems and specific fears

Several studies have highlighted a worsening trend in mental health and psychological well-being among Slovenian youth (see, for example Klanjšek and Naterer, 2021; Naterer and Lavrič, 2019). The results of this study indicate that the situation has further deteriorated in recent years. In addition to the continued upward trend in feelings of stress, we also observe a sharp increase in alienation, with more young people feeling that life is empty and meaningless (Figure 1). Furthermore, from 2018 to 2024 (for which

we have comparable data), pessimism about personal futures and the future of society has also increased substantially.

These trends are also reflected in the increase in specific fears among young people (see Figure 2). Among the eight specific fears that can be directly compared to 2018, five show a significant increase, while the other three have not changed much. The sharpest increases are in fears related to international issues, such as migration, war, and terrorist attacks. This is followed by substantial increases in fears related to physical violence, including the fear of being robbed. Given the increased instability of the international order and the heightened presence of war and violence in the media, including social media, this is not surprising.

Figure 1
Pessimism, Stress, and Meaning in life among the Slovenian youth, 2010 – 2024, age group 15-29 years².

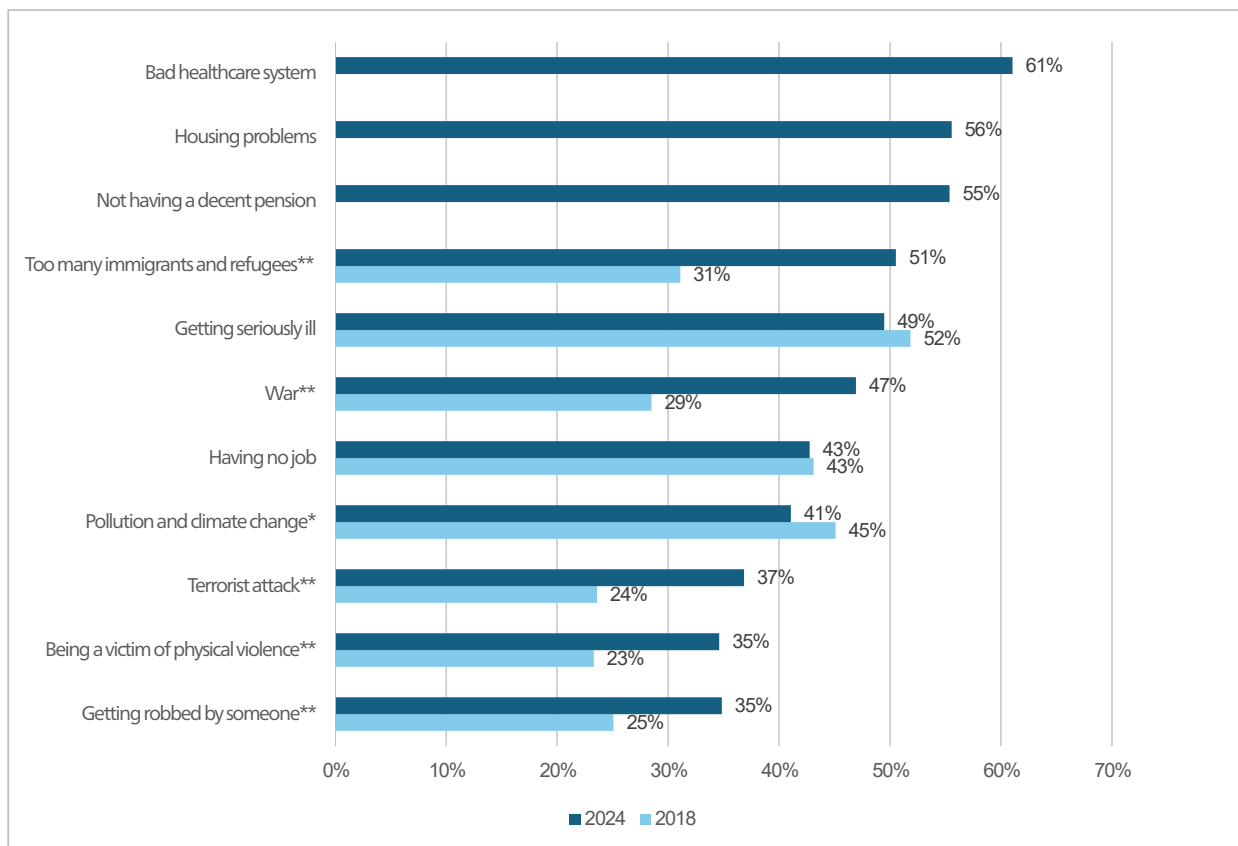


² The age group was adjusted to 15-29 year-olds to enable valid comparisons with youth studies from 2010 and 2020. All other analyses and figures in this report refer to the age group 14-29.

Figure 2

Fears and concerns of Slovenian youth, 2018 and 2024.

To what extent are you frightened or concerned in relation to the following things (% saying "a lot"):



Note:

** differences in Mean values between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$

* differences in Mean values between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

2nd key point: Quality of public services, housing, and immigration are top political priorities

Perhaps contrary to public perceptions, climate change and unemployment are not the primary concerns for young people in Slovenia³. As both Figure 2 and Figure 3 confirm, while these issues remain significant, their importance is not increasing. Instead,

they are being surpassed by two other major groups of issues.

The first and most important concern is the quality of public services, particularly the healthcare⁴ system, but also the pension system. Another very important and closely related issue is housing and public policies in this area. The problem of housing has been increasingly recognized as one of the most critical issues for young people in Slovenia, as highlighted by the national study Youth 2020 (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021) and recently by the public campaign of the National Youth Council

³ Despite experiencing serious ecological crises in recent years, such as the floods in the summer of 2023 and the wildfires in the summer of 2022, it is particularly surprising that climate concerns have not increased.

⁴ This result was certainly influenced by the Slovenian media's coverage of the crisis situation in Slovenian healthcare. This reporting was particularly intense because of the doctors' strike that lasted throughout the survey data collection period for our study.

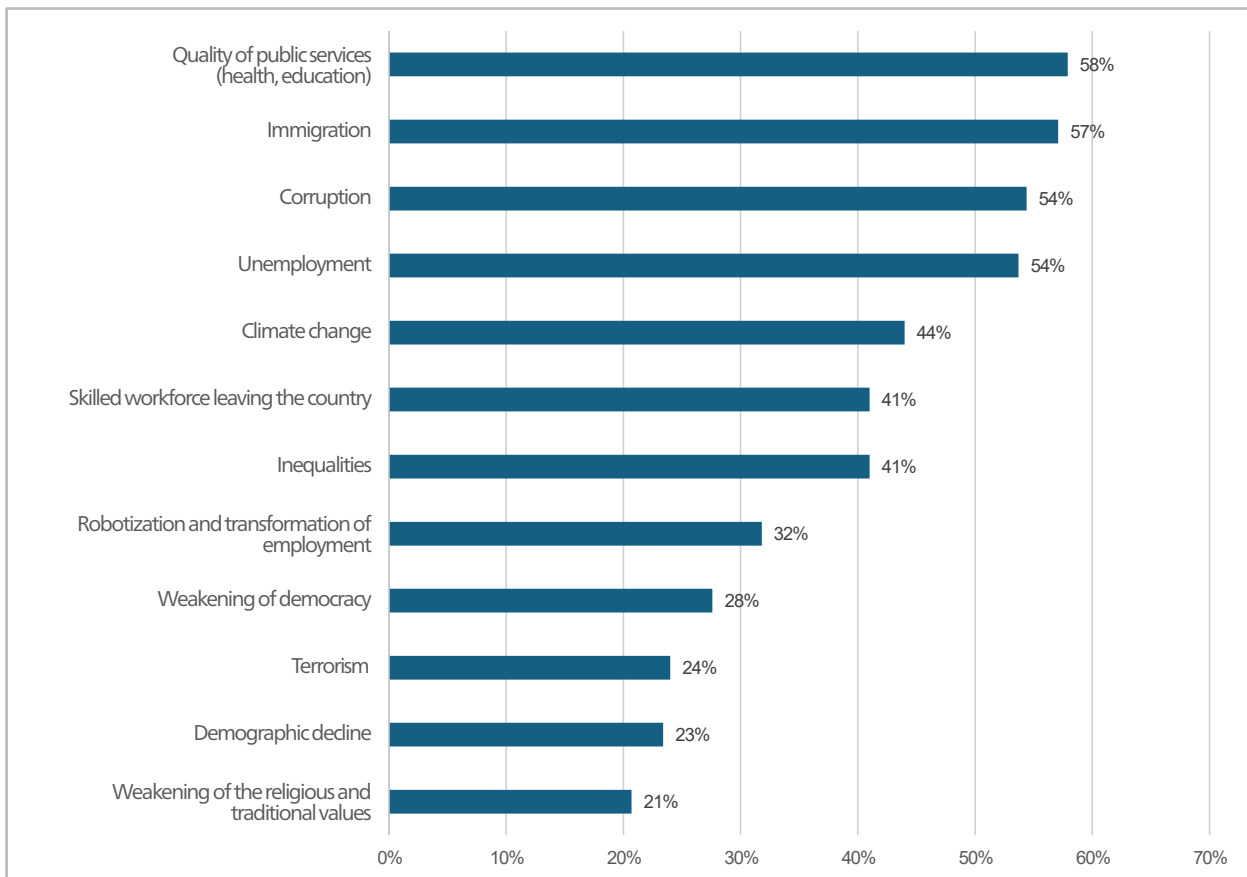
of Slovenia called 'Nowhere to go' (Mladinski svet Slovenije, n.d.). Indeed the available data confirm that the real estate prices and rents for apartments, especially in Ljubljana, have reached dizzying numbers in recent years (Lesjak Šilak, 2024).

According to our data, there has been a further and relatively sharp increase in the perception of housing as a problematic issue since the last measurement in 2020, reaching an all-time high, with 56 per cent of young people expressing serious concerns in this area (see Figure 2).

The second group of top political topics is related to international issues, particularly

immigration, which has become one of the top political priorities for the next decade (Figure 3). Furthermore, the fear of having too many immigrants and refugees is present 'a lot' among more than half of respondents and has increased sharply since 2018 (Figure 2). Interestingly, this increase occurred mostly on the left. For example, the percentage of far-left youth expressing 'a lot' of fear regarding this issue increased from 27 per cent in 2018 to 48 per cent in 2024. This brings the topic of immigration to the forefront of the agenda on both sides of the political spectrum, similar to the concerns about the quality of public services and housing.

Figure 3
The perceived key socio-political issues for the next decade, 2024.
 Which of the following issues worry you the most in the next decade?



Note: Respondents were invited to choose any of the listed options. The percentages refer to young people who chose a particular option.

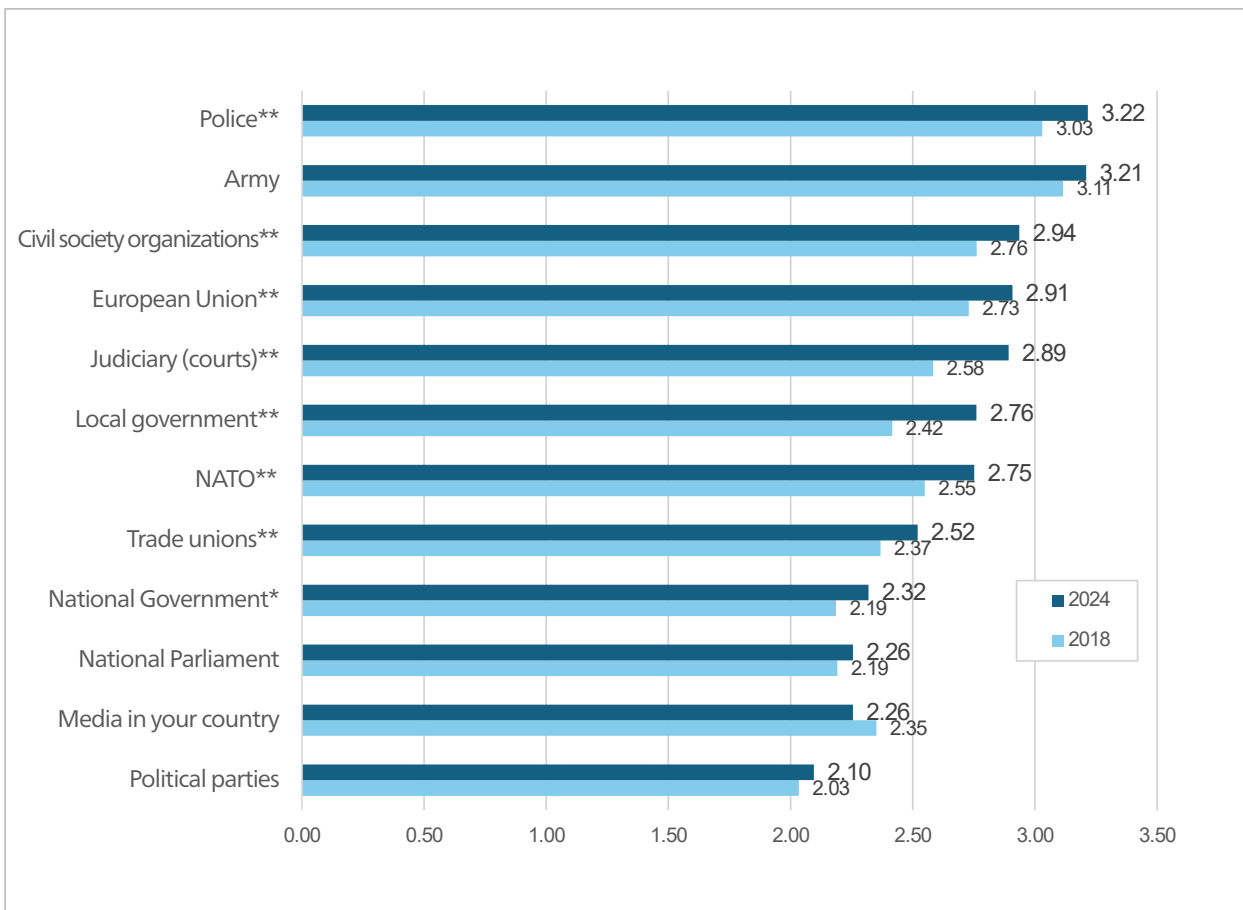
3rd key point: Trust in national institutions has been rising and the perceived socio-political situation in Slovenia is catching up with the perception of the situation in the EU

Although trust in public institutions remains relatively low, there has been a near-universal revival since 2018. The rankings of particular institutions have not changed much, with the police and army remaining the most trusted,

and political parties and the media the least trusted. The only noticeable exception is the trust in the media, which has slightly (although not statistically significantly) declined, resulting in a substantial drop in its position on the trust ladder.

Interestingly, institutional trust increased almost exclusively among boys, which aligns with the observation that general political interest and engagement also rose mostly among boys (Rutar, 2024). It is also important to note that institutional trust is substantially higher among right-wing youth. For example, in 2024, 87 per cent of far-left youth expressed no or very low trust in political parties, while this share was only 41 per cent among far-right youth⁵.

Figure 4
Trust in public institutions, 2018 and 2024.
 On the whole, how far do you trust the entities listed below?



Note:
 ** differences between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$
 * differences between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

⁵ Political orientation was measured on a scale from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). Respondents who chose '1' or '2' were classified as far-left, while those who chose '9' or '10' were classified as far-right.

In relation to international actors, we observe a significant improvement in trust in NATO and especially in the EU. Regarding the EU, respondents were first asked to choose three out of seven values that were most important to them (see Figure 5). They were then asked to evaluate the situation in Slovenia and in the EU concerning these values. The results generally confirm that Slovenian youth are predominantly pro-European. For example, young people still see the EU as offering better employment opportunities, higher economic welfare, and a higher level of human rights. However, it should be noted that the perception of the EU in terms of the latter two

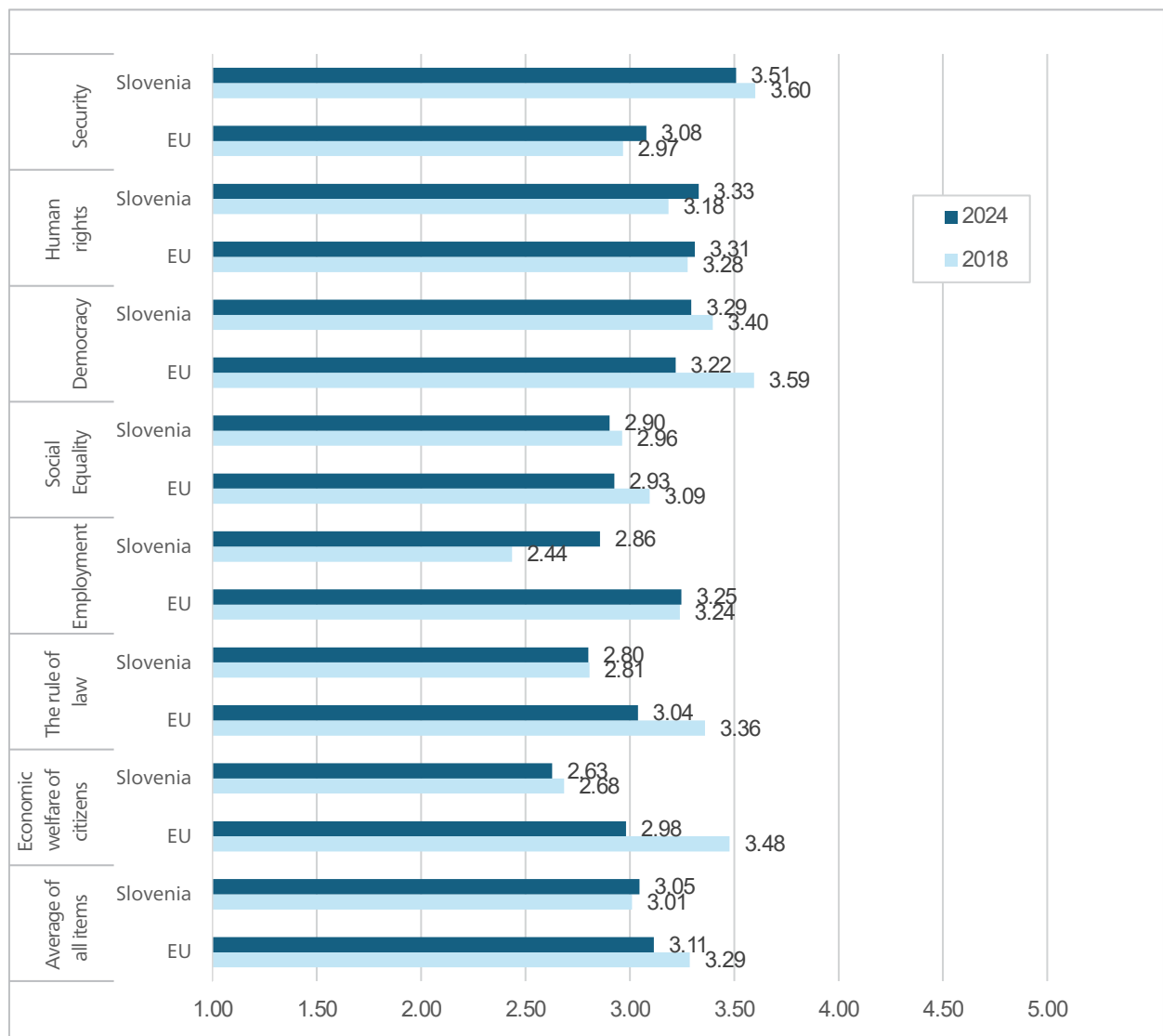
values has decreased substantially.

Furthermore, in 2024, unlike in 2018, Slovenia is seen as more democratic than the EU and it is still seen as a much better place in terms of security. Overall, the perception of the situation in Slovenia is catching up with the perception of the situation in the EU (see average of all items in Figure 5). The former has slightly improved, while the latter has deteriorated. The gap has virtually disappeared, meaning that Slovenia is now perceived as an average country to live in within the EU.

Figure 5

Perceptions of the situation in Slovenia and in the EU with regards to most important socio-political values, 2018 and 2024.

How good or bad are, in your view, is the status of following listed values in your country and in the EU? (Only those who ranked a particular value as one of the three most important)



Note: A scale from 1 to 5 was used, with 1 indicating "Very bad" and 5 indicating "Very good."

4th key point: Nationalism has been rising along with the increased ideological polarization

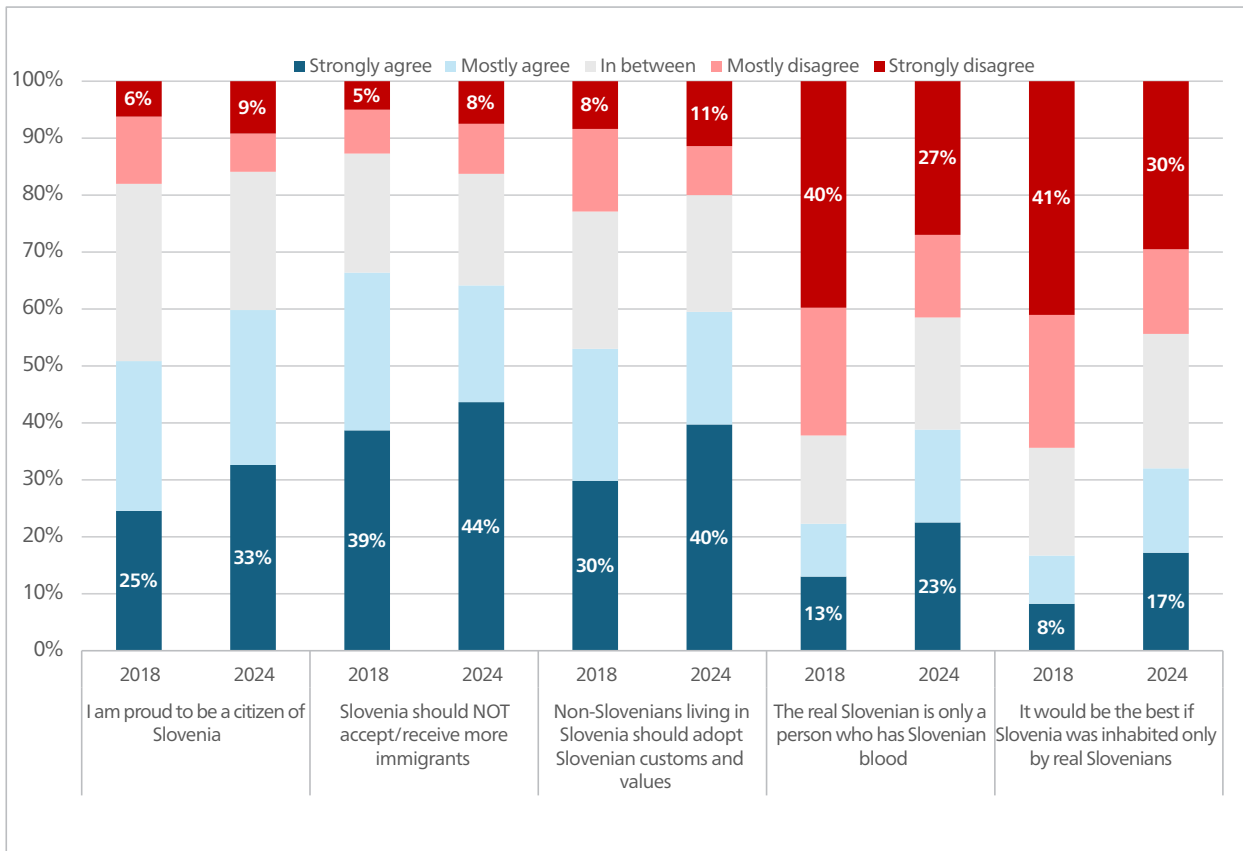
Given the already identified right-wing turn among the young (Rutar, 2024), it is not surprising that over the past few years, nationalism has substantially increased, together with national pride and unfavourable attitudes towards immigration. However, it is important to note that in most items within Figure 6, there is a substantial increase at both extremes of the agreement scale, indicating ideological polarization. For example, full agreement with the statement that non-Slovenians living in Slovenia should adopt Slovenian customs and values has

increased from 30 per cent to 40 per cent, but strong disagreement has also increased from 8 per cent to 11 per cent. Similar patterns can be seen regarding national pride and attitudes towards immigration.

The remaining two measures of ethnonationalism, however, show a clear trend of increase that also includes a decrease in respondents opposing these ideas. This leads to the overall conclusion that nationalistic attitudes are indeed on the rise among Slovenian youth⁶, though this rise is accompanied by a certain level of polarization.

Ideological polarization can also be observed with regards to the attitudes towards marginalised groups, specifically towards women. The polarization regarding women's rights increasingly divides boys and girls. The share of girls believing that women do not

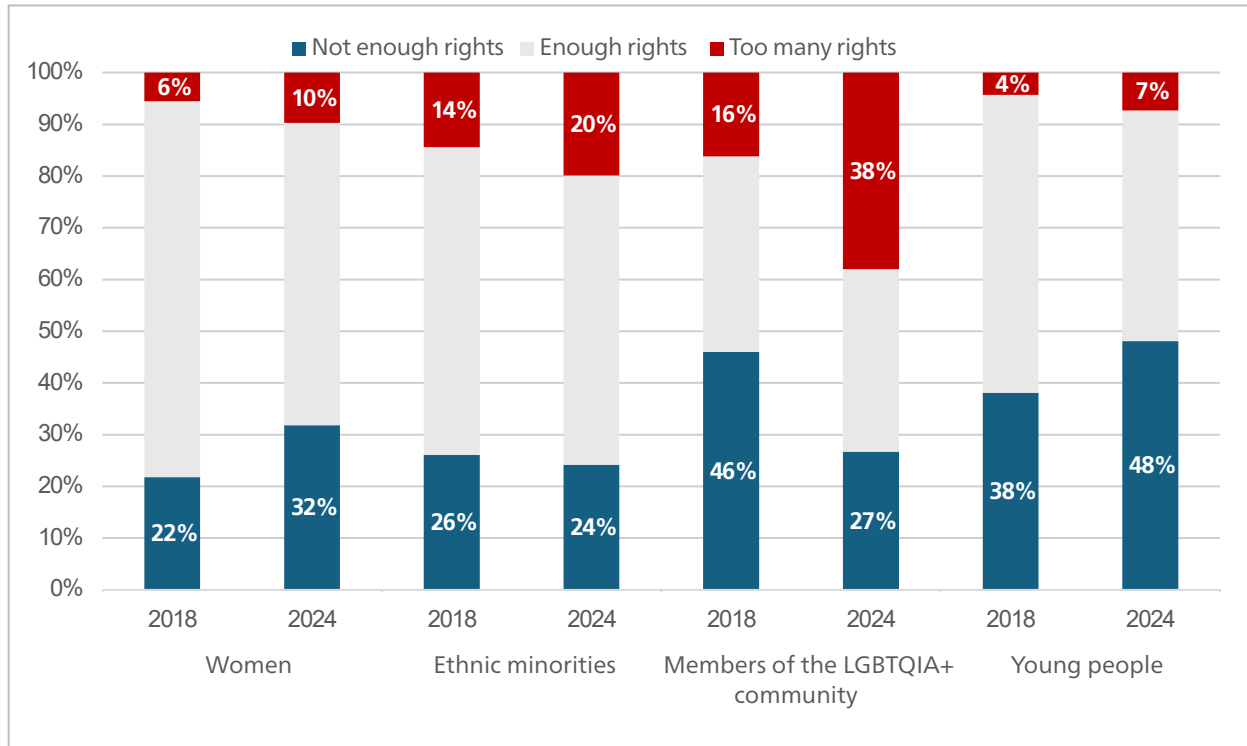
Figure 6
Nationalism and related concepts, 2018 and 2024.
 To what degree do you agree with the following statements?



⁶ It should be noted that the rise in nationalism is much more pronounced among boys than among girls, which aligns with the broader finding that boys are shifting rightward significantly more than girls (Rutar, 2024).

Figure 7
Attitudes towards minority rights, 2018 and 2024.

Please tell us whether, in your view, the following groups, have not enough, enough, or too many rights:



have enough rights has increased sharply, from 20 per cent to 40 per cent. Among boys, this percentage has slightly decreased (from 24 per cent to 23 per cent), while the share of those who think that women have too many rights has increased from 7 per cent to 15 per cent. These results indicate potentially sharp tensions between men and women in the coming years and decades.

While polarization regarding the rights of marginalized groups is a serious concern, the main conclusion from Figure 7 is that young people increasingly perceive marginalized groups as having too many rights. This sentiment is particularly strong concerning the LGBTQIA+ community, where a relative majority of young people believe that this group has been granted excessive rights.

5th key point: Young people are increasingly reluctant to take on responsibility or study at the university, yet their desire to become rich has been growing

Respondents of surveys in 2018 and in 2024 rated thirteen items measuring the importance of some basic personal values. Based on the results of factor analysis and scale reliability analysis⁷, these items were merged into four basic value orientations, while two of the items were analyzed as a single-item measures.

As discernible from Figure 1, values autonomy and responsibility⁸ have decreased quite substantially over the past six years. Notably, the decrease occurred across all different socio-demographic groups in terms of gender, type of settlement and socioeconomic status. According to additional analyses, these values are correlated with more positive visions of

⁷ Initially, all respondents who provided identical answers (e.g., always choosing number '5') across all thirteen items were considered problematic in terms of the validity of their responses and were thus removed from further analyses. In total, there were 43 such cases (2.7%) in Slovenia.

⁸ These values include four items: Being independent, Taking responsibility, Having a successful career and Graduating from university.

personal future ($r_{2024} = 0.211, p < 0.01$) and the absence of feeling that life is empty and meaningless ($r_{2024} = -0.136, p < 0.01$). Given the fact that both measures show negative trends over the past several years, we can assume that the described value shift can be at least partially attributed to increasingly bleak visions of the future and deteriorating psychological wellbeing of young people.

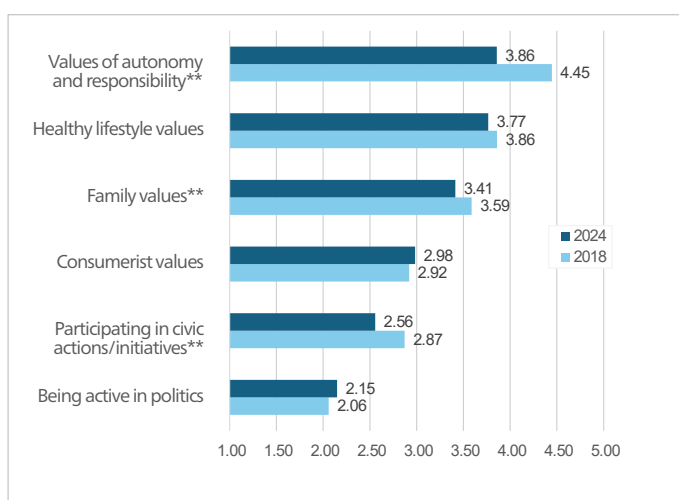
Interestingly, by far the biggest drop among all the analysed values was detected in relation to educational aspirations, which were a part of the first set of values. In 2018, as many as 77 per cent of young people stated that graduating from university was very important to them; however, this share fell to only 48 per cent in 2024. A similar trend, though often to a lesser extent, has been noted in other Southeast European countries included in our research. Furthermore, a recent Pew Research Center survey (Fry, Braga and Parker, 2024) showed comparable results among adults in the USA, where only one in four respondents said that having a college degree is very important for securing a well-paying job⁹. Following this logic, termed by some authors as “the College Backlash” (Deming, 2023), we can assume that the observed shift among Slovenian youth may partly stem from a growing scepticism about the economic value of a university education. Our data support this notion, revealing that the decline in educational aspirations

coincides with a rise in consumerist values¹⁰, such as the importance of being or becoming rich¹¹. It is particularly revealing that the proportion of people who consider being rich important or very important, yet do not view graduating from university as equally important, has more than doubled¹². In short, Slovenian youth increasingly aspire to wealth while showing a diminishing interest in university education.

Consistently with the general decline in the values of independence and responsibility, we also observe a significant drop in family values¹³. Interestingly, the two sets of values are strongly correlated ($r_{2024} = 0.347, p < 0.01$), suggesting that the trends are interconnected. This implies that part of the decline in family values might be attributed to the growing reluctance of young people to take on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood¹⁴.

Similarly, a significant decrease in the importance of civic participation might be partially connected to the decline in general values of independence and responsibility ($r_{2024} = 0.246, p < 0.01$). Interestingly, the importance of being active in politics is not correlated with the values of responsibility, which might explain why this orientation did not decrease but even slightly increased, though not statistically significantly. Furthermore, it is revealing that being active in politics correlates strongly with consumerist values ($r_{2024} = 0.301, p < 0.01$), particularly with wearing branded clothes ($r_{2024} = 0.424, p < 0.01$). Both correlations have increased significantly since 2018, indicating that young people's motivation in politics is increasingly linked to materialistic and narcissistic motives.

Figure 8
Basic value orientations of youth, 2018 and 2024.



Note:
 A scale from 1 to 5 was used, with 1 indicating "Not at all important" and 5 indicating "Very important".
 ** differences between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$
 * differences between 2018 and 2024 are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

⁹ It is worth noting that these perceptions are generally not supported by the objective data on college premiums (see Deeming, 2023).

¹⁰ These values include: *Being/getting rich, Looking good, and Wearing branded clothes.*

¹¹ An independent samples t-test showed that the increase in mean value for this item was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Interestingly, this increase has occurred only among boys, while girls have become slightly less inclined to aspire to wealth.

¹² It has increased from 8,1 % to 18,6 % between 2018 and 2024.

¹³ These values include the importance of getting married and the importance of having children.

¹⁴ The decline in readiness to take on responsibilities might help explain the puzzling coexistence of the recent rightward shift (see Rutar, 2024) and the decreasing importance of family values.

Conclusion and recommendations

According to official statistics, Slovenian youth is enjoying unprecedented levels of economic prosperity with optimistic predictions (O'Neal, 2024), high levels of personal and political freedom (Freedom House, 2024) and very high levels of security (World population review, 2024). Nevertheless, our study is one of many showing a pronounced and at least a decade-long trend of deteriorating mental health and psychological wellbeing. These trends are accompanied by increasingly bleak visions of the future, which appear to affect the personal values of young people. According to our data, Slovenian youth is increasingly unwilling to take on responsibilities, with many abandoning high career goals, particularly the ambition to attend university. These are undoubtedly socially undesirable and disturbing trends that policymakers should strive to ameliorate. There has been an increasing number of studies, some offering practical policy recommendations, that can be applied for this purpose.

The good news is that young people are increasingly trusting public institutions. This trend appears to be linked to the rising political interest and engagement, predominantly among boys. Although the renewed political interest is increasingly linked to materialistic motivations, the increase in political trust and engagement is a generally positive trend that policymakers can build on.

Most importantly, the top political priorities and concerns of young people have shifted from issues of employment and climate change towards the quality of public services, particularly the healthcare system. Other top priorities include housing, immigration, pension systems, and corruption. All these issues are closely tied to and manageable through public policies. Given that young people are gaining trust in public institutions and becoming increasingly interested and involved in politics, the conclusion seems quite clear: Young people are increasingly ready to step in. Policymakers in charge should be there to support them.

One of the challenges along this path might be the increasing ideological polarization, particularly related to the noticeable rightward shift among boys. There is a growing ideological gap concerning nationalistic ideas and attitudes towards some marginalized groups, which in some cases, also leads to a widening ideological gap between boys and girls. This situation is largely connected to the generally high levels of political and ideological polarization in Slovenian society (Lavrič, 2023). Thus, mitigating polarization should be one of the primary future priorities for Slovenian politics.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Croatia & Slovenia Office

Praška 8
10000 Zagreb
Croatia
<https://croatia.fes.de>

Responsible:

Dr. Sonja Schirmbeck, Director FES Croatia
Contact: sonja.schirmbeck@fes.de
Design: Rene Andritsch & Heidrun Kogler, Ivna Hraste

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About FES Youth Studies

What are young people afraid of or hopeful about? In a rapidly changing world that is challenged by the climate crisis and inequalities, and in many parts aging societies and democratic decline, FES Youth Studies investigate how young generations perceive the development of their societies and their personal future. Our aim is to foster informed debate about young people's views on politics and democracy against the background of their life circumstances and values. This includes key issues such as education, employment and mobility, family and friends, and their overall attitudes and perceptions. We focus on young people aged 14 to 29 to understand their perspectives on these critical topics.

FES has conducted numerous youth studies around the world since 2009. In 2024, youth in Slovenia was surveyed along with youth in other Southeastern European and Central Eastern European countries.

Methodology

"FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024" is an international youth research project carried out simultaneously in twelve countries of Southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece and Turkey. The main objective of the surveys has been to analyze attitudes of young people towards politics and democracy. The research project is based on a quota-based nationally representative sample of young people from selected countries. The structure of the sample was determined based on age, gender and statistical regions. The data was collected in early 2024 from almost 9,000 respondents aged 14–29 in the above-mentioned countries. The sample size varied from N = 501 in Montenegro to N = 1,233 in Turkey. The sample for Slovenia included 602 respondents, of whom 49.6 per cent were women, 49 per cent were men and 1.4 per cent identified with a third gender or did not answer the question. The average age of the Slovenian respondents was 22.2 years.

About the author

Miran Lavrič is a professor of Sociology at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. His research primarily focuses on youth in Slovenia and Southeast Europe. Lavrič has led multiple research projects and published numerous original scientific articles in international journals on various sociological topics. He directed two major national studies of youth in Slovenia in 2010 and 2020 and served as the lead research coordinator for the international project "Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019".