



## FIVE KEY POINTS ON ECONOMIC ISSUES FACING YOUTH IN SLOVENIA

**1** Although general macroeconomic conditions improved, including conditions in the labor market, youth still face high(er) levels of unemployment (in comparison to the general population) and job insecurity. Moreover, improved conditions in the labor markets did not diminish the fear of unemployment among youth.

**2** The high level of fear of unemployment among youth, despite favorable labor market conditions, can be understood in the context of the current pattern of development – increasing migration flows, the rise of the AI, and hidden unemployment.

**3** Improved macro-economic conditions in Slovenia did not translate into psychological well-being for youth.

**4** Young people in Slovenia (and in the EU) face an uphill battle regarding affordable housing, especially in areas with educational and employment opportunities. This could be attributed to rapid price increases in the housing

market and to the fact that economic growth did not improve the bottom half of the population's financial standing by much. This is manifested in elevated concerns regarding housing that are associated with higher levels of stress, and are thus contributing to poor mental health.

**5** Although the support for a welfare state is still strong, it is waning. This is not only a result of youth expressing their desire for a more right-wing political orientation but also due to the fact that youth, in general, is becoming more economically liberal and potentially unaware that issues that burden them are often identified as a result of "neoliberal"/market-oriented economic policies.



# Introduction

There is no doubt that Slovenia — and Europe as a whole — is now, on average, more prosperous, more educated, more connected, more mobile, and more open than in the past. For instance, Slovenia's GDP per capita, adjusted to purchasing power, has increased by more than 130% since 2000, the number of passenger cars per thousand inhabitants has nearly doubled, and almost all households have internet access (94% compared to 74% in 2012), (Eurostat, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). Still, both Europe and Slovenia are facing significant challenges and changes in the context of global competition, automation, unfavorable demographic trends, environmental destruction, wealth/income inequality, and rising political polarization/instability.

These forces are profoundly reshaping many areas of youth life, including those related to the labor market and the nature of work. For example, for some time, traditional forms of permanent employment have been increasingly replaced by less secure, flexible forms of employment (Grimshaw et al., 2016; Klanjšek, 2018; Klanjšek et al., 2021). New technologies are eliminating jobs and changing the nature of work (Ford, 2016; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2016), and the new positions being created generally

require higher skill levels. These trends partly explain why the age of first entry into the labor market is rising and why the transition into employment is taking longer and has become more uncertain (Furlong and Kelly, 2005; Vertot, 2009).

Thus, achieving existential milestones, such as moving away from parents, solving housing problems, or starting one's own family, often seems more challenging.

The current report, based on the FES Youth 2024 Study and past youth studies from 2000 to 2020 (Youth 2000, Youth 2010, FES Youth Study 2013, FES Youth Study 2018, Youth 2020), examines recent trends in labor markets and the related sentiments of Slovenian youth, such as the fear of unemployment and its correlates. It also assesses how one of the key critical issues—housing—is impacting the well-being of Slovenia's young people. The report's main aim is to provide empirical and theoretical insights that could help policymakers to address the identified issues.

## 1<sup>st</sup> key point: The improvement in labor market conditions has not reduced the fear of unemployment

Although general macroeconomic conditions improved, including conditions in the labor market, youth still face high(er) levels of unemployment (in comparison to the general population) and job insecurity. Moreover, improved conditions in the labor markets did not diminish the fear of unemployment among youth.

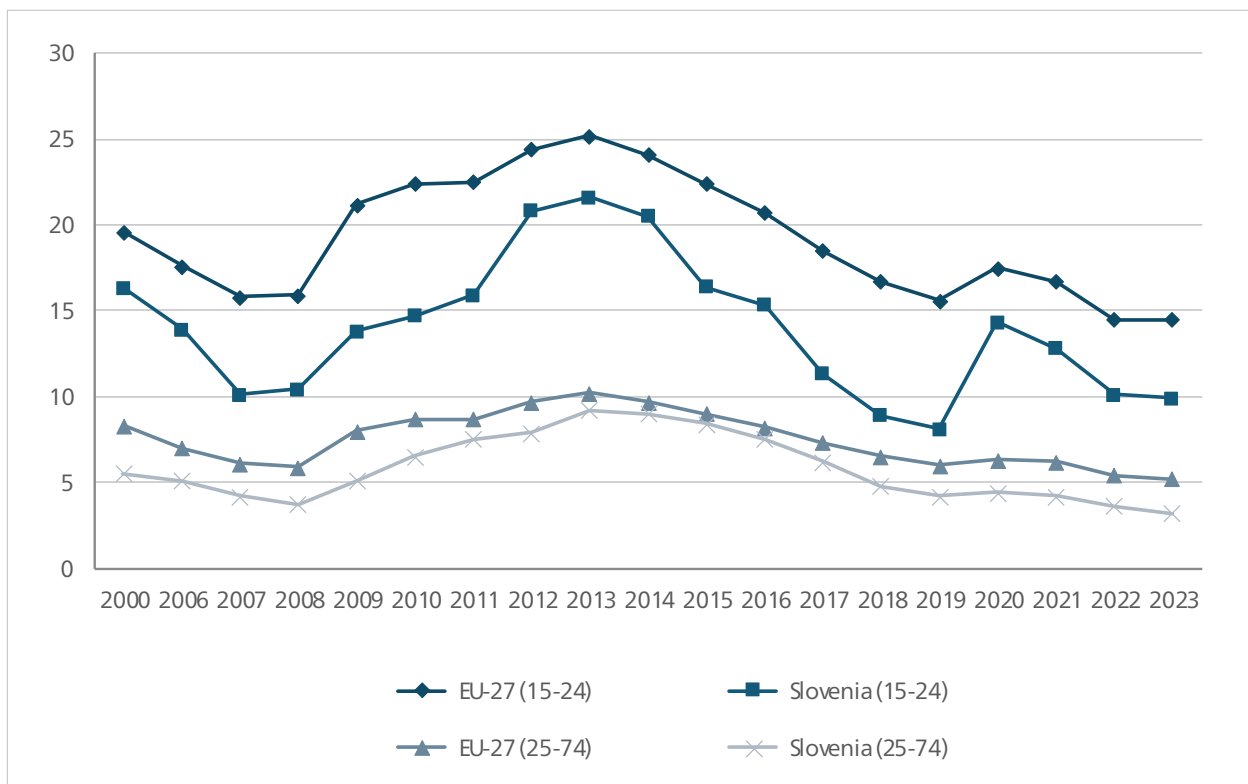
In the past decade, the employment situation for young people in Slovenia has improved, both in terms of unemployment and job precariousity. The data also shows that youth unemployment in

Slovenia has consistently remained below the European (EU-27) average.

However, unemployment and precarious employment rates are still markedly higher among youth than among the general population (e.g., the share of temporarily employed persons in 2023 amounted to 48.6% among youth aged between 15 and 25, while it reached only 8.9% among those aged between 25 and 75; see Figure 1). This points to the strong age-based segmentation of labor markets. Data also indicates that economic crises disproportionately affect young people, although, as studies suggest, they also tend to find employment more quickly during economic recoveries (Makeham, 1980; O'Higgins, 2001).

Next, although the desire to emigrate among Slovenian youth increased (the percentage of those who said they are not considering to emigrate decreased from 42.3% in 2013 (FES Youth Study 2013) to 27% in 2024), it is

Figure 1  
Unemployment rate, age groups 15-25 and 25-74, 2000-2023, EU-27 and Slovenia



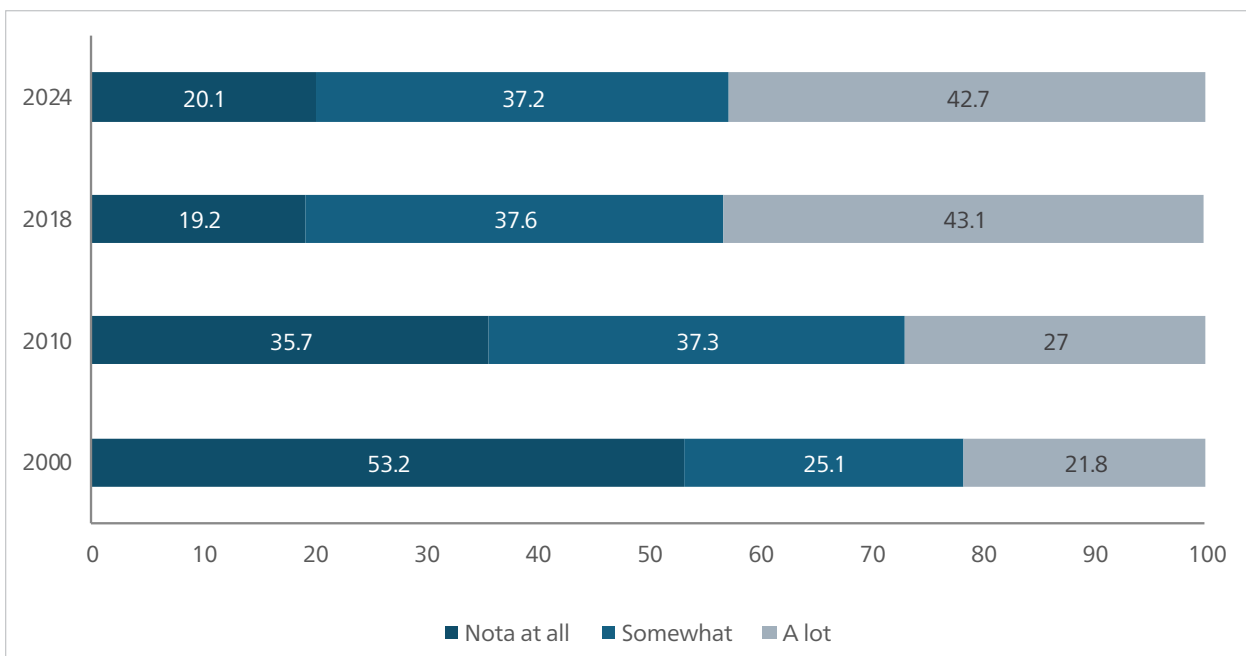
Source: Eurostat (2024f)

important to note that economic reasons lost their prominence. Specifically, in 2013, "Improvement of the standard of living" and "Higher salaries" were listed as reasons for emigration by 75.1% of those intending to do so. This fell to 44% in 2024. The only economic reason for leaving the country that increased in the period was "Better opportunities for starting my own business" (2.3% to 5.4%), indicating that other factors, such as enriching one's life, gaining new experiences, visiting friends, etc., gained prominence.

In this context, it is somewhat surprising that the fear of unemployment increased between 2010

and 2018 (and this fear has remained relatively unchanged in 2024). Specifically, while the 2010 national youth survey 'Youth 2010' (Lavrič, 2011) indicated that around 27% of young people expressed fear of not having a job, this fear became much more prevalent in both 2018 and 2024, with the percentage of concerned youth hovering around 43%. Interestingly, the lowest level of fear of unemployment was observed in the 2000 wave of the youth study (Miheljak and Ule, 2001), where only 21.8% of youth expressed concern despite labor market conditions being worse (the youth unemployment rate in 2000 stood at 16.3%).

Figure 2  
Fear of having no job, 2000-2024



## 2<sup>nd</sup> key point: High levels of fear are a result of the current development pattern

The high level of fear of unemployment among youth, despite favorable labor market conditions, can be understood in the context of the current pattern of development – increasing migration flows, the rise of the AI,

and hidden unemployment.

The growing/persistent fear of unemployment might be linked to the fact that improvements in labor market conditions may be less pronounced than official data suggests. For instance, results from youth employment status analyses (using data from our own 'Youth' series) indicate that the percentage of those who claim to be unemployed today is not only significantly higher than the percentages reported by Eurostat (9.9% vs. 23.6% in 2023; see Fig. 3) but also higher than those during

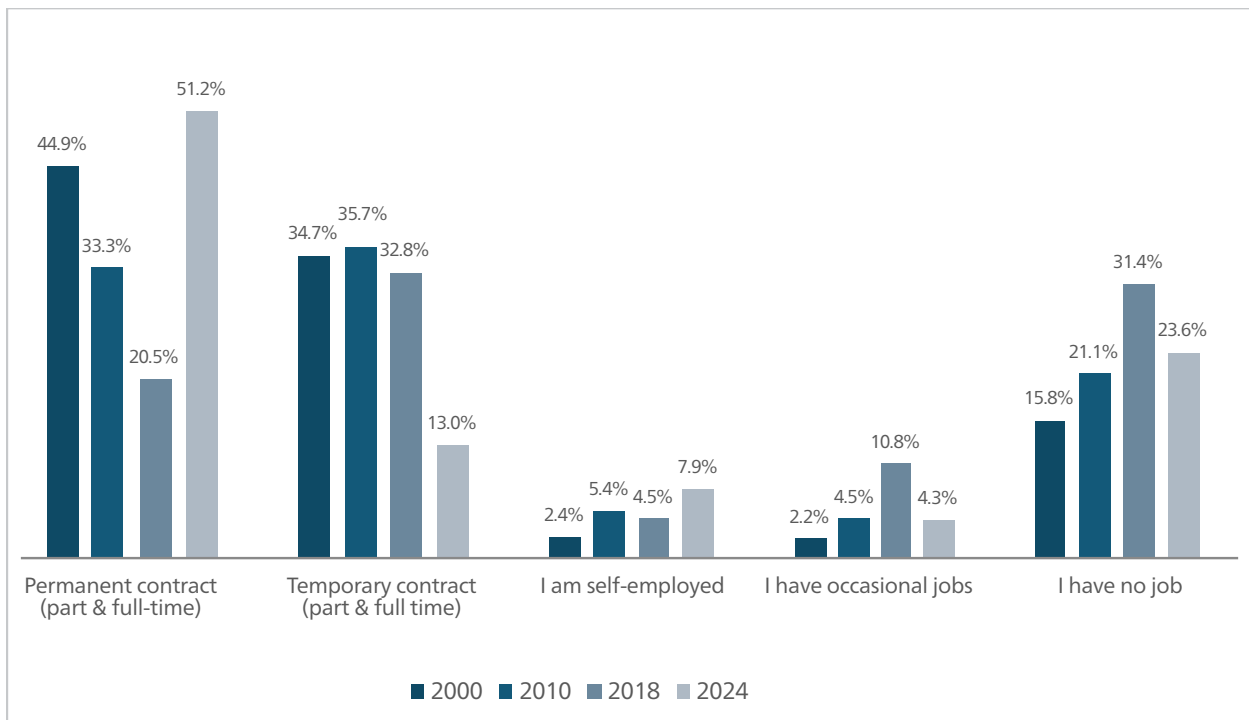
worse periods, such as in 2000 and 2010. From this methodological perspective, the "paradoxical fear" results make much more sense.

In addition, the rising fear of having no job, which is statistically significantly ( $r_{2018} = 0,27$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $r_{2024} = 0,20$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ) associated with the fear of having "too many migrants and refugees"<sup>1</sup>, might also be related to the fact that the issue of migrants raises additional concerns. Specifically, 54% expressed (mild to strong) fear of having "too many migrants" in 2013. This increased to 69% in 2018 and 83% in 2024. To further this point, it has been found that almost half disagree that immigrants enrich our culture (only 20% are favorable in this regard), 54% see immigration as the biggest issue in the next decade (which makes this issue more prominent than, for example, climate change, corruption, terrorism, or weakening of democracy) and nearly half express (47%) that we must protect our own culture from the influence of other cultures (see also parallel reports by Lavrič, 2024 and Rutar, 2024). This fear of foreigners seems at least

partly warranted if one acknowledges that there are various studies that indicate that immigration increases labor supply, which can lower wages for domestic workers, particularly in low-skilled jobs. Additionally, immigration can weaken the bargaining power of domestic labor, particularly in the lower wage spectrum. This in turn diminishes their negotiating power over wages and working conditions (Borjas, 2003; Card, 2001; Lewis, 2011; Mishel & Bivens, 2017).

Thirdly, youth are also not favorable towards another powerful force reshaping social reality – AI (a building block of a digital future, identified as a strategic goal of the EU). Namely, although concern regarding the negative consequences of AI was included in the 2024 wave only, it was expressed by 73,6% of youth as a concern. As with migrants, this concern was also significantly associated with the fear of having no job ( $r = 0,29$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ). Whether this sentiment is justified is debatable, but a recent OECD study (Georgieff and Milanez, 2021) has shown that Slovenia has the second highest share of jobs at high risk of automation (70%

Figure 3  
**Youth Employment Status, Persons Between 15-24 Years of Age, 2000-2024**



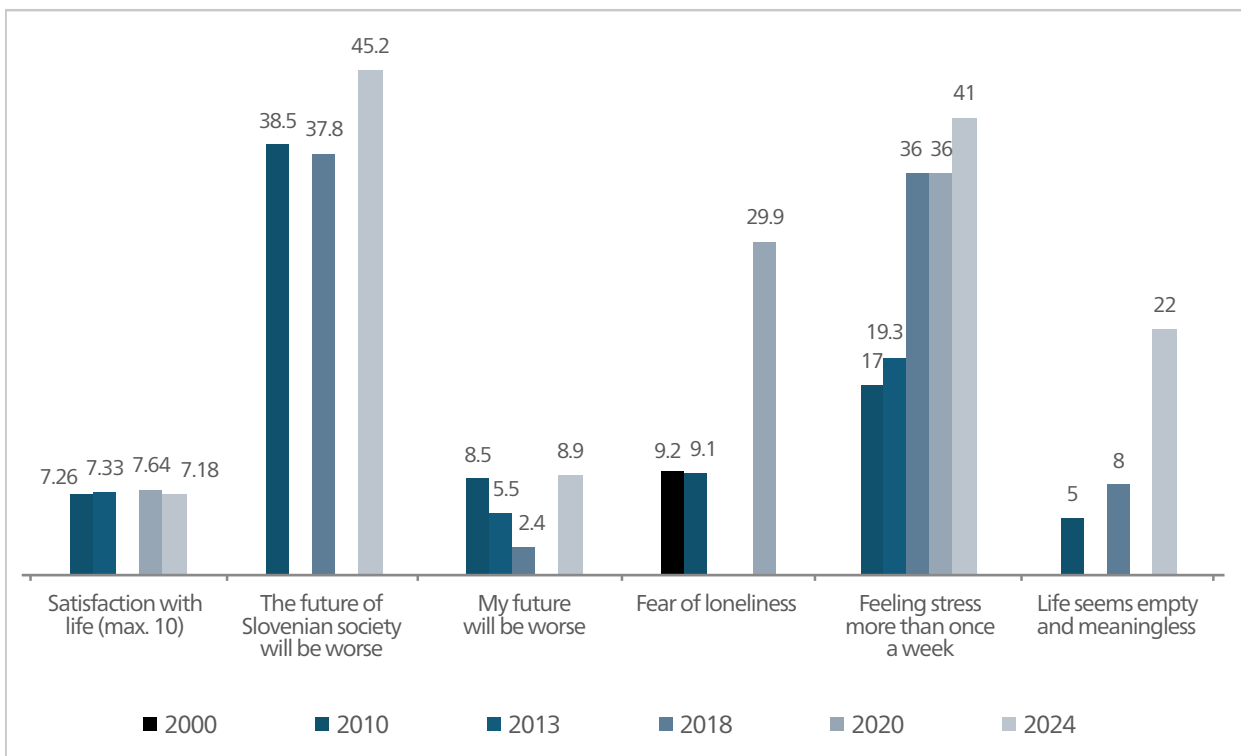
<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire did not differentiate between refugees and migrants.

probability of jobs being automated in Slovenia).

These findings indirectly support a general and well-documented fact that economic development does not automatically translate into well-being. For example, it is known that if economic growth is not inclusive but exclusive/divisive, i.e., it increases inequality and

decreases security, and if it brings change too quickly (and is thus disruptive, destructive, destabilizing, and disintegrative), then it can often offset the benefits usually associated with it (e.g., higher well-being, happiness) (e.g., Offer, 2006; Clark et al., 2008; Layard, 2005; Kasser, 2002).

Figure 4  
**Various Indicators of Youth Psychological Well-being, 2000-2024**



### 3<sup>rd</sup> key point: The improvement in national macroeconomic conditions has not translated into the psychological well-being of young Slovenians

Improved macro-economic conditions in Slovenia did not translate into psychological well-being for youth

As noted in the parallel report (Lavrič, 2024),

several studies have highlighted a worsening trend in the mental health and psychological well-being, not only of Slovenian youth (see, for example, Klanjšek and Naterer, 2021; NIJZ, 2018) but also of youth elsewhere. For example, while European Youth Forum (2023) reported that half of all young Europeans now report poor mental health and that depression has more than doubled since 2019, "The State of the World's Children 2021" (UNICEF, 2021) reported that mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, are now present in 16.3% of European youth between 10–19 years of age: an estimate that is higher than the global average of 13.2% for the same age group.

The findings of this study support these worrying trends. Along with a continued rise in stress levels, there has been a marked increase in feelings of loneliness and alienation (“life is empty and meaningless”, see Fig 4), with virtually no change in life satisfaction from 2010. There is also growing pessimism about personal futures and the future of society.

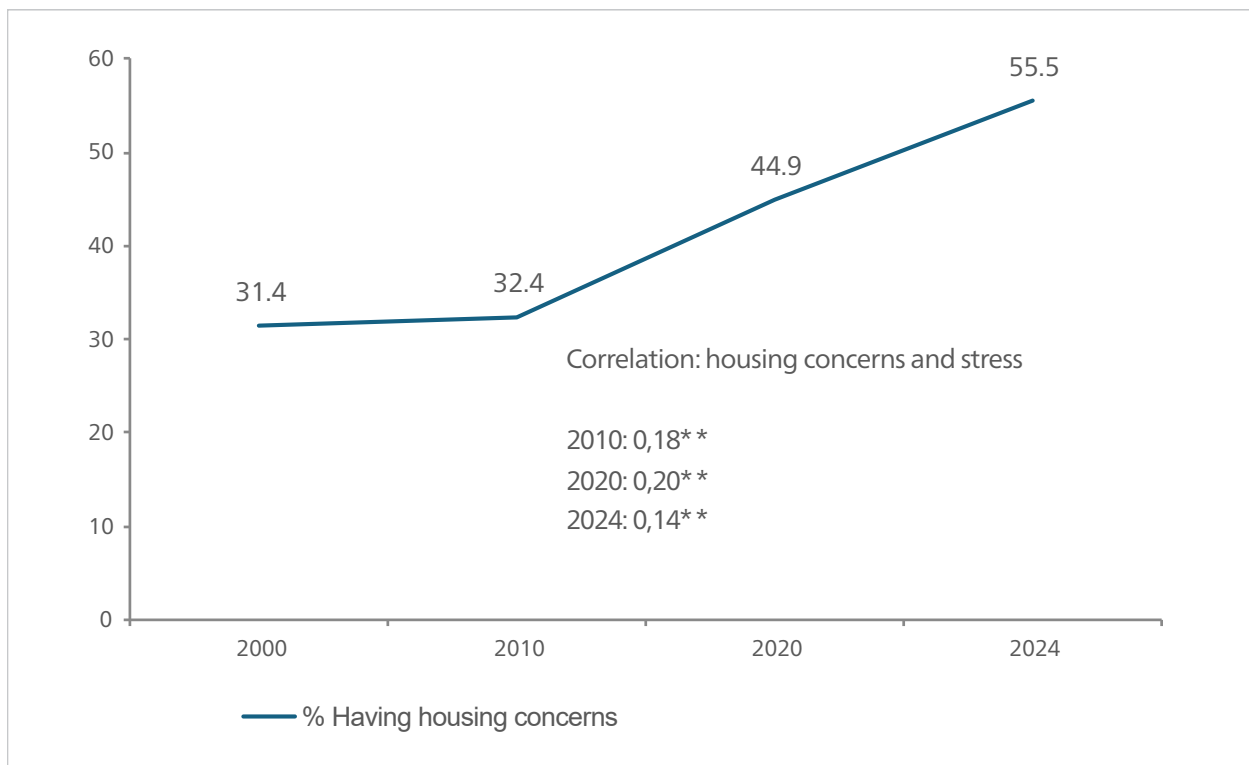
Past research lists various factors that help to explain why youth today might feel more anxious, lonely, pessimistic, alienated, and stressed. For example, Goncalves and colleagues (2014) suggested that young people face new pressures and challenges as a result of the socio-cultural and economic transformations that include increasing use of digital devices (especially time spent on social networks), individualization, changes in the labor market, increased mobility, increased competition, faster daily rhythm, information overload, higher expectations regarding the standards of success, more difficulties in interpersonal relations, more passive leisure activities, higher rates of obesity, the crisis of meaning, and greater uncertainty overall (see also Schweizer, Lawson, and Blakemore, 2023). Materialistic values often emphasized in consumer-driven economies can also negatively impact psychological well-being and social relationships (Kasser, 2002).

### 4<sup>th</sup> key point: Housing issues significantly impact the mental health of young people

Young people in Slovenia (and in the EU) face an uphill battle regarding affordable housing, especially in areas with educational and employment opportunities. This could be attributed to rapid price increases in the housing market and to the fact that economic growth did not improve the bottom half of the population's financial standing by much. This is manifested in elevated concerns regarding housing that are associated with higher levels of stress, and are thus contributing to poor mental health.

The role of housing has also been previously identified as a factor of mental health. Specifically, studies have demonstrated that the lack of affordable housing, rising housing costs, and housing instability/insecurity were all connected to worse mental health (for a systematic review of research on housing and health, see, e.g., Alidoust and Wei Huang, 2023).

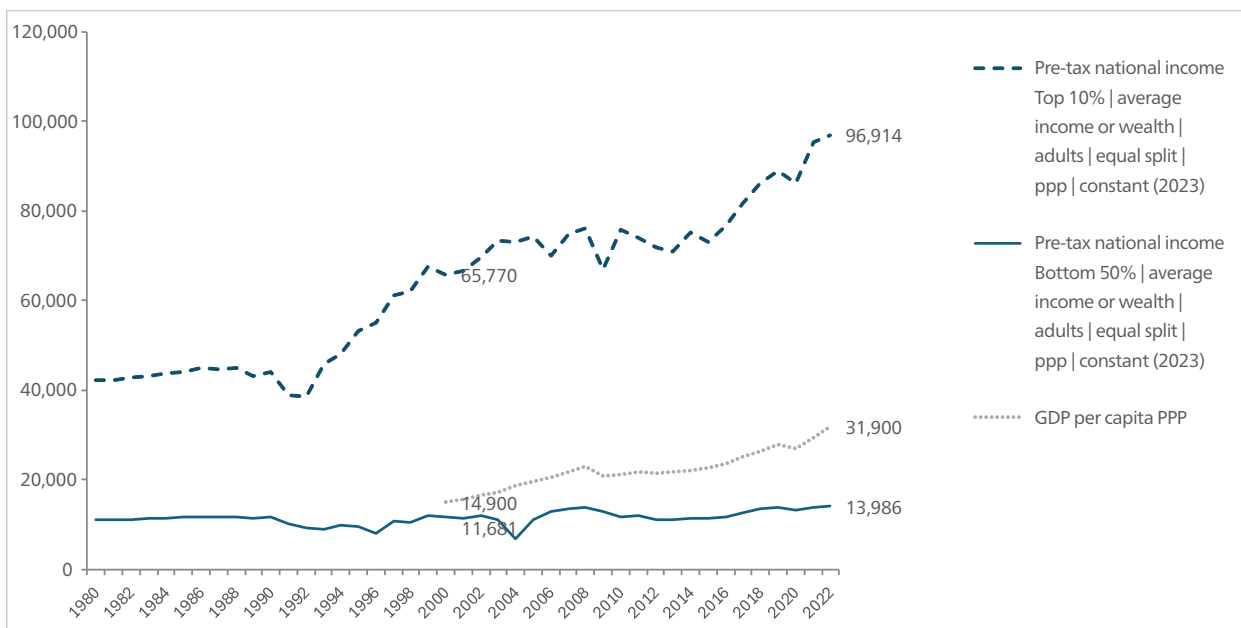
Figure 5  
**Housing Concerns and Stress, 2000-2024**



The latter seems especially problematic as recent housing trends in the EU and Slovenia indicate that affordability is becoming a key hurdle for young people in achieving "existential milestones" (Baert, Morgan, and Ushiyama, 2022), including childbearing. For example, in the 2010-2021 period, a household's disposable income per capita in real terms in the EU grew by 12% (Eurostat – Housing in Europe, n.d.), while rents increased by 16% and housing prices increased by 42% (Eurostat, 2021). This trend continued in 2022. In the fourth quarter of 2022, rents and housing prices increased (compared with the same period in 2021) by 3 and 4% respectively, while real disposable income decreased by less than 1% (Eurostat, 2023). Additionally, the Statistical Office of Slovenia (SURS, 2024) reported that property prices rose by over 86% from 2015 to 2023; most significantly in the last three years (Klanjšek, 2022). It is thus not surprising, that the share of Slovenian youth that express fear of housing as a concern is steadily increasing, from 31.4% to 55.5% in 2024. Importantly, housing concerns proved to be significantly connected to stress, which known to be a significant factor that impacts (mental) health (Pearlin et al., 2005).

The fact that economic progress did not significantly improve the bottom half of the population's economic standing only adds to the macrostructural conditions that work against the potential to solve one's housing issues. Specifically, while incomes for the bottom half increased by around 24% in 2015-2023, real estate prices, as indicated, increased by 86%. Moreover, youth in 2024 indicated worsening social situations than in 2018 (a statistically significant mean decrease of 6% could be observed), where the percentage of those who do not have enough money for basic bills (electricity, heating) and food increased from 2% to 4%, and the percentage of those who stated that they can afford to buy whatever they need to achieve a good living standard decreased from 17% to 14%. Based on the findings, it could be argued that an "average" Slovenian family is losing out in relation to housing prices, which has a direct and indirect effect on youth's ability to solve their housing problems.

Figure 6  
**Pretax national income per capita, top 10% vs bottom 50%, PPP, constant 2003 EUR, 1980-2023**



Source: World Inequality Database (2024).



## 5<sup>th</sup> key point: Support for the welfare state remains high but is decreasing

Although the support for a welfare state is still strong, it is waning. This is not only a result of youth expressing their desire for a more right-wing political orientation but also due to the fact that youth, in general, is becoming more economically liberal and potentially unaware that issues that burden them are often identified as a result of "neoliberal"/market-oriented economic policies.

The results indicated a slight decrease in support for the welfare state and an increase in approval of 2 out of 3 forms of corruptive behavior. These changes suggest that youth is slowly recasting their support for classical "leftist"/interventionist economic policy, regardless of their policy orientation. For example, the share of left-oriented youth that oppose greater income equality increased from 7.7% to 15.4%. There are also indications that youth is moving away from what could be described as "public good morality", i.e., they are becoming more tolerant

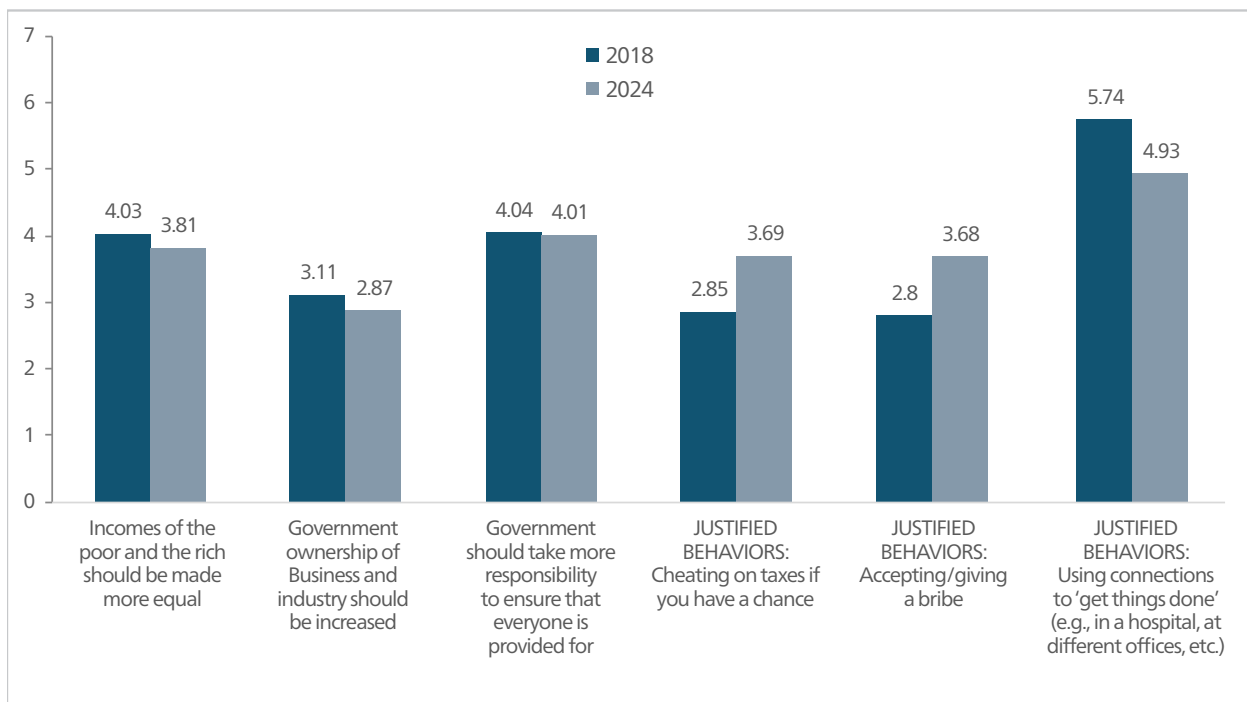
towards taking bribes and cheating on taxes (see Fig. 7).

However, it should be mentioned that support for the welfare state (i.e., support for redistributive policies, government ownership, government being responsible for individual's well-being) is still relatively high; as is, for example, trust in trade unions (percentage of youth that trust trade unions a lot/fully increased from 12.8% in 2018 to 21.5% in 2024, mean increase was statistically significant at  $p < 0,001$ ). Surprisingly, trade unions enjoy statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) higher support among those who position themselves "right" on the left-right political orientation scale.

Another example of youth being supportive of social policies concerns universal basic income (UBI) – 54% of youth support it; however, with UBI, there are no significant differences in relation to the political orientation of youth. To sum up, youth are still very much in favor of some of the main pillars of the welfare/social state, regardless of their political orientation. The only statistically significant association between the left-right orientation was found in relation to (in)equality, i.e., incomes of rich and poor should be more equal, where higher support for this was found among those of left political orientation.

Figure 7

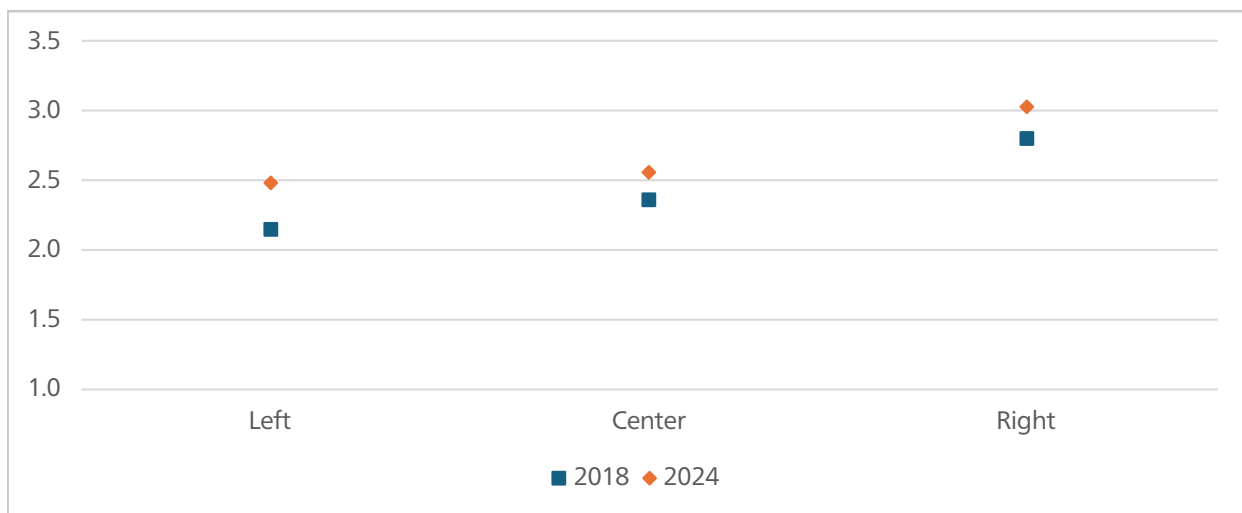
### Support for state interventionism/economic liberalism and "public good morality"



Furthermore, as indicated by a parallel report by Lavrič (2024), the issues that concern youth the most - quality of public services (healthcare, pension system – e.g., 55% worry a lot about the latter), housing, migration, and security - are all indirectly or directly tied to the active role of the state. It might thus be said that youth are caught in an ideological paradox: while they recognize that certain issues are tied to the state, they increasingly believe that the state should not tackle these issues. For example, as indicated, youth see income inequality as less problematic while at the same time, they care more about security issues, which, as many studies have shown, are associated with greater income/wealth inequality (Sutherland and Cressey, 1974, Hsieh and Pugh, 1993; Wilkinson and Pickett,

2009; Pare and Felson, 2014). Similarly, many adverse social outcomes that youth care a lot about (e.g., lack of affordable housing), are known to be associated with the domination of market logic (Currie, 2007; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2013; Messner, Thome, & Rosenfeld, 2008), which, as shown, is becoming more "popular" among youth.

Figure 8  
**Trust in trade unions and political orientation, 2018-2024**



## Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that Slovenian youth live in times of unprecedented levels of economic prosperity. Nevertheless, young people also face new pressures and challenges due to socio-cultural and economic transformations facilitated by globalism, marketization of social life, and associated technological progress. These challenges include coping with increased competition, faster daily rhythm, information overload, higher expectations regarding standards of success, difficulties in interpersonal relations, climate change, housing issues, political instability, and migration. In other words, as indicated, improving macroeconomic conditions in Slovenia did not translate into the well-being of youth. Specifically, there is a long trend of deteriorating mental health and psychological well-being, accompanied by increasingly bleak visions of the future (Lavrič, 2024). This affects the personal values of young people, who seem more unwilling to take on responsibilities: they just want to have "a good life," whatever it takes, even if it means taking bribes, cheating on taxes, or even going to politics<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, it is not surprising that youth are less enthusiastic about education<sup>3</sup>. Market logic, which basically argues that only those efforts that lead to material utility are rational, has effectively increased skepticism about the value of a university education. Namely, if education is seen mainly through an economic lens (which is to be expected in a materialistic, market-driven society), then the importance of education, which also offers non-material rewards, will slowly diminish.

In this sense, recommendations to remedy the issues listed are not easy to make as they question some of the central tenets of the current model of (globalist) "development". Moreover, it seems that some policies called

upon would directly conflict with the said model. For example, if youth are more fearful/resentful of migrants and if they strive more towards ethnic homogeneity and "education"<sup>4</sup>, in this regard the globalist model does not seem to work (as shown, youth is becoming more nationalistic and more "radical" when it comes to immigration). Based on these notions, the policy recommendation would call against the policy of open borders. The same argument could be made in relation to housing. Namely, numerous studies (e.g., Bentley and colleagues, 2016; Wetzstein, 2017) have shown that the marketization and financialization of housing, brought about by globalist, neoliberal growth, and austerity policies, have contributed to the housing affordability crisis. Additionally, there are studies (e.g., Gonzales and Ortega, 2013) that show that an increase in immigrant populations leads to higher housing demand, which in turn drives up housing prices, especially in metropolitan areas. Important insight is also given by Hines and Summers (2009), who explain that as countries become more economically open, the ability to maintain highly progressive income taxes diminishes, pushing governments to rely more on consumption-type taxes, which are generally less progressive. This, in effect, does not only limit the state's ability to provide public housing, health, and pension systems, which, as indicated, are on top of youth's "worries list", but can also pose challenges to tackling income distribution, which is a problem by itself. Namely, there is ample evidence that increasing within-country income inequality, often attributed to globalization (Dorn, Fuest, and Potrafke, 2022), is associated with political polarization, social instability, and crime, which effectively erodes feelings of security. Moreover, as Rodrik (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Consumerist values, which are on the rise (Lavrič, 2004), are strongly associated with tolerance towards both types of corruptive behavior ( $r = 0,21$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ) and in 2024 even with young people's motivation in politics ( $r = 0,37$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ), which, as Lavrič (2024) also notes, seems to be increasingly linked to materialistic and narcissistic motives.

<sup>3</sup> The share of youth who agree that graduating from university is (mostly/very) important decreased from 76.5% in 2018 percent to 47.6% in 2024.

<sup>4</sup> As recent report by the European Commission has indicated (Eurydice, 2023) most European education systems report that issues related to diversity and inclusion are already considered in their curricula, and nearly half of them indicate that their curricula have been recently revised (in the previous 5 years) to reinforce these dimensions. Specifically, in Slovenia, the curriculum of active citizenship for upper secondary education, was introduced in 2020. It set the objective for students to develop opinions and views related to respecting the individuality of people, understanding and accepting diversity, empathy, overcoming stereotypes, nurturing tolerant coexistence, solidarity, volunteering, and intergenerational cooperation.

and many others (Scheiring et al., 2024) show, globalization (open border policy) is directly responsible for populism and political radicalization, which, as indicated, has also been observed among the Slovenian youth.

Another clashing recommendation could be identified concerning digitalization. Namely, if there is mounting evidence that digital life is harming the mental health of the young and old, why then position "digitalization" as a strategic goal? Another example can be found in relation to social change. Namely, numerous writings argue that the fast pace of social change (anomie) can disrupt people's ability to adapt, leading them to radicalize. If so, why then argue for policies that heighten this pace?

In summary, possible solutions to the listed problems would include policies that very much question the liberal view on the economy, politics, and social life in general. Specifically, it is becoming clear that the costs of neoliberal development are becoming apparent. More are calling into question, for example, the policies of open borders and policies that erode social security in the name of competitiveness, growth, and efficiency. Namely, living in a fast-paced setting that is becoming more and more dominated by market and materialistic logic is not only alienating young people but is also making them more afraid and concerned about the future, which they increasingly express through dismissive stances against migrants, as well as ethnic and other minorities. Lastly, more and more youth are fearful of war which also calls for a reevaluation of foreign policies that strengthen the probability of an all-out war.

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## Imprint

### 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](mailto:sonja.schirmbeck@fes.de)  
Design: Rene Andritsch & Heidrun Kogler, Ivna Hraste

ISBN: 978-953-8376-21-4

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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 % were women, 49 % were men and 1.4 % identified with a third gender or did not answer the question. The average age of the Slovenian respondents was 22.2 years.

## O avtorju

**Rudi Klanjšek** is a professor of Sociology at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. His research primarily focuses on youth in Slovenia and Southeast Europe, with an emphasis on issues such as employment, inequality, housing, well-being, and deviance in the context of social change. He has extensively been published as an author and co-author in numerous international journals, including *European Societies*, *Nationalities Papers*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Justice Quarterly*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Substance Use & Misuse*, and others.