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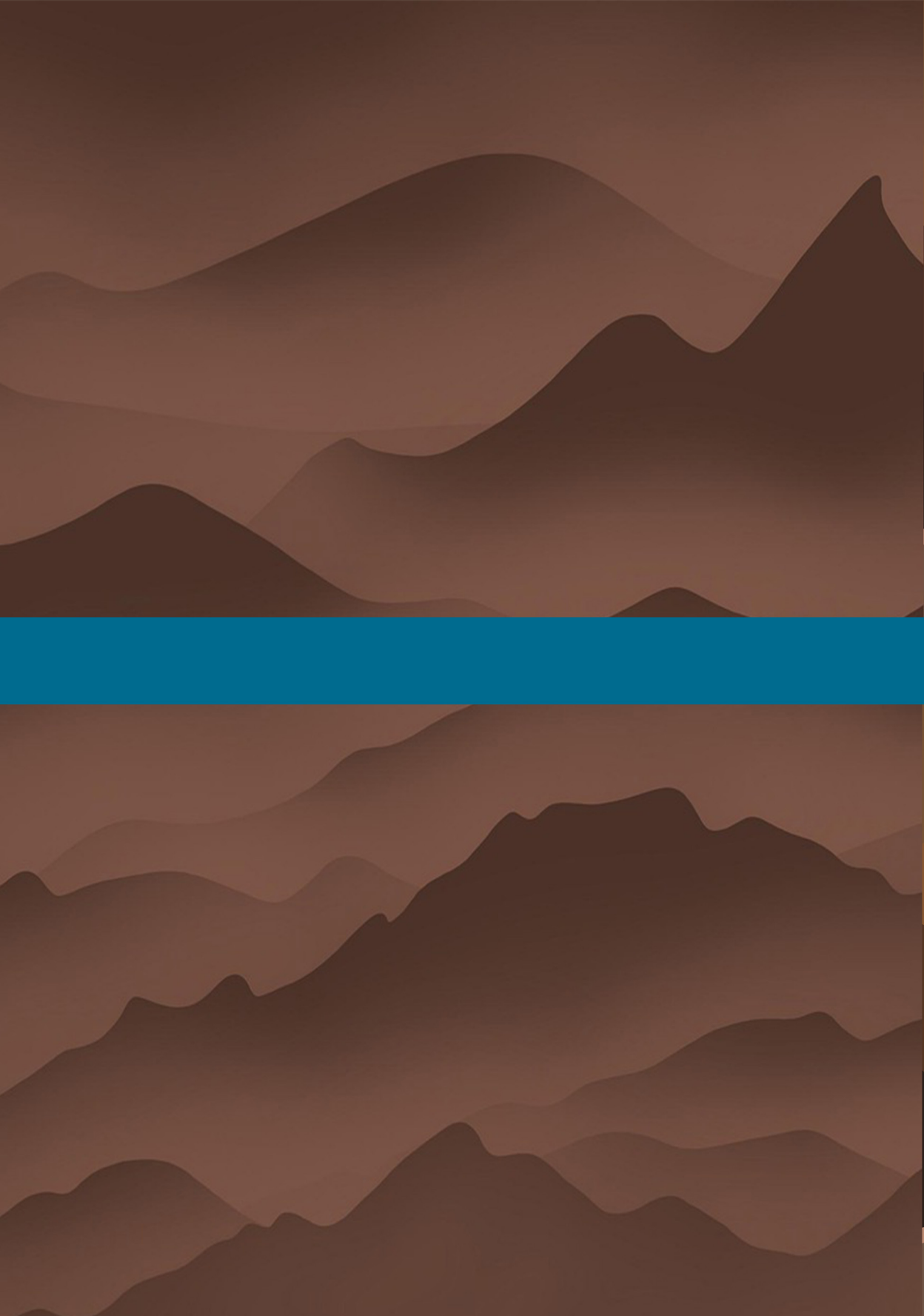
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Dunja
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TWO COUNTRIES,
ONE CRISIS
The YO-VID22 Pandemic Study



University of Maribor Press





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Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu
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Two Countries, One Crisis

The YO-VID22 Pandemic Study

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Table of Contents

	Executive summary Andrej Naterer, Dunja Potočnik	1
1	1. Introduction: Why Another Study on COVID-19 and Youth? Introduction to the YO-VID22 Project Main Publication Andrej Naterer, Dunja Potočnik	5
2	2. Life Satisfaction and Aspects of Subjective Well-Being of Youth as Indicators of Youth Mental Health: Pre-Pandemic, Pandemic, and Post-Pandemic Perspectives Sandra Antulić Majcen, Andrej Naterer, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić	19
3	3. Housing and Living Conditions of Youth – Caught Between COVID-19 and Structural Challenges Rudi Klanjšek, Iva Odak	49
4	4. Youth's Educational Experiences Before, During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic Iva Odak, Sandra Antulić Majcen, Suzana Košir	73
5	5. School-To-Work Transition and Labour Market Darja Maslić Seršić, Rudi Klanjšek, Suzana Košir	103
6	6. Mental Health, Burnout and Stress-Related Symptoms Among Youth: Prevalence and Pandemic Effects Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, Darja Maslić Seršić, Sandra Antulić Majcen	133
7	7. Youth in Transition: Navigating Expectations in the Post-Covid Era Dunja Potočnik, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, Minea Rutar	157
8	8. Family and Partnership Danijela Lahe, Andrej Naterer	185
9	9. Support Structures and Intergenerational Support During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic Dunja Potočnik, Andrej Naterer	211

10	10. Slovenian and Croatian Youth and Their Civic and Political Participation Andrej Naterer, Anja Gvozdanović	239
11	11. Young People's Online Engagement During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic Rudi Klanjšek, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, Dunja Potočnik	277
12	12. Youth in a Broader Socio-Cultural Context Miran Lavrič, Anja Gvozdanović, Vesna Vuk Godina	313

Executive Summary

ANDREJ NATERER, DUNJA POTOČNIK

This study presents a comprehensive cross-national analysis of the status, experiences, values, attitudes, and well-being of young people in Croatia and Slovenia, providing insights into the youth pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic realities. Youth well-being and physical health have significantly deteriorated in both countries during the pandemic period, with a pronounced decline in life satisfaction and elevated mental health challenges, especially among adolescent girls. Social relationships were heavily disrupted during the pandemic, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Despite improvements in emotional well-being post-pandemic, significant gender and socioeconomic disparities persist.

The results indicate that housing and living conditions remain a structural barrier to autonomy, with delayed home-leaving patterns influenced by financial constraints and family background. At the same time, youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged households report lower well-being, while urban youth face overcrowding and noise pollution.

In education, a share of young people in tertiary education is increasing, although socioeconomic and gender inequalities remain widely present. The pandemic intensified stress within educational settings, particularly affecting girls and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although well-being among students has improved post-pandemic, many still face elevated stress levels, which suggests the need for meaningful and structured institutional support.

Youth employment is gradually stabilising, with increasing access to permanent contracts. However, young women continue to face barriers to secure employment. While the pandemic caused temporary labour market disruptions, it also reshaped employment values. Young people are more frequently engaging in flexible work schemes. In line with this finding, employment status remains closely tied to youth subjective well-being in both countries.

Mental health challenges, particularly depression and burnout, are widespread among young people in Croatia and Slovenia, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls and young people in education. Younger women report the highest levels of psychological distress, although symptoms tend to decrease with age. Gender-specific trends in mental health outcomes suggest the need for targeted psychosocial support.

Youth expectations reflect confidence in personal capabilities but diverge by country in terms of aspirations. Slovenian youth prioritise educational success, while Croatian youth place more emphasis on family milestones. Socioeconomic status is to a significant extent associated with youth perspectives in employment, independence, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, with structural gender inequalities more evident in Slovenia.

Family and partnership dynamics reveal contrasting national patterns. Croatian youth report stronger familial support, which reflects cultural norms focused on family solidarity. In contrast, Slovenian youth experienced more strain in family relationships during lockdowns. At the same time, the pandemic prompted a re-evaluation of personal priorities, with an emerging openness to diverse life trajectories beyond traditional models.

Social support remained primarily familial during the pandemic, particularly for younger age groups. Croatian youth reported higher overall support, with socioeconomic status influencing perceptions of available assistance. In both countries, younger individuals experienced more support from parents, while public services and educational institutions were often viewed as inaccessible or ineffective. At the same time, young people express readiness to engage in support to their parents in case of parental incapacity due to illness or older age.

Civic and political participation trends reveal growing disillusionment among Croatian youth, which is influenced by a perceived lack of political representation. On the other hand, Slovenian youth demonstrate increased political interest, alongside ideological shifts and growing support for strong leadership. However, rising political engagement appears concentrated among already active youth, rather than expanding across the wider young population.

Online engagement is one of the dominant aspects of youth life in both countries, with digital communication and social media playing key roles. Patterns of engagement mostly vary by gender and SES, with Croatian youth showing greater ease in online self-expression. Cyberbullying is more prevalent in Croatia, and signs of potential problematic internet use are present in both countries.

Finally, analysis of cultural frameworks and value orientations indicated modest levels of generalised social trust, particularly among young women. Slovenia witnessed a recovery in trust in the post-pandemic period, while Croatian youth demonstrated significant declines in interpersonal trust. Religious trends diverge, with Slovenian youth maintaining secular outlooks and Croatian youth becoming more polarised in their value orientations. However, it has to be noted that religiosity offered little protection for psychological well-being during the pandemic in either country. Moreover, solidaristic and altruistic attitudes have declined, raising concerns about long-term civic cohesion in both Croatia and Slovenia.

An overall picture based on the research results suggests the complex and differentiated experiences of youth in Croatia and Slovenia, shaped by age, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural context. The results highlight the necessity of targeted, inclusive policy responses to address the systemic challenges faced by young people today. In light of this, each chapter provides targeted policy recommendations aimed at enhancing youth social inclusion and their well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION: WHY ANOTHER STUDY ON COVID-19 AND YOUTH? INTRODUCTION TO THE YO-VID22 PROJECT MAIN PUBLICATION

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The introductory chapter outlines the methodological design and rationale of the YO-VID22 project, which investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth well-being and support structures in Croatia and Slovenia. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study combined large-scale quantitative nationally representative surveys with qualitative methods, which included focus groups, expert interviews, and media content analysis. Quantitative data were collected through stratified online surveys on nationally representative samples of 16-29-year-olds, which enabled comparisons with pre-pandemic datasets. Qualitative components provided more profound insights into lived experiences, institutional responses, and public discourse surrounding youth. Focus groups captured peer-based dynamics and shared cultural values, while expert interviews highlighted systemic adaptations and policy gaps. At the same time, media analysis revealed shifting portrayals of young people in the public sphere. This integrated research design ensured both statistical robustness and contextual richness, and offered comprehensive evidence for understanding youth experiences during the pandemic and informing future policy and academic debates.

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In March 2020, when the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 had become a pandemic, everyday life in Croatia and Slovenia came to a standstill. Schools closed, first jobs were lost before they had properly begun, hugs were banned and deserved celebrations were cancelled. For teenagers and young adults, the crisis did not merely interrupt routines but also collided head-on with the formative years in which identities, careers and relationships are and should normally be forged. The impact was swift and severe, but societies somehow pulled through. And while some, mostly adults, forgot relatively quickly about the whole ordeal, its impact endured among youth. How did it impact them? Who did they turn to? Who and what should have been available for their support but was not? Was it the same everywhere? Was it really all that bad?

The YO-VID22 project – Youth Well-being and Support Structures Before, During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic – was created to answer that question among youth in Croatia and Slovenia. By returning to national youth cohorts first surveyed in 2018 and combining new quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered after the crisis, the study provides one of the few genuinely comparative, pre-/post-pandemic datasets on European youth. This opening chapter invites scholars, politicians, practitioners, students and interested citizens into the project's logic, results and findings and recommendations aimed at improving our collective preparedness in mitigating existing negative results of the pandemic and bolstering resilience in future crises. It traces why the research was needed, how it was designed and executed, what the main results are and why its findings speak to anyone concerned with social recovery.

1.1 A research gap that mattered

Numerous pandemic scholars gravitated toward elderly vulnerability, intensive-care, medicine and macro-economic turbulence. At the same time, youth appeared peripheral, presented mainly in anecdotes or media moralising headlines that blamed youth's irresponsible behaviour or parties for viral spikes. A systematic scan of the EU's CORDIS database found thousands of projects with a youth angle and hundreds that addressed COVID-19, yet almost none bridged the two themes. Yet, developmental psychology warns that late adolescence and emerging adulthood are sensitive periods and shocks encountered there can impact widening inequalities for

decades. Were COVID-19 and the lockdown that followed not a shock of that sort? A question is a rhetorical one; therefore, the answer is an obvious “Yes”. All stakeholders, but particularly policymakers planning recovery packages and future actions, need evidence that could distinguish fleeting discomfort from lasting damage. The YO-VID22 consortium, which brings together sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, based at the University of Maribor, the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, and the University of Zagreb, aimed to provide that evidence. This book presents a comprehensive summary of their findings and recommendations, intended to inform and support all stakeholders and interested parties.

Our starting point rests on the recognition of well-being as a multidimensional phenomenon. Hedonic theories focus on happiness and life satisfaction, whereas eudemonic perspectives stress meaning, autonomy and relatedness. YO-VID22 combined both, measuring subjective life satisfaction and mental-health indices while also mapping purpose, agency and belonging. At the same time, the team treated well-being as inseparable from the web of support that young people can mobilise, particularly their parents, siblings, partners, friends, teachers, youth clinics and social workers, civil society organisations (CSO), online communities and religious organisations. Previous Southeast European studies suggested that those sources are unevenly available, shaped by socio-economic status, gender, settlement type and national welfare regimes. The design within YO-VID22, therefore, focused on three intertwined questions, namely “How did self-reported well-being among 16- to 29-year-olds change from the pre-pandemic baseline of 2018 to the post-pandemic moment of early 2022?”, “Which support structures proved most resilient or most brittle under the pandemic pressure?”, and “Did services in both countries, Slovenia and Croatia, produce different protective patterns?”.

The project consortium pursued the following main objectives. Firstly, to build a mixed-method database linking pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) snapshots of youth well-being and support, secondly, to identify mechanisms that explain any observed changes, and thirdly to generate concrete recommendations sensitive to national specificities yet transferable across Europe and lastly, to communicate the findings for diverse publics through policy briefs, multimedia, and an international conference. In order to accommodate these objectives, an approach

resting on mixed-methods was adopted. Two nationally representative online surveys capturing approximately 1,200 respondents per country, and stratified by gender, three age cohorts (16-19, 20-24, 25-29), settlement type and region were planned. Core items from the 2018 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies Southeast Europe (YSEE) survey were replicated verbatim, while new modules asked about lockdown experiences, digital substitution, vaccine attitudes and institutional trust. Sample quotas ensured that the second wave mirrored the pre-pandemic cohort, creating a quasi-longitudinal design that compared statistically equivalent groups. In order to secure depth, a set of complementary qualitative approaches was introduced. Numbers alone cannot capture the feel of cancelled proms, pandemic-induced broken relationships or an internship that never began. To secure that richness, the project ran focus groups with young people in each country, conducted expert interviews with representatives of public institutions, educators, social workers and CSO leaders, and analysed media depictions of youth during and after the pandemic.

So, why Croatia and Slovenia? The two countries share Yugoslav legacies and EU membership, yet diverge in several important respects regarding youth. Croatia has higher youth unemployment and lower social spending, factors that traditionally push young adults back onto family support. Slovenia, on the other hand, invests more in public welfare and education, implying a thicker institutional safety net. Studying both contexts promised insight into how different welfare systems mediate the same pandemic stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in the support systems that young Europeans depend on, but it also uncovered a wealth of creativity in devising ad-hoc support structures, such as online study groups, neighbourhood support groups, and youth-driven mental health discussions. YO-VID22 reflects both the vulnerabilities and strengths, offering data to create more equitable systems and narratives to bring them to life. Its central message is pressing: a generation cannot be expected to rebuild society relying solely on family and friendship networks as their safety net. If academics, politicians, practitioners and CSOs, young people, and citizens collaborate, Croatia and Slovenia can transition from reactive crisis management to a meaningful intergenerational social contract suitable for the twenty-first century.

This Book is structured in 11 thematic chapters, following the introductory chapter and the chapter on methodology. In the chapter *Life satisfaction and aspects of subjective well-being of youth as indicators of youth mental health: pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic perspective*, Sandra Antulić Majcen, Andrej Naterer and Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić take a close look at how young people's life satisfaction and mental health shifted over time. Drawing on comparative data from Croatia and Slovenia, they trace a marked decline in well-being, particularly among girls and youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While some mental recovery is evident after the crisis, the chapter highlights enduring feelings of isolation and underscores the central role of social relationships in sustaining youth mental health.

Rudi Klanjšek and Iva Odak in their chapter titled *Housing and living conditions of youth – Caught between COVID-19 and structural challenges*, explore the intersection of pandemic pressures and long-standing structural barriers to housing independence. They show how financial insecurity and family background continue to shape young people's living conditions, with youth in Slovenia and Croatia especially affected by factors closely linked to psychological distress and reduced life satisfaction.

The chapter *Youth's educational experiences before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, by Iva Odak, Sandra Antulić Majcen, and Suzana Košir, focuses on the educational disruptions triggered by the pandemic and their lasting effects. While enrolment in tertiary education continues to rise, the authors highlight persistent gender and socioeconomic disparities, and reveal how the emergence of remote learning and increased stress levels burdened students, particularly girls and disadvantaged youth. Although well-being has somewhat improved, the need for sustained support across educational systems remains clear.

In *School-to-work transition and labour market*, Darja Maslić Seršić, Rudi Klanjšek, and Suzana Košir analyse the evolving landscape of youth employment. Their findings show a gradual shift toward greater job stability, yet young women still face obstacles in securing permanent positions. Although the pandemic's economic disruptions were largely temporary, it reshaped employment values, stimulating flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance among young people.

The chapter *Mental health, burnout and stress-related symptoms among youth: prevalence and pandemic effects*, by Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, Darja Maslić Seršić, and Sandra Antulić Majcen, focuses on the rising incidence of mental health issues among youth, especially among adolescent girls and students. With symptoms of depression and burnout widespread, the chapter emphasises how vulnerabilities differ by age, gender, and life stage, making a strong case for focused mental health interventions in the post-pandemic recovery.

In *Youth in transition: Navigating expectations in the post-COVID era*, Dunja Potočnik, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, and Minea Rutar investigate how young people's aspirations and confidence evolved in the wake of the crisis. Among others, their results reveal that Slovenian youth appear to be driven by academic achievement, while their Croatian peers lean toward traditional family milestones. The authors show how these aspirations are deeply shaped by gender roles and class background, reflecting wider social norms and divergent pathways to adulthood.

The chapter *Family and partnership* by Danijela Lahe and Andrej Naterer reveals how the pandemic reshaped family dynamics and relationship expectations. While Croatian youth generally experienced strong familial support, Slovenian youth reported more tension and distance. The crisis prompted many to rethink personal goals and relationship models, with growing openness to non-traditional life paths such as long-term singleness or child-free unions—a shift with lasting social implications.

In *Support structures and intergenerational support during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, Dunja Potočnik and Andrej Naterer examine how youth leaned on different sources of support during the pandemic. Parents were the most consistent providers of help, while public institutions often remained on the margins. Among others, the authors notably find that young people express a strong sense of duty toward caregiving in later life, suggesting evolving notions of intergenerational solidarity.

The chapter *Slovenian and Croatian youth and their civic and political participation* by Andrej Naterer and Anja Gvozdanović offers a nuanced view of youth engagement. While Croatian youth express growing disillusionment with politics, Slovenian youth show rising political interest and ideological diversification. The chapter points to a widening gap between active and disengaged youth, raising questions about

democratic participation and how to meaningfully include younger voices in public life.

In *Young people's online engagement during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, Rudi Klanjšek, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, and Dunja Potočnik focus on the digital world, to which much of youth life shifted during lockdowns. They analyse how young people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds used social media, both as a platform for expression and a potential source of harm. While online spaces offered vital social connections, concerns about cyberbullying and digital overuse reveal the complex emotional landscape of youth internet engagement.

Finally, in *Youth in a broader socio-cultural context*, Miran Lavrič, Anja Gvozdanović and Vesna Vuk Godina situate the experiences of Croatian and Slovenian youth within broader shifts in cultural values. Trust in others and in institutions has declined, while religiosity shows growing polarisation. Most striking is the documented erosion of solidaristic and altruistic attitudes, raising alarms about the long-term health of civic life and social cohesion in the region.

Together, these chapters offer a deep and multidimensional insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reshaped the everyday realities of youth in Croatia and Slovenia. From well-being and education to housing, labour, digital life, and civic engagement, the findings expose both shared vulnerabilities and national specificities, but also examples of resilience, adaptation, and emerging agency among young people. By combining rigorous data with lived experience, this volume provides a vital evidence base for reimagining youth policy and support systems in a post-pandemic era.

1.2 Methodology

To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth well-being and support structures in Croatia and Slovenia, the YO-VID22 project employed a mixed-method research design. The study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture broad trends and deeper contextual meanings likewise. Quantitative data were gathered through a large-scale, stratified online survey on the nationally representative samples of young people aged 16 to 29 in both countries, alongside secondary analysis of relevant pre-pandemic and EU-wide datasets. To

enrich and interpret these findings, the project incorporated a series of qualitative methods, including focus groups, in-depth interviews with experts from youth-related institutions, and media content analysis. This multi-layered design allowed the research team to trace both structural patterns and lived experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how young people navigated the pandemic and its aftermath.

The methodological components are presented in the following table:

Table 1.1: Methodological components.

Approach	Method	Description
Quantitative methods	Survey	Target population: young people aged 16-29: Sample: n=1,200/country; stratified, based on gender, age group (16-19; 20-24, 25-29), type of settlement and region. Type: online survey
	Secondary data analysis	YSEE2018 and other relevant databases: the European Social Survey (ESS – round 9 (year 2018) – “Justice and Fairness” and “Timing in Life”) and EUROSTAT
Qualitative methods	Focus groups	5 per country, 5-10 participants per group, employed to (1) gain qualitative insights into the period during and after the pandemic and (2) gain insights into the areas identified as the most striking results from the survey
	Expert in-depth interviews	10 per country, with selected representatives of institutions relevant for young people, and representatives of youth CSOs to gain insights into practices and policies regarding the intersection of well-being, youth and the pandemic
	Content analysis of media reports	with youth designated as the unit of analysis, electronic media coverage of selected topics during and after the pandemic was analysed to identify changes in social perceptions of youth roles during the pandemic. Ten internet news portals in Slovenia and 15 news media portals in Croatia were analysed, comprising the period between March 2020 and May 2023.

Together, these methodological components formed a comprehensive and complementary research framework. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the project not only to identify statistically significant trends across youth populations, but also to explore the underlying mechanisms, personal narratives, and contextual factors that shape young people's experiences. By drawing on multiple data sources, including first-hand accounts, expert perspectives, and public discourse, the project provided a rich, evidence-based understanding of the challenges and support systems that defined youth life during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This robust design strengthens the reliability of the findings and ensures their relevance for both national policy and broader academic inquiry.

1.2.1 Quantitative approach

The YO-VID22 project was based on a comparison of data gathered during the 2018 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies Southeast Europe (YSEE), therefore the design closely followed the sampling logic, field procedures and quality controls first established there. In that baseline survey, the target population comprised all citizens aged 14-29 in Slovenia ($\approx 334,000$ individuals in 2017) and Croatia ($\approx 670,000$ young individuals in 2017). In Slovenia, a net sample of 1,015 completed questionnaires was achieved, comfortably meeting the planned 1,000 cases and limiting the sampling error to ± 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, while in Croatia the sample size was 1,500. These procedures, along with a suitable content of the questionnaire, delivered a rigorously controlled, nationally representative dataset that served as the empirical backbone for the longitudinal comparisons presented in YO-VID22.

All young participants were residents of Croatia and Slovenia, aged 16-29. Minimum age was slightly modified (from 14 in YSEE to 16 in YO-VID22) mainly because of the administrative accessibility of the respondents. The survey comprised an extensive array of questions aimed at assessing the well-being of young individuals across various dimensions. Data was gathered in the autumn of 2023 through the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique. Participants filled out an online questionnaire, submitting their answers directly on a web-based platform. On average, each survey took 28 minutes to complete.

In each country, a quota sampling strategy was utilised to achieve a representative distribution across essential demographic and regional traits. Valicon Agency oversaw the sampling process, leveraging their online panel, 'JaZnam'. While most participants were drawn from this existing panel, additional individuals were recruited through panel referrals and targeted social media promotions to meet the target sample size of 1,200 respondents per country. Quotas were set based on national census data and demographic projections for people aged 16-29 years, ensuring balanced representation across gender, age brackets, geographic areas, and educational levels.

The final sample included 2,502 individuals. The Croatian sample comprised 1,216 participants, with 51.2% being male, 26.3% of the entire sample were aged 16–19, 36.4% 20–24, and 37.3% 25–29 (an average age of 22.77 years, $SD=3.89$). The Slovenian group included 1,287 participants, 52.8% of whom were male, 26.6% of whom were aged 16–19, 35.1% 20–24, and 38.3% 25–29 (an average age of 22.87 years, $SD=4.00$). Among the Croatian respondents, 28.9% lived in rural areas or villages, 12.4% in areas more rural than urban, 15.8% in areas more urban than rural, and 42.9% in urban settlements. In Slovenia, 42% of respondents resided in rural areas or villages, 20.4% in more rural than urban areas, 17.3% in more urban than rural areas, and 20.4% in urban settlements.

1.2.2 Qualitative approach

1.2.2.1 Focus groups

Focus groups represent an integral part of the project. The method is suitable for researching youth because it creates an open, peer-based environment while at the same time encouraging honest conversation and reflection. Young people often feel more comfortable sharing their views in a group setting with peers, especially when discussing topics related to their personal lives, emotions, and everyday challenges. The social dynamic of a focus group helps participants build on each other's thoughts, challenge ideas, and negotiate meaning collectively. This makes it possible not only to gather individual perspectives but also to observe how opinions are shaped and reshaped through dialogue. Another key strength of focus groups lies in their ability to uncover the shared experiences and values that define youth culture. In discussing issues such as mental health, education, employment, or relationships, participants often find validation in each other's stories, which can lead to more open and insightful discussions than those typically found in individual interviews or written surveys. This format also allows researchers to explore sensitive or emotionally complex topics in a setting where participants may feel less isolated and more supported.

The flexibility of focus groups is especially valuable when working with youth, as it allows researchers to follow up on unexpected topics, clarify ambiguous responses, and adapt questions to the group's natural flow of conversation. This responsiveness is crucial when investigating new or rapidly evolving issues, such as the social and

emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. More broadly, focus groups are well-suited to youth research because they reflect the conversational nature of how young people engage with the world. They offer a space in which young participants can articulate their experiences and insights on their own terms. Thus, focus groups not only generate rich qualitative data but also serve as a form of recognition and inclusion, treating young people as active contributors to understanding the world they are helping to shape.

The design of the focus groups was based on approaches that are well established in social sciences (e.g. Flick, 2014; 2018; Given, 2008). Guidelines for the focus groups and interviews were developed after an extensive state-of-the-art and secondary data analysis, with the main goal to gain deep insight into the lives of the participants. In both countries, five focus groups were executed, with a total of 50 young people that took part in Croatia, and 30 in Slovenia. The findings provided deep insights into young people's life experiences and support systems.

Concerning focus group composition in Croatia, there were 32 female and 18 male participants (64.0% and 36.0% respectively), with 42.0% (N=21) of participants in the youngest cohort (age 16-19), 28.0% in the middle age group (20-24 years of age) – N=14, and 15 participants aged 25-29 (30.0%). There were only 4 participants who were both in education and employment (8.0%), while 2 participants (4.0%) were unemployed, 11 were employed (22.0%), and 33 (66.0%) were still in education. Out of the total focus group sample in Croatia, 42 participants (84.0%) were from urban or more urban than rural areas, while 8 participants (16.0%) were from rural or more rural than urban settlements.

Regarding focus group composition in Slovenia, there were 19 female and 11 male participants (63.4% and 36.6% respectively). The sample included an equal number (N=6) from populations from primary school (age 15-16), secondary school (age 16-18), university (age 20+), NEET population within project PUMO+ (age 16-23) and employed youth (age 25-29). All participants were from urban or more urban than rural areas.

1.2.2.2 Interviews

The interviewing of experts in youth policy, services, and CSOs was a vital component of the project, offering a systemic and institutional perspective that complemented the personal experiences captured through surveys and focus groups. While young people described how they navigated daily life during the pandemic, expert interviews provided insight into how youth-serving systems responded to this unprecedented disruption. These professionals, ranging from representatives of the ministries in charge of youth, education, health and employment, over educators and social workers to youth workers, youth centre coordinators and advisors, were often on the front lines of the crisis response during the pandemic. Their reflections and perspectives helped the research team understand how formal structures adapted, or often failed to adapt to meet the needs of young people, particularly in areas such as mental health, education, employment, and social inclusion.

Beyond offering practical observations, expert interviews also revealed how institutional priorities shifted during the pandemic, what assumptions shaped policy decisions, and how coordination between different sectors influenced outcomes for youth. These perspectives were critical in identifying gaps between what young people needed and what services were actually delivered. Moreover, expert accounts shed light on the challenges of implementing youth-focused policies under emergency conditions, including resource limitations, bureaucratic constraints, and varying levels of political will. By integrating these insights, the project was able to develop relatively realistic, context-sensitive policy recommendations.

1.2.2.3 Media analysis

The analysis of media content was another crucial part of the project, for it offered valuable insight into how youth were portrayed, discussed, and positioned in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media, whether traditional like newspapers and television or digital platforms and social networks, not only reflect societal attitudes but also shape them. By examining how young people were represented across different media formats, the project aimed to understand the narratives that influenced public perception and, in turn, potentially affected policy decisions, social trust, and youth self-image. This layer of analysis helped uncover whether youth were framed as vulnerable, resilient, irresponsible, or invisible, and

how these portrayals shifted over time. At the same time, it shed light on the visibility of youth voices in public debate: whether young people were included as active participants in discussions about education, employment, and mental health, or merely spoken about by others? Understanding these dynamics was essential to grasping the broader social context in which young people experienced the pandemic, and to identifying the cultural and communicative gaps that may have deepened their sense of exclusion or misunderstanding.

The Slovenian sample was developed according to a report by MOSS, a project measuring website traffic, for the time of the pandemic (MOSS, 2025). The keywords used in the design of the sample were based on the concepts and focal points of the project and included the following words: COVID-19, pandemic, young people, welfare, support, help, problems, needs, work with young people, youth work, support for young people's families, friendship, young people and living conditions, education, career directions, social perception of young people, media image of young people, social roles of young people, participation of young people, generation. In its final form, the sample included 150 pieces of various content from 10 most popular platforms. The Croatian sample for the media content analysis was devised in the same manner, following the cooperation with the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing via usage of their platform TakeLab Retriever: AI-Driven Search Engine for Articles from Croatian News Outlets. In total, 15 news media portals were analysed, which resulted in 290 news articles.

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2. LIFE SATISFACTION AND ASPECTS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING OF YOUTH AS INDICATORS OF YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: PRE-PANDEMIC, PANDEMIC, AND POST-PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES

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This chapter examines youth well-being in Croatia and Slovenia before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on mental health outcomes. Findings reveal a marked decline in life satisfaction across family life, friendships, and body image, with negative changes disproportionately affecting girls and young people of lower socio-economic status. During the pandemic, around one-fifth of respondents reported rarely or never experiencing positive emotions, while one-third frequently encountered negative states such as sadness, fear, or anger. Loneliness emerged as a significant concern, particularly among girls, though age-specific patterns differed between the two countries. Despite this, most young people retained access to supportive social networks, which served as an important protective factor. On the other hand, the post-pandemic period showed improvements in subjective well-being, which included stronger social connectedness and more positive emotional states. However, persistent vulnerabilities remain, particularly among girls, the youngest cohort, and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Subjective well-being (SWB) includes both cognitive evaluations, such as life satisfaction and happiness, and affective evaluations, encompassing positive and negative emotional states (Diener et al., 1984; Diener et al., 1995; Diener et al., 2018). In recent decades, increasing attention has been devoted to measuring and monitoring SWB, particularly among children, adolescents, and young adults (Marquez & Long, 2021). These factors include rising individualism, increased academic pressure, and a decline in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, such influences can affect different aspects of youth well-being in distinct ways. For instance, while rising individualism was historically associated with greater well-being (Diener et al., 1995), more recent research indicates it may negatively impact other dimensions of well-being (Humphrey et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, as a non-normative crisis event, affected various areas of people's lives. Young people who were at important life transitions into adolescence, from adolescence to young adulthood, were especially vulnerable during the pandemic period. Developmentally, during these transitional periods, young people face numerous changes in biological, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of development, which were even more challenging during the pandemic period. Also, the pandemic has disrupted various areas of life, such as education, employment, family relations, relationships with friends, romantic relationships, travel, etc. Graupensperger et al. (2023) identified several stressors and life disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social and relational stressors, school-related stressors, financial and job-security stressors, as well as media-related stressors. The implications of COVID-19-related stressors may be particularly prominent for adolescents and young adults, who are at higher risk for mental health concerns and risky health behaviours. The huge changes in the lifestyle of youth, their peers, and their families may act as environmental stressors for mood fluctuation. Young people were encouraged to actively avoid social activities for fear of the coronavirus, and were confined to their homes for a long time. That social isolation was associated with higher risk of depression and anxiety, decrease of psychological distress, as well as increase of negative affect and loneliness in research and meta-analysis for both adolescents, high school students, and young adults (Wang et al., 2021; Kauhanen et al., 2023).

The main goal of this chapter is to investigate aspects of the well-being of young people in the period before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth well-being is operationalised with measures of life satisfaction and measures of subjective

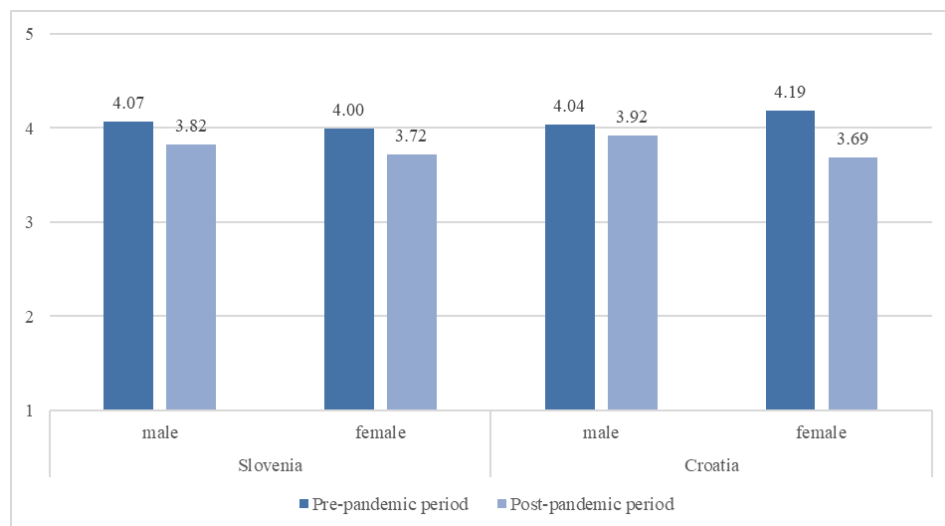
well-being such as positive affect, negative affect, loneliness, meaning of life, and relationships with others. The analysed data were collected on representative samples of young people aged 16 to 29 from Slovenia (N=1,287) and Croatia (N=1,216).

2.1 How are the young people?

Subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) includes self-assessments and evaluations of one's own life based on factors that contribute to thinking about and experiencing one's life in a positive, rather than negative way (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018). Within this perspective, life-satisfaction is recognised as an “cognitive” conceptualisation of happiness (Sirgy, 2012) which can be operationalised as “a cognitive judgmental process dependent upon a comparison of one’s circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard” (Diener et al, 1985; p. 71). Accordingly, the concept of life satisfaction may involve judgments of fulfilment of one’s needs, goals, and wishes (Sirgy, 2012). Measuring the concept of life satisfaction is well-represented in numerous large-scale studies (e.g., Swami et al., 2025; Veenhoven, 2024; Helliwell et al., 2021), which enables monitoring trends in life satisfaction in different populations and different cultures over time. Youth satisfaction in Slovenia and Croatia is continuously monitored through youth studies conducted since 2013 on representative samples of young people (Lavrič & Deželan, 2021; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2017; Flere et al., 2014; Ilišin et al., 2013), which allows us to track trends over time and make comparisons between countries. Life satisfaction among youth is declining globally (Handa et al., 2023; Marquez & Long, 2021; Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025; Twenge, 2019). However, important country differences exist in these trends and baseline life satisfaction. The data was observed during the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods (Figure 2.1.).

In the pre-pandemic period, the average life satisfaction of Slovenian youth was 4.03 (SD=.867) on a 5-point scale (1 - not satisfied at all; 5 - very satisfied) with no significant differences between sexes ($t=1,317$, $df=895$, $p=0,188$; male: $M=4.07$; $SD=.883$; female: $M=4.00$; $SD=.850$). In comparison, Croatian youth reported significantly higher average overall life-satisfaction of 4.12 ($SD=.825$; $t=2.225$; $df=2249$; $p<0.05$). In the pre-pandemic period in Croatia, the girls reported significantly higher average life satisfaction ($M=4.19$; $SD=.794$) than boys ($M=4.04$;

SD=850; $t=3.328$; $df=1352$; $p<0.01$). In both countries, youth life satisfaction was significantly correlated with family socio-economic status¹, significantly more in Croatia ($\rho=.280$; $p<0.01$) than in Slovenia ($\rho=.081$; $p<0.05$). In both countries, the youth's life satisfaction was stable across different age groups.



Note: The item was originally assessed on a 10-point scale that was transformed to a five-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied), to allow comparison with other items of satisfaction with individual aspects of life.; Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.1: General Youth Life Satisfaction in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic period (mean scores)

In comparison, in the post-pandemic period, average youths' life satisfaction significantly declined in both countries. According to our findings, in the post-pandemic period average life satisfaction of Slovene youth was 3.77 (SD=.887; $t=6.849$; $df=2182$; $p<0.01$), with substantial variation between sexes ($M=3.82$, SD=.886 for men, $M=3.72$, SD=.888 for women). In Croatia, there is also a significantly declining trend in average youth life satisfaction ($M=3.81$; SD=.890; $t=9.057$; $df=2568$; $p<0.01$) in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. As in

¹ As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item "Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?" was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1- We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

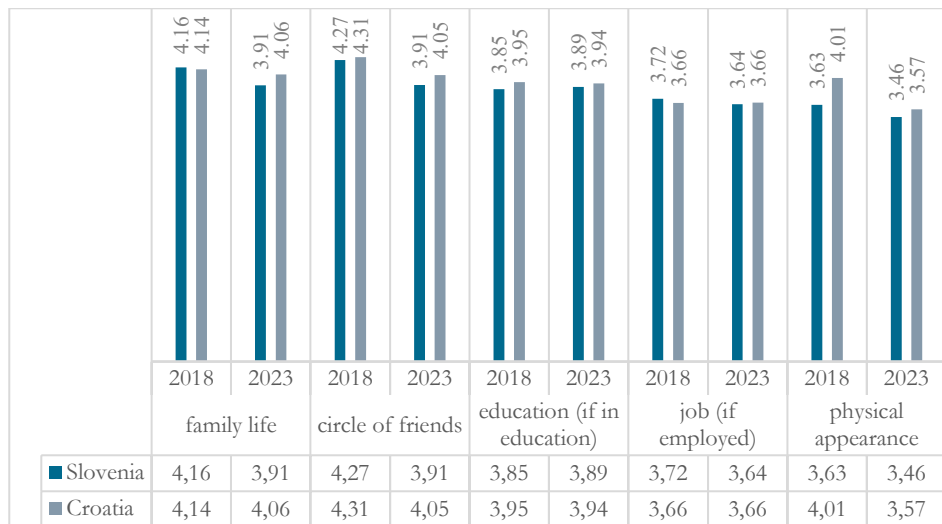
Slovenia, the substantial gender differences were also recorded in Croatia, where boys reported statistically significantly higher average life satisfaction ($M=3.92$; $SD=.875$) than girls ($M=3.69$; $SD=.891$; $t=4.552$; $df=1214$; $p<0.01$). These results suggest that the pandemic period had a significant negative impact on the overall life satisfaction of girls in Croatia, boys appeared to demonstrate greater resilience during the pandemic. Similar to the pre-pandemic period, general life satisfaction is stable across different age groups of young people. Regarding socio-economic status, a significant correlation with youth life satisfaction was also recorded in the post-pandemic period in both countries (Slovenia: $\rho=.182$; $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.148$; $p<0.01$). Compared to the pre-pandemic period, Slovenia recorded an increase in the correlation between young people's life satisfaction and social status (SES), whereas in Croatia, the strength of this correlation decreased. The results imply that in Slovenia the pandemic had a negative impact on young people living in families of lower socioeconomic status, which was reflected in the lower overall life satisfaction in the post-pandemic period.

From the longitudinal perspective, youths' life satisfaction is significantly declining in both countries. During the pandemic girls were less resilient than boys, and lower life satisfaction was more prominent among youth from the lower socio-economic background.

With the aim of better understanding the satisfaction of young people in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods, trends in aspects of life satisfaction were analysed in both countries (Figure 2.2.).

In the pre-pandemic period in Slovenia, both boys and girls were the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=4.23$; $SD=.849$; boys: $M=4.31$, $SD=.814$), followed by the satisfaction with their family life (girls: $M=4.19$; $SD=.987$; boys: $M=4.14$, $SD=.975$), education (girls: $M=3.77$; $SD=1.022$; boys: $M=3.94$, $SD=1.006$) and/or work (girls: $M=3.59$; $SD=1.145$; boys: $M=3.84$, $SD=1.078$) and, finally, their physical appearance (girls: $M=3.54$; $SD=.825$; boys: $M=3.72$, $SD=.851$). Compared to girls, boys were significantly more satisfied with their education (if in the education system, $t=2.501$; $df=883$; $p<0.05$), their job (if employed, $t=2.563$; $df=500$; $p<0.05$), and their physical appearance ($t=2.501$; $df=883$; $p<0.05$). In the pre-pandemic period, like the youth in Slovenia, both girls and boys in Croatia were the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=4.33$; $SD=.786$; boys: $M=4.28$,

SD=.780), followed by the satisfaction with their family life (girls: M=4.21; SD=.892; boys: M=4.07, SD=.901) with the girls reporting significantly higher satisfaction with family life in comparison to the boys. Besides friends and family, in Croatia, girls were the most satisfied with their education (M=4.02, SD=.910), then physical appearance (M=3.97, SD=.802), and work (those who were employed, M=3.69, SD=1.088). In comparison, besides friends and family, boys were most satisfied with their physical appearance (M=4.06, SD=.737), then their education (M=3.88, SD=.928), and work (those who were employed, M=3.63, SD=1.070).



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied); Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.2: Domain-specific satisfaction, pre-pandemic (2018) vs post-pandemic period (2023), by Country (mean score)

Compared to the pre-pandemic period, in Slovenia, there has been a statistically significant decrease in the average satisfaction of young people with their family life (from 4.16 to 3.91; $t=5.797$; $df=2177$, $p<0.01$), with their friend circle (from 4.27 to 3.91; $t=8.526$; $df=2182$; $p<0.01$) and with their physical appearance (from 3.63 to 3.46; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) in the post-pandemic period. Both girls and boys reported the lowest satisfaction with their physical appearance (girls: M=3.35, SD=1.013; boys: M=3.79; SD=0.991), followed by their work (for those who were employed, girls: M=3.44, SD=1.054; boys: M=3.69; SD=1.058), and education

(boys: $M=3.87$; $SD=0.972$). Young people are the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=3.84$; $SD=1.055$; boys: $M=3.98$; $SD=1.017$) and their family life (girls: $M=3.89$; $SD=1.036$; boys: $M=3.94$; $SD=0.982$), with the exception of girls' satisfaction with the education with the highest average score of 3.91 ($SD=0.982$). Compared to girls, boys were statistically more satisfied with their physical appearance ($t=3.801$; $df=1279$; $p<0.01$) and their friend circle ($t=2.330$; $df=1277$; $p<0.05$). In Slovenia, satisfaction with certain aspects of life is relatively stable across age groups. Statistically significant differences across age groups were recorded for satisfaction with family life ($F_{2,1275}=3.854$; $p<0.05$) and satisfaction with one's friend circle ($F_{2,1279}=6.625$; $p<0.01$), with young people aged 20 to 24 expressing significantly lower satisfaction than other age groups.

Compared to the two observed periods, young people in Croatia in the post-pandemic period are statistically significantly less satisfied with their friend circle (from 4.31 to 4.05; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) and physical appearance (from 4.01 to 3.57; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) than they were in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the post-pandemic period in Croatia, both girls and boys reported the lowest satisfaction with their physical appearance (girls: $M=3.45$, $SD=1.041$; boys: $M=3.68$; $SD=1.072$), followed by their work (for those who were employed, girls: $M=3.51$, $SD=1.234$; boys: $M=3.80$; $SD=1.140$), education (girls: $M=3.90$, $SD=1.083$; boys: $M=3.97$; $SD=1.000$), while they were most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=3.99$; $SD=1.057$; boys: $M=4.12$; $SD=1.036$) and their family life (girls: $M=4.02$; $SD=.977$; boys: $M=4.10$; $SD=1.004$). Compared to girls, boys were significantly more satisfied with their physical appearance ($t=3.739$; $df=1203$; $p<0.01$), work (if employed; $t=3.589$; $df=868$; $p<0.01$), and friend circle ($t=2.159$; $df=1209$; $p<0.05$). In Croatia, satisfaction with certain aspects of life is stable across age groups.

The pandemic has negatively impacted aspects of young people's lives related to family life, friendships, and physical appearance. This impact is more pronounced among girls.

Following the trends within general youth life satisfaction, in both countries, youth satisfaction with the various life domains was significantly correlated with family socioeconomic status. In the pre-pandemic period, young people with lower socioeconomic status also reported lower satisfaction with work (if employed;

Slovenia: $\rho=.130$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.286$, $p<0.01$), education (Slovenia: $\rho=.129$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.276$, $p<0.01$), family (Croatia: $\rho=.257$, $p<0.01$), friend circles (Slovenia: $\rho=.079$, $p<0.05$; Croatia: $\rho=.197$, $p<0.01$) and physical appearance (Slovenia: $\rho=.129$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.119$, $p<0.01$). In the post-pandemic period in Slovenia although the correlations are slightly weaker, the trends remained similar, with the exception of statistically significant positive correlation between family socio-economic status and satisfaction with family life ($\rho=.158$; $p<0.01$), meaning that with higher family socio-economic status the youths' satisfaction with family life increases. In Croatia, in the post-pandemic period, there was a significant decrease in the correlation between the socio-economic status of the family and youths' satisfaction with certain aspects of life, whereby only satisfaction with family life ($\rho=.140$; $p<0.01$), friend circle ($\rho=.080$; $p<0.01$), and education ($\rho=.076$; $p<0.05$), remained significantly correlated with the socio-economic status of the family.

In the post-pandemic period, there is a lower impact of the socioeconomic status of young people's families on general life satisfaction as well as on domains of satisfaction related to family life, friendships, and education.

According to these findings, it can be concluded that relationships with friends, satisfaction with physical appearance, and, in the case of Slovenia, family relationships contributed to the decline in youth satisfaction in the post-pandemic period. Youths' satisfaction with specific domains in life and the average life satisfaction have significantly declined in both countries' post-pandemic period. These trends are in line with previous research documenting similar declines in English-speaking countries (Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025), France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden (Blanchflower et al., 2024), Ex-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2025), and most recently, in most UN countries (Blanchflower, 2025). These findings highlight specific areas of young people's lives that were disrupted during the pandemic, the consequences of which are still being felt today.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the key aspects that make up the quality of life of young people.

“I would say that relationships are definitely the most important thing. Somehow, they understand you, understand them, and support each other. Yet, on the other hand, that you can have fun, that everything is not so serious, simply that you find someone who suits you. For me, that's the most important thing.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“For me, it's important to have people around me who I know I can rely on, who are there when I need something and I don't know, more or less that's the most important thing to me, to know that I have people around me who are always there regardless of all the other things that happen in life.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I firmly believe that we humans are social beings, meaning that we have to be in contact with other people in order to function normally. In that sense parents are not the only ones, you have to be in contact with your peers, to be able to go through certain life phases. You share your feelings and experiences with your peers differently than with your parents. /.../ For our generation this was terrible. For 2 years we were deprived of having friends and peers by our side... And once you are alone alienation sneaks in. You feel bad and even after a while that you've been fooling yourself with your computer games you feel a lack of these connections... In the end you get it, the consequences on your mental health are real and it's all because of the social isolation during pandemics.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Maybe a feeling that we are satisfied with ourselves, that we are working on ourselves, that we love ourselves first and foremost, that we focus on, I don't know, on education, on sports maybe, on some hobby, interest and that we are working on ourselves. At least that's how I see it.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I've always been more into helping others, and that's where I found purpose and some kind of inner peace. That's the only thing that hasn't changed over the past few years, from the beginning of the pandemic until now.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

“Well, well, maybe I would say a sense of belonging, that we belong both with friends and in class, and that I don't feel lonely or separated, isolated.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

Young people in both Croatia and Slovenia, when they state what makes them satisfied, are mainly focused on their social connections and reciprocal support that they provide to the people around them and that they receive from their environment. The period of the pandemic, specifically the social distancing measures, seriously disrupted the social relations of young people, specifically, making friends, hanging out, building trust, and other aspects of the everyday life of young people. As the young people themselves state, the lack of social contact is consequently reflected in their sense of loneliness and belonging. At the same time, it is social connectedness that helps young people find their purpose and meaning, the essence of normal functioning, and a significant source of satisfaction.

2.2 How were the young people coping during the COVID-19 pandemic?

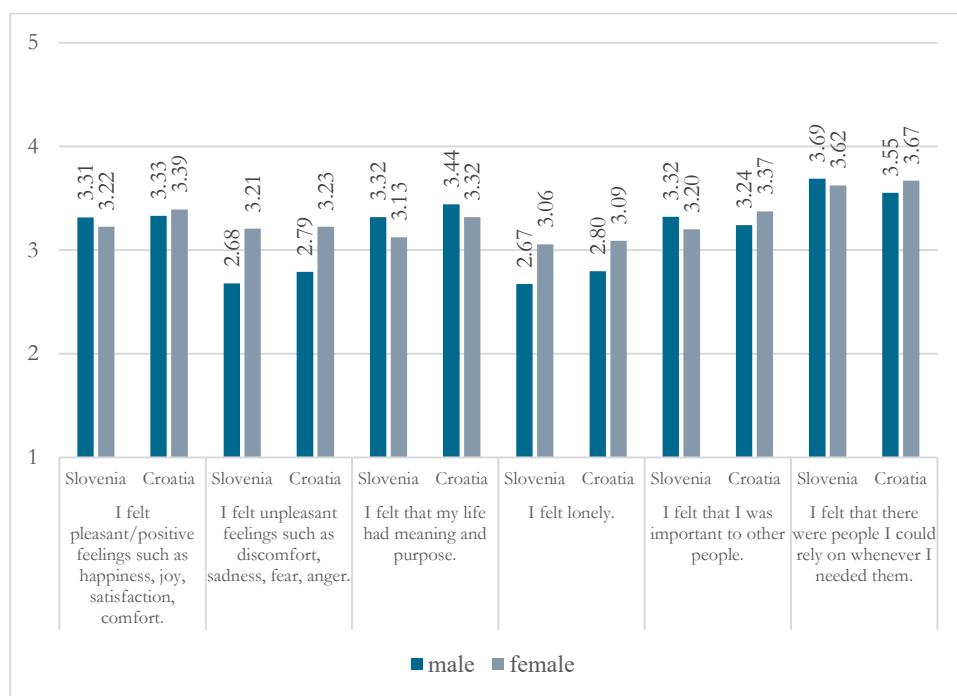
From a eudaemonic perspective, an individual's subjective well-being, in addition to life satisfaction, also includes the individual's emotional response to the events and circumstances in ongoing life in terms of positive and pleasant emotions versus unpleasant and negative emotions (Diener et al., 2018), and the balance between the two (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Another important concept of subjective well-being is the concept of purpose and meaning of life (Diener et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2006; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which includes one's goals in life and sense of direction, feeling of ascribing meaning to past and present life, beliefs that give life meaning, along with aims and objectives of living. Higher subjective well-being is associated with an awareness of the most important aspects of life and living in accordance with these values (Diener et al., 2018). Positive relations with others are one of the basic human needs, especially given the sensitive periods of adolescence and young adulthood. Positive relations with others are reflected in warm, trusting and satisfying relationships, concern for the well-being of others, and the capacity for strong empathy, affection and intimacy (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In contrast, loneliness, as a profoundly disabling condition (Sirgy, 2012) has a significant negative association with psychological well-being, and is recognised as a fast-growing problem among the youth (Bhagchandani, 2017). In times of uncertainty and crisis, all of the above aspects of well-being can serve as protective mechanisms for youth well-being, but at the same time, they can also represent risk factors for the most vulnerable groups of youth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted youth well-being by reshaping their daily lives, social interactions, and family relationships (Ellis et al., 2020). The pandemic introduced an unprecedented period of disruption, causing stress, uncertainty, and isolation, particularly during crucial developmental transitions related to education, employment, and social engagement (Gruber et al., 2021). School closures, restrictions on in-person interactions, and economic instability further exacerbated these challenges, leading to significant disruptions in young people's academic progress, career prospects, and overall sense of stability. The abrupt shift to remote learning created disparities in access to education, disproportionately affecting those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who faced barriers such as limited digital resources and inadequate learning environments (OECD, 2021). This period of instability significantly influenced young people's mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Research has highlighted a marked rise in psychological distress among youth, with reports of heightened emotional difficulties stemming from social isolation, fear of infection, and concerns about the future (Van de Velde et al., 2024).

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of young people was also explored in our research on a representative sample of young people from Croatia and Slovenia. We explored how young people felt during the COVID-19 pandemic and examined which contextual factors or individual characteristics played a protective role in young people's well-being during the pandemic.

Specifically, the young were asked to assess how they felt during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2.3.). The results indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, around one-fifth of young people in both countries rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, or comfort. Moreover, approximately one-third of them reported that they often or very often experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear, or anger during the pandemic. Young people in Croatia felt positive and pleasant emotions somewhat more often ($M=3.36$; $SD=1.011$) compared to young people in Slovenia ($M=3.27$; $SD=.987$; $t=2.243$; $df=2501$; $p<0.05$), while they felt unpleasant feelings to an equal extent during the pandemic. In both countries, girls report that they experienced somewhat more unpleasant feelings than boys during the pandemic (Slovenia: $M=2.68$, $SD=1.066$; $t=9.097$, $df=1282$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $M=2.79$; $SD=1.070$; $t=7.188$,

$df=1214$, $p<0.01$), which may indicate different patterns in life circumstances during the pandemic concerning gender roles. The prevalence of positive and negative emotions during the pandemic was relatively stable across age groups of young people, except for the experience of positive emotions among young people in Slovenia. Namely, young people in the oldest age group (25-29 years) experienced statistically significantly more positive emotions during the pandemic ($M=3.36$; $SD=.934$), followed by young people in the middle age group (20-24 years; $M=3.24$; $SD=.981$), and the youngest group (16-19 years) who reported feeling positive emotions somewhat less frequently than others during the pandemic ($M=3.19$; $SD=1.058$; $F_{2,1283}=3.649$; $p<0.05$).



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - very rarely or never; 5 - very often or always). The data was collected in 2023 with instructions to recall how they felt during the COVID-19 pandemic.; Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.3. Average (mean) scores on aspects of youth well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, by gender and by country

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five young people rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction or comfort. Moreover, one in three young people often or very often felt unpleasant emotions such as discomfort, sadness, fear or anger during the pandemic.

The prevalence of positive and negative feelings should be viewed in the context of relationships with others. One of the measured aspects of youth well-being was the feeling of loneliness. This aspect of well-being was particularly important in the context of various measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially quarantine, school closures, remote work/learning, social distancing, etc. The feeling of loneliness among young people during the pandemic highlights the extent of the negative effects of these measures on young people's well-being. In both countries, almost a third of young people often or very often felt lonely during the pandemic. In both countries, girls reported feeling significantly lonelier than boys during the pandemic ($p < 0.01$)². Regarding age groups, in Slovenia, young people in the youngest age cohort (16-19 years; $M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.265$) felt the loneliest ($p < 0.01$)³. They were followed by young people aged 20–24 years ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.154$), while young people in the oldest cohort (24-29 years; $M = 2.66$; $SD = 1.163$) felt the least lonely during the pandemic. In Croatia, an opposite trend was observed. Young people in the oldest age group (25-29 years, $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.123$) felt the loneliest, followed by the youngest cohort (16-19 years, $M = 2.90$; $SD = 1.218$), while the group aged 20 to 24 felt the least lonely during the pandemic ($p < 0.05$)⁴. The differences obtained could be explained by different pandemic measures related to education, and the support network of young people, such as family, friends, immediate and extended relatives, etc.

The pandemic has led to a more pronounced sense of loneliness, especially among girls, with one in three young people often or very often feeling lonely during the pandemic.

Despite the concerning trends in loneliness, the majority of respondents demonstrated relatively strong social connectedness during the pandemic. Around 60% of participants (Slovenia: 60.7%, Croatia: 58.2%) felt they had reliable people

² Slovenia: girls, $M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.167$; boys: $M = 2.67$; $SD = 1.195$; $t = 5.798$; $df = 1282$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: girls, $M = 3.09$; $SD = 1.107$; boys: $M = 2.80$; $SD = 1.193$; $t = 4.422$; $df = 1214$; $p < 0.01$.

³ $F_{2,1283} = 10.413$; $p < 0.01$.

⁴ $M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.148$; $F_{2,1212} = 4.018$, $p < 0.05$.

in their lives, while around 45% of young people (Slovenia: 44.1%, Croatia: 44.2%) frequently experienced a sense of importance to others during the pandemic. In both Croatia and Slovenia, during the pandemic, support from close people they could rely on was equally available to both young men and young women. On the other hand, the sense of importance to others was somewhat more pronounced among men in Slovenia ($p < 0.05$), while in Croatia it was somewhat more pronounced among women ($p < 0.05$)⁵. Social connectedness in Croatia was relatively stable across age groups. In Slovenia, the sense of importance to other people increases with age ($p < 0.01$)⁶. Thus, the greatest feeling of importance to other people is present in the oldest cohort of young people (25-29 years, $M=3.40$; $SD=1.048$), followed by the age group of 20-24 years ($M=3.24$; $SD=1.077$) and the youngest age cohort (16-19 years, $M=3.10$; $SD=1.152$). Given that the data were relatively stable in relation to the country where young people live, it can be concluded that measures related to social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic were relatively uniform between countries and that they had an equal impact on the social life of young people.

Young people managed to preserve their social support network in their immediate environment during the pandemic, which served as a protective factor in times of crisis.

Finally, young people were asked to assess their sense of life purpose during the pandemic. One in four young people in Slovenia never or rarely felt during the pandemic that their life had meaning and purpose. By comparison, one in five young people in Croatia felt this way. In both countries, girls struggled somewhat more with recognising the meaning of life during the pandemic than men ($p < 0.01$)⁷. In Croatia, the sense of meaning in life is stable across different age groups, while in Slovenia it is least expressed in young people aged 16-19 ($M=3.12$; $SD=1.205$) and most expressed in the oldest cohort of young people ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.030$)⁸. The socio-economic status of young people was also significantly associated with their well-being during the pandemic. Young people of lower socioeconomic status

⁵ Slovenia: girls, $M=3.20$; $SD=1.092$; boys: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.1092$; $t=1.979$; $df=1282$; $p < 0.05$; Croatia: girls, $M=3.37$; $SD=1.060$; boys: $M=3.24$; $SD=1.087$; $t=2.154$; $df=1214$; $p < 0.05$.

⁶ $F_{2,1283}=7.943$

⁷ Slovenia: $t=3.113$; $df=1282$; $p > 0.05$; boys: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.074$; girls: 3.13 ; $SD=1.145$; Croatia: $t=1.994$; $df=1214$; $p < 0.05$; boys: $M=3.44$; $SD=1.136$; girls: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.059$.

⁸ $F_{2,1283}=6.645$; $p < 0.01$.

experienced fewer positive emotions ($\rho=.155$; $p<0.01$) and more negative emotions ($\rho=-.095$; $p<0.01$) during the pandemic, and were more likely to feel lonely ($\rho=-.134$; $p<0.01$). Also, more socially disadvantaged young people reported having fewer people they could rely on ($\rho=.121$; $p<0.01$), and were significantly less likely to feel important to others ($\rho=.109$; $p<0.01$) and had a harder time recognising the meaning of life ($\rho=.150$; $p<0.01$).

During the pandemic, every fourth young person in Slovenia and every fifth young person in Croatia rarely or never felt that their life had meaning, with the feeling of meaninglessness of life being more pronounced among girls.

When considering these findings alongside the earlier evidence of rising meaninglessness and loneliness, a more complex picture of youth well-being emerges. Although many young people report heightened levels of negative affect and isolation, a substantial degree of social support among the majority suggests a protective factor that may help mitigate negative mental health trends. This duality implies that while targeted interventions are urgently needed to address feelings of meaninglessness and persistent loneliness, especially given their links to other negative mental health outcomes and suicidality, it is equally important to bolster and leverage these existing strong social connections to foster resilience and overall well-being.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups ($N=100$; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the diverse impact the pandemic has had on young people.

"I don't remember. I don't know, I just remember feeling a kind of anger and confusion, like "why is this even happening?"

(Male, employed, Croatia)

"Everybody got lazier because of corona."

(Male, employed, Slovenia)

"For example, I had other things happen in my life that devastated me more than the pandemic itself. It was just a "dot on the i" that made me say to myself "you have to change something, this is how the situation is, get the best out of it and fight in all

aspects as much as you can", so in a way, maybe it's better that something like that happened for a person to make some change. The whole world turned upside down, and then you can't stay in the same place, you have to adapt to the situation as it is. And then, everyone came out of that pandemic as a new person. Now, is it better? Is it worse? Depends on how everyone got through it."

(Female, employed, Croatia)

"In the beginning it was cool. I was at home, sleeping all day, no stress... All fine. But it started building the feeling of unease, of isolation. I was really seeking some connection with other people. But you could get none! The feelings of unease, isolation and deep dissatisfaction were strong."

(Female, student, Slovenia)

"I wanted to add that I think that at the end of it all, the pandemic had a big impact on our psyche. While, for example, I remember, my family members didn't have COVID, I had it and then, while you have to be locked in a room for 14 days without being in contact with anyone, I think that it had a big impact on us and that we actually decided to appreciate how much that contact actually means to us."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

"I would like to add that the pandemic had a very bad impact on my mental health because, for example, I was in isolation four times in a row, without a break. I was in my room at home for two months and I remember the first time I went out among people, I know we had a gym class, that I was kind of anxious, tense, I didn't feel comfortable in society at all, I felt like someone had let me off the chain, if I may say so, it took me a week to come to my senses and somehow fit into society and accept that I was now surrounded by so many people again."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

"When corona started, I was a bit anxious, not because I was pressured with health or the healthcare system, but because it was interesting. We did not go to school, which was great, but then it started dragging... I had no social connections with my friends. I was totally isolated and this was my biggest problem. I could not wait for the whole thing to be over and for us to go back to school. I was sick of hanging with people at home (other family members)".

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“I agree that before the pandemic I had much more support than when the isolation came, I had no support from school, my friends were all just for themselves, as I would say, everyone was focused on themselves, on their own problems, on all sorts of struggles with themselves. We were left to ourselves, somehow, we had to be our own support, support, push ourselves forward.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I was in my first year of high school when the coronavirus started. I would say that somehow our generation, maybe a year or two more, is somehow the most deprived in terms of social life because those were the years when we started going out, socialising more and everything lively, but, in fact, we couldn't do it, we weren't able to, we weren't allowed to. Everything was closed and we just closed ourselves off and, like, were in our own four walls and were on our phones, watching series, and in fact, nothing good happened from spending so much time alone with ourselves. Let's say, I notice, or, I don't know, that's maybe some kind of my, my reflection on all of that, that our generation doesn't really know how to socialise unless it's, let's say, I don't know, going for coffee or some kind of specific activity like that.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

Young people, when recalling the pandemic period, highlight confusion, anger, fear, anxiety, lack of support and loneliness as the predominant emotions. At the same time, for some, this period marked a turning point, and encouragement for some important life decisions, recognition of priorities, and greater awareness of the importance and appreciation of social support in their immediate environment.

2.3 How are young people today, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic?

If youth well-being is viewed through life satisfaction, as previously stated, in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, a significant decline in life satisfaction among young people was recorded in the post-pandemic period, in both Slovenia and Croatia. Regarding specific aspects of life, in the post-pandemic period, young people in both countries are significantly less satisfied with their circle of friends and physical appearance, while young people in Slovenia are also less satisfied with their family life. Along with the concept of life satisfaction, in this research, the subjective well-being of young people is addressed from the aspect of emotions, feelings of loneliness, meaning of life and social connection. Subjective well-being was explored

in relation to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and in regard to the period of one month before the implementation of the research (at the end of 2023). We wanted to explore how young people felt during the post-pandemic period, in comparison to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine which contextual factors or individual characteristics are playing a protective role in young people's well-being in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analyses confirm that in the post-pandemic period, there have been significant differences in all aspects of young people's psychological well-being compared to the pre-pandemic period in both countries (Figure 2.4). In the post-pandemic period, young people feel significantly more positive emotions ($p < 0.01$)⁹, and significantly fewer negative emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁰. Young people in the post-pandemic period feel significantly less lonely ($p < 0.01$)¹¹, and they felt significantly more that there were people they could rely on whenever they needed them ($p < 0.01$)¹². After the pandemic, young people are significantly more likely to believe that they are important to other people ($p < 0.01$)¹³ and to a significantly greater extent see the meaning and purpose of life ($p < 0.01$)¹⁴.

In the post-pandemic period, compared to young people in Slovenia, young people in Croatia report slightly more frequent positive emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁵, but at the same time, they also report more frequent negative emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁶ and a feeling of loneliness ($p < 0.01$)¹⁷ and report a slightly more pronounced feeling of meaning and purpose in life ($p < 0.01$)¹⁸. The indicators of social connectedness among young people were consistent in both countries.

⁹ Slovenia: $t=19.250$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=17.909$; $df=1215$.

¹⁰ Slovenia: $t=10.181$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=7.561$; $df=1215$.

¹¹ Slovenia: $t=16.614$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=15.026$; $df=1215$.

¹² Slovenia: $t=9.835$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=9.672$; $df=1215$.

¹³ Slovenia: $t=10.148$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=10.256$; $df=1215$.

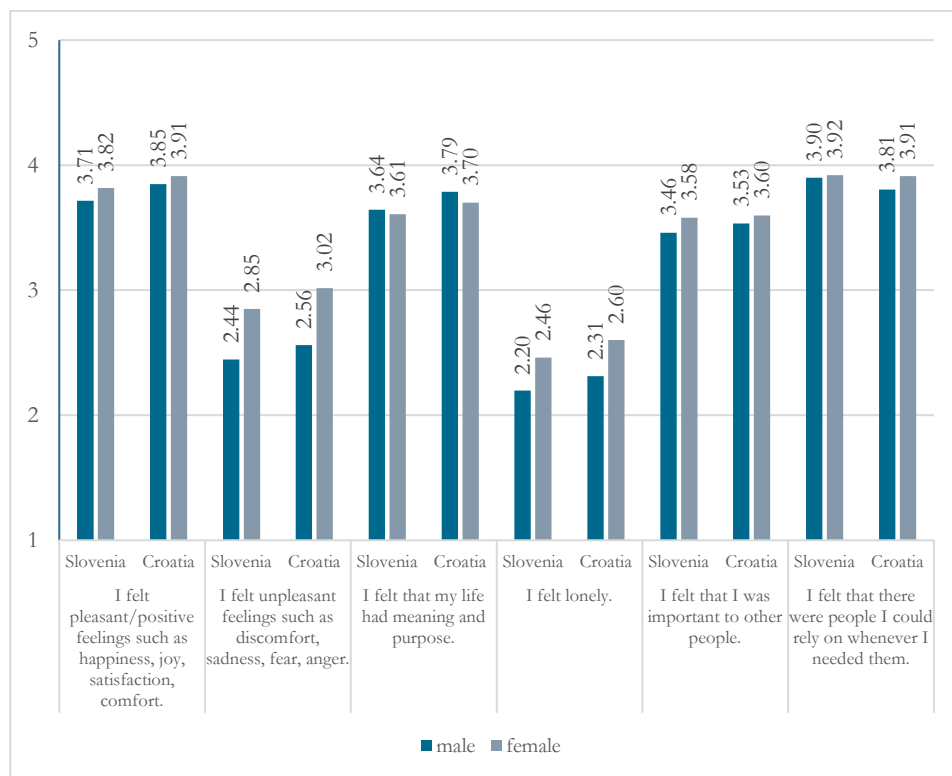
¹⁴ Slovenia: $t=15.691$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=13.933$; $df=1215$.

¹⁵ $t=3.240$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=3.76$, $SD=.922$; Croatia: $M=3.88$; $SD=.883$.

¹⁶ $t=3.505$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=2.64$, $SD=1.029$; Croatia: $M=2.78$; $SD=1.068$.

¹⁷ $t=2.969$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=2.32$, $SD=1.104$; Croatia: $M=2.45$; $SD=1.107$.

¹⁸ $t=2.877$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=3.63$, $SD=1.028$; Croatia: $M=3.74$; $SD=1.033$.



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - very rarely or never; 5 - very often or always). The data was collected in 2023 with instructions to recall how they felt during the month prior to the data collection (end of 2023); Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.4: Mean scores on aspects of youth well-being in the post-pandemic period, by gender and country

In both countries, girls report that in the post-pandemic period, compared to boys, they are significantly more likely to experience unpleasant emotions such as discomfort, sadness, fear and anger ($p < 0.01$)¹⁹ and loneliness ($p < 0.01$)²⁰. Additionally, in Slovenia, compared to boys, girls are significantly more likely to experience positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, joy and comfort

¹⁹ Slovenia: $t = 7.169$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.018$; girls, $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.002$; Croatia: $t = 7.611$; $df = 1214$; boys, $M = 2.56$; $SD = 1.041$; girls, $M = 3.02$; $SD = 1.047$.

²⁰ Slovenia: $t = 4.322$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 2.20$; $SD = 1.074$; girls, $M = 2.46$; $SD = 1.123$; Croatia: $t = 4.588$; $df = 1214$; boys, $M = 2.31$; $SD = 1.073$; girls, $M = 2.60$; $SD = 1.124$.

($p < 0.05$)²¹ and being important to other people ($p < 0.05$)²². The findings may indicate more significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls in both countries, which manifest in more frequent negative affect and a more pronounced sense of loneliness. At the same time, in Slovenia, compared to boys, girls expressed a slightly higher level of positive emotions and a greater sense of importance to other people, which may be a protective mechanism in terms of the well-being of young people in the post-pandemic period.

Regarding different age groups, the findings were consistent for all age groups studied in both countries. The exception is the feeling of loneliness, which is significantly more pronounced in the 20-24 age group in Slovenia ($p < 0.05$)²³. This group of young people was at many turning points in their lives during the pandemic, including education, making friends, romantic relationships, and social life, which was disrupted during the pandemic. These findings point to possible consequences for this specific group of young people, which should receive additional attention. These patterns resonate with previous research reporting increasing levels of loneliness among young people worldwide (Twenge et al., 2021). The observed trends have been discussed in the context of “liquid modernity” (Ünal, 2018), building on foundational sociological insights (Bauman, 2013; Giddens, 2023). This theoretical framework suggests that the erosion of stable social structures contributes to historically unique dilemmas of identity among youth, potentially fuelling the observed increases in meaninglessness and loneliness. These results are particularly concerning given that both a crisis of meaning (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013; Schnell et al., 2018) and persistent loneliness (McClelland et al., 2020; Schinka et al., 2013) have been independently linked to higher risks of suicidality in young people. These findings indicate the urgent need for interventions that address these critical aspects of youth mental health.

Just as during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the post-pandemic period, socioeconomic inequalities are still present among young people in Slovenia and Croatia. In the post-pandemic period young people from lower socioeconomic

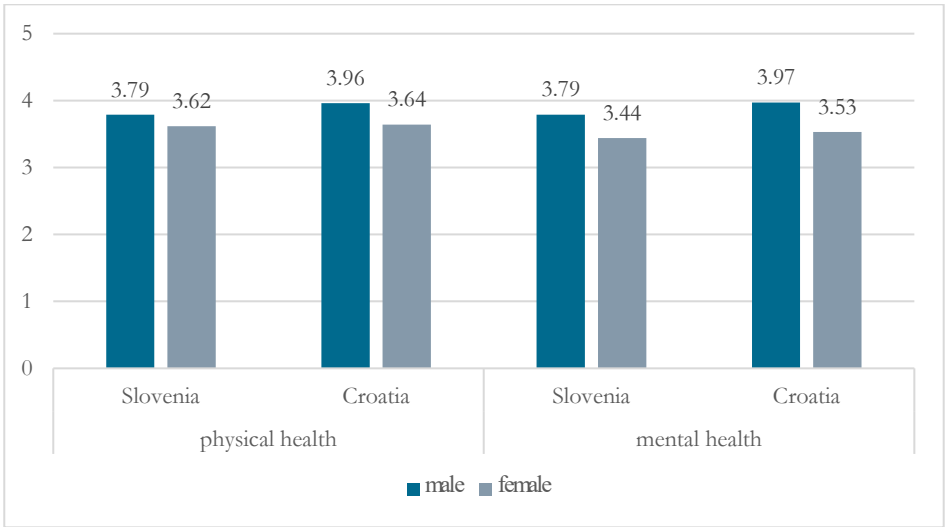
²¹ $t = 2.033$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 3.46$; $SD = 1.078$; girls, $M = 3.58$; $SD = 1.017$.

²² $t = 1.989$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 3.71$; $SD = .930$; girls, $M = 3.82$; $SD = .913$.

²³ $F_{2,1283} = 3.891$; age group 16 – 19, $M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.094$; age group 20-24, $M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.110$; age group 25-29, $M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.099$.

background are still experiencing fewer positive emotions ($p<0.01$, Slovenia: $\rho=.112$, Croatia: $\rho=.158$) and more negative emotions ($p<0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho=-.083$; Croatia: $\rho=-.086$), and are more likely to feel lonely ($p<0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho=-.080$; Croatia: $\rho=-.112$). Also, more socially disadvantaged young people are reporting to have fewer people they could rely on ($p<0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho=.130$; Croatia: $\rho=.145$), and were significantly less likely to feel important to others ($p<0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho=.159$; Croatia: $\rho=.144$) and had a harder time recognizing the meaning of life ($p<0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho=.122$; Croatia: $\rho=.149$). Trends in differences in the association between the socio-economic status of young people and aspects of well-being during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods and across countries may indicate the effectiveness of individual measures targeting the most vulnerable groups, which would be worth exploring further.

Although in the post-pandemic period, young people feel much more positive emotions, much less negative emotions, feel less lonely and consequently have more meaningful social relationships, significant gender differences and socioeconomic inequalities among young people are still present, and manifested at the level of subjective well-being.



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied); Source: YOVID22, 2023

Figure 2.5: Mean satisfaction scores for mental and physical health among youth in the post-pandemic period, by gender and country

Finally, to gain insight into the importance of specific aspects of youth health, young people assessed the extent to which they were satisfied with their mental health, referring to the post-pandemic period (Figure 2.5.).

Average satisfaction with the physical and mental health of young people is slightly lower in Slovenia compared to Croatia ($p < 0.05$)²⁴. In both countries, satisfaction with physical health is significantly lower among girls (Slovenia: $M = 3.62$; $SD = .977$; $t = 3.153$; $df = 1282$; $p = .002$; Croatia: $M = 3.64$; $SD = .999$; $t = 5.515$; $df = 1205$; $p = .000$) compared to boys (Slovenia: $M = 3.79$; $SD = .991$; Croatia: $M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.007$). Satisfaction with physical health among young people in Croatia is similar across all age groups, while in Slovenia it is significantly higher in the 16-19 age cohort ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .974$)²⁵ compared to other age cohorts (20-24 years: $M = 3.65$; $SD = 1.018$; 36-29 years: $M = 3.65$; $SD = .957$). The satisfaction with mental health of young people today, in the post-pandemic period, also differs by gender. Compared to young men, girls are statistically significantly more dissatisfied with their mental health in both Slovenia ($p < 0.01$)²⁶ and Croatia ($p < 0.01$)²⁷. In both countries, satisfaction with mental health is relatively stable across different age cohorts of young people. Both satisfaction with mental health and satisfaction with physical health in both countries are significantly correlated with the socio-economic status of young people. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family, the lower their satisfaction with physical health (Slovenia: $\rho = .110$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: $\rho = .082$; $p < 0.05$). The correlation is somewhat more pronounced with mental health, whereas the socio-economic status of the family from which the young people come decreases, the satisfaction with mental health of young people decreases (Slovenia: $p < 0.01$; $\rho = .104$; Croatia: $\rho = .105$; $p < 0.01$). In both countries, satisfaction with mental health is significantly correlated with general satisfaction with life (Slovenia: $\rho = .594$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: $\rho = .574$; $p < 0.01$), and therefore, it is crucial to ensure mechanisms for providing different models of mental health support to young people, especially to girls and especially to the most vulnerable groups of young people, who often lack support.

²⁴ physical health: $t = 2.476$; $df = 2492$; $p = 0.013$; Slovenia, $M = 3.71$; $SD = .987$; Croatia: $M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.015$; mental health: $t = 3.038$; $df = 2493$; $p = 0.02$; Slovenia, $M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.075$; Croatia, $M = 3.76$; $SD = 1.111$).

²⁵ $F_{2,1283} = 6.324$; $p < 0.01$

²⁶ Slovenia: $t = 5.849$; $df = 1280$; girls: $M = 3.44$; $SD = 1.054$; boys: $M = 3.79$; $SD = 1.070$.

²⁷ Croatia: $t = 6.977$; $df = 1207$; girls: $M = 3.53$; $SD = 1.118$; boys: $M = 3.97$; $SD = 1.063$.

In both countries, girls are less satisfied with both their physical and mental health. When it comes to mental health, young people from families of lower socio-economic status are particularly vulnerable.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their needs, challenges, and perspectives on the vision they hold for the future.

“So, what young people really need is to just understand what they feel, to understand what they want and to help others explain what is happening to them and how they, if possible, could help them in any way. Because, really, now we are a new generation. If we are adults and if we grow up the way we are, things are going badly for us. And it's hard now, you all know that it's hard to get yourself into something, helping yourself is the best, but the hardest thing. So, we always need that encouragement from someone else. And there is always someone ready for it, it's just the hardest thing to ask.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

“On all these topics, I absolutely agree with all of you, from housing, job quality, work-life balance, and family planning. In general, I think I feel more scared than I see some, well, optimistic future. In any case, I don't think I would like to raise children in this kind of environment one day. I think the human rights situation in Croatia is quite bad, it's getting worse and worse, and that's it, at least from my experience. And what young people might need is that opportunity and the feeling that they can achieve what they want with their own effort, their own knowledge and their own commitment.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

The well-being of the generation of young people who at the time of the pandemic were at different turning points in their lives experienced challenges in many aspects so that some groups coped with it better and some were not so resilient. Although the consequences of the pandemic on the well-being of young people will be felt for a long time to come, it is important to focus on the key needs of young people today. According to young people, the key needs of young people today can be summarised as the need of young people to be seen, heard, respected, and supported both as individuals and as important members of society.

2.4 Conclusions and recommendations

Awareness of youth well-being and mental health concerns has already begun to occupy the space of scientific and professional discourse towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The youths' mental health concerns became predominant, especially in the post-pandemic period, when youth mental health was detected as an area that needed to be strategically approached, including different levels of the system. This primarily refers to the national health system, the social welfare system, the education system, etc., then to health and educational institutions, and finally, to key stakeholders in the local community as the primary community that should support every individual, and should especially take care of young people. The results of our research confirm the following:

- In both countries, there is a significant decline in youths' life satisfaction, especially regarding family life, friends and physical appearance. Negative changes were more pronounced among girls and young people of lower socio-economic status.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, around one-fifth of young people in both countries rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction or comfort, and around one-third of them report that they often or very often experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear or anger during the pandemic. The prevalence of negative emotions during the pandemic was more pronounced among girls, which may indicate different patterns in life circumstances during the pandemic concerning gender roles.
- In both countries, almost a third of young people often or very often felt lonely during the pandemic, which highlights the extent of its negative effects on young people's lives, especially girls. Interestingly, in Slovenia, the loneliest were young people in the youngest age cohort (16-19), while in Croatia, the loneliest were young people in the oldest age cohort (25-29), which can be a reflection of different pandemic measures, specific to each country.
- Despite the concerning trends in loneliness, in both countries, the majority of respondents demonstrated relatively strong social connectedness during the pandemic, whereby the support from close people they could rely on was equally available to both young men and young women.

- In the post-pandemic period, a significant improvement in all aspects of the subjective well-being of young people was recorded in both countries. They are feeling significantly more positive emotions, significantly fewer negative emotions, less lonely and better connected with their social environment.
- Nevertheless, in the aftermath of COVID-19, mental health problems among young people are continuously increasing, with the most vulnerable groups being women, the youngest age cohort and young people of lower socio-economic status.

These findings indicate trends in aspects of youth subjective well-being before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate characteristics of youth that may represent risk factors and highlight the importance of relationships, family environment, friendships and other forms of social support as an important protective mechanism for youth mental health. It is essential to emphasise that additional efforts are needed at local, regional and national levels to respond to the needs of young people and to provide them with assistance and support, especially taking into account the most vulnerable ones. Based on these findings, we developed the following recommendations for policymakers, youth workers, and social service professionals, aiming to address the key challenges while leveraging existing strengths in youth social networks and resilience:

- Prioritisation of accessible gender-sensitive mental health services. Policymakers should ensure the expansion of accessible, affordable, and youth-friendly mental health services, with special attention to girls and young women, who consistently report higher levels of distress, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with mental health. Services must be culturally and developmentally appropriate, and schools and community centres should serve as key access points.
- Strengthening of socio-economic support for vulnerable youth. The pandemic has deepened the link between socio-economic status and well-being. Targeted support measures, such as educational grants, housing assistance, career counselling, and digital inclusion programmes, should be prioritised for young people from lower-income families to reduce inequality and enhance life satisfaction across life domains.

- Fostering of social connectedness through community-based initiatives. Youth workers and social workers should invest in programmes that promote positive peer interactions and intergenerational relationships, especially for young people recovering from social isolation. Support networks such as youth clubs, mentorship programmes, and volunteer opportunities can serve as protective mechanisms for psychological well-being and social integration.
- Introduction of mental health literacy and life skills in education. Educational systems should integrate mental health literacy, emotional regulation, and resilience training into formal curricula from an early age. Teaching young people to recognise, understand, and manage emotions can improve long-term outcomes in both mental health and life satisfaction.
- Longitudinal monitoring of youth well-being. Governments and research institutions should support the regular collection of data on youth well-being through nationally representative, longitudinal studies. This allows for real-time monitoring, evidence-based policymaking, and early identification of emerging crises, especially among at-risk subgroups.
- Engagement of youth in policy design and implementation. To ensure policies are relevant and impactful, young people must be included as co-creators in the design, implementation, and evaluation of youth-focused initiatives. Participatory policymaking, through youth advisory boards, forums, and consultations, builds trust and ensures that responses align with their lived experiences and evolving needs.

These recommendations provide an answer to the urgent need for a coordinated and inclusive response to the evolving challenges in youth well-being. By investing in preventive measures, targeted support, and meaningful youth engagement, we can create environments where all young people, regardless of gender or socio-economic background, have the opportunity to thrive mentally, emotionally, and socially in the post-pandemic world.

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3. HOUSING AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF YOUTH – CAUGHT BETWEEN COVID-19 AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

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This chapter explores the housing and living conditions of youth in Slovenia and Croatia, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural challenges. The pandemic intensified housing insecurity through job losses, campus closures, and forced returns to parental homes, increasing stress, anxiety, and family strain. Youth in both countries leave home considerably later than the EU average, with financial constraints representing the main barrier to independent living. Croatia faces particularly high overcrowding rates, while in both contexts, housing deprivation is strongly linked to poorer mental health and lower life satisfaction. A severe affordability crisis, driven by rapidly rising housing prices and insufficient public housing, has further delayed transitions to autonomy. These trends reflect broader issues of labour market precarity, deregulated housing markets, and limited social investment. Policy implications include the urgent need for expanded social housing, rent subsidies, anti-speculation measures, and integrated youth-oriented strategies linking housing, employment, and mental health to ensure sustainable pathways toward independence and well-being.

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The issue of housing and living conditions is central to youth well-being across Europe. Adequate and affordable housing not only provides shelter but also serves as a foundation for education, social integration, and mental health (Bambra, Riordan, Ford, & Matthews, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing housing vulnerabilities. Numerous young individuals experienced increased housing insecurity due to economic challenges, employment losses, and campus closures. This instability frequently resulted in elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, affecting various aspects of their lives and future prospects. For example, the closure of university dormitories necessitated students to secure alternative accommodations. This abrupt displacement frequently resulted in financial burden and logistical difficulties, particularly for international students or those from remote locations. Next, the economic downturn caused by the pandemic resulted in job losses, particularly in sectors that typically employ young people, such as retail and hospitality. This loss of income made it difficult for many youths to maintain their housing arrangements. As a consequence, many relocated to parental or guardian residences, potentially straining familial relationships (Šinko et al., 2021).

The pandemic's effect on housing prices has significantly influenced youth living conditions. Research indicates that housing prices surged in certain areas during the pandemic, exacerbating affordability issues for low-income families and youth (Jiao et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2021). The increase in housing prices, juxtaposed with prolonged economic instability, has led to a precarious situation for many youths, making stable housing increasingly challenging to obtain (Rugh, 2021; Bhat et al., 2021). This financial strain is compounded by documented increases in domestic violence, further threatening the housing security of youth in vulnerable situations (Balma et al., 2023).

This chapter examines the housing and living condition of youth in Croatia and Slovenia taking in consideration the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader EU context.

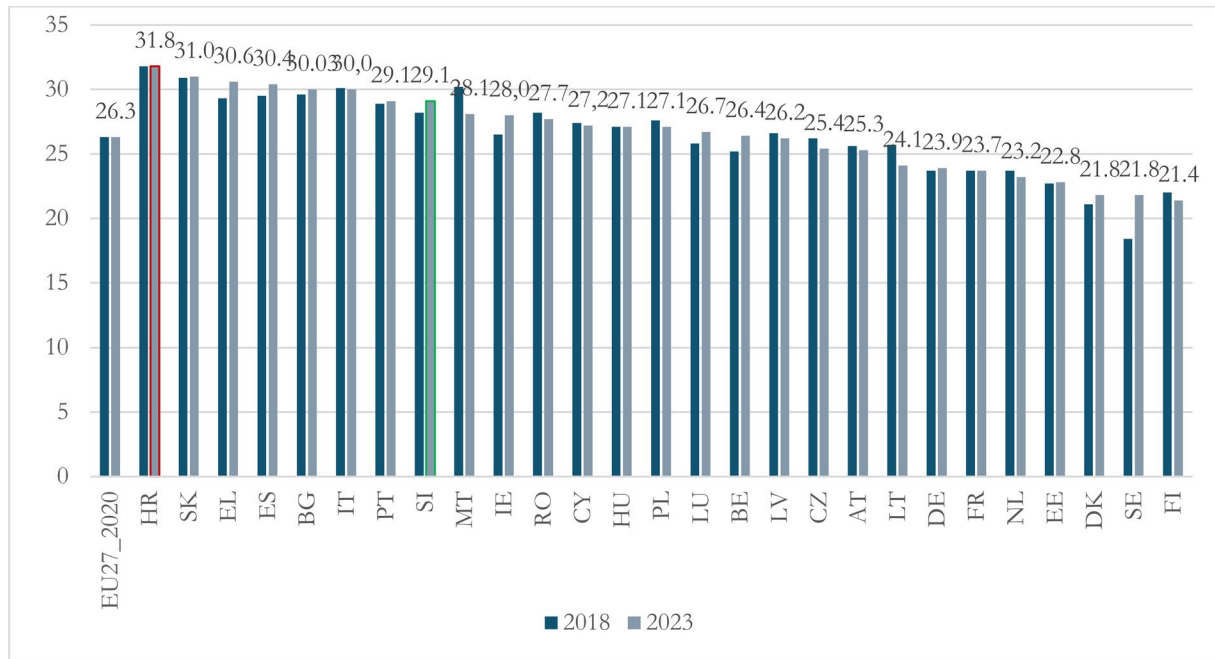
3.1 Leaving the parental home

According to the Eurostat data (2024), the average age at which young individuals moved out of their parents' homes across the European Union in 2023 was 26.3 years, and remained unchanged in the last five years. This figure, however, differed significantly among EU member states. Some countries, including Croatia (31.8), Slovakia (31.0), Greece (30.6), Spain (30.4), and both Bulgaria and Italy (30.0), reported the highest average ages, all 30 or above (Slovenia: 29.1). On the other hand, Finland (21.4), Sweden (21.8), Denmark (21.8), and Estonia (22.8) had the lowest average ages, all below 23. The consistency of these patterns over time suggests enduring differences in multigenerational living arrangements across EU nations, where, at least on average, the pandemic did not, or at least not permanently, change this situation (Figure 3.1.).

Further analysis by age groups (15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years old - Figure 3.2.) reveals additional disparities.

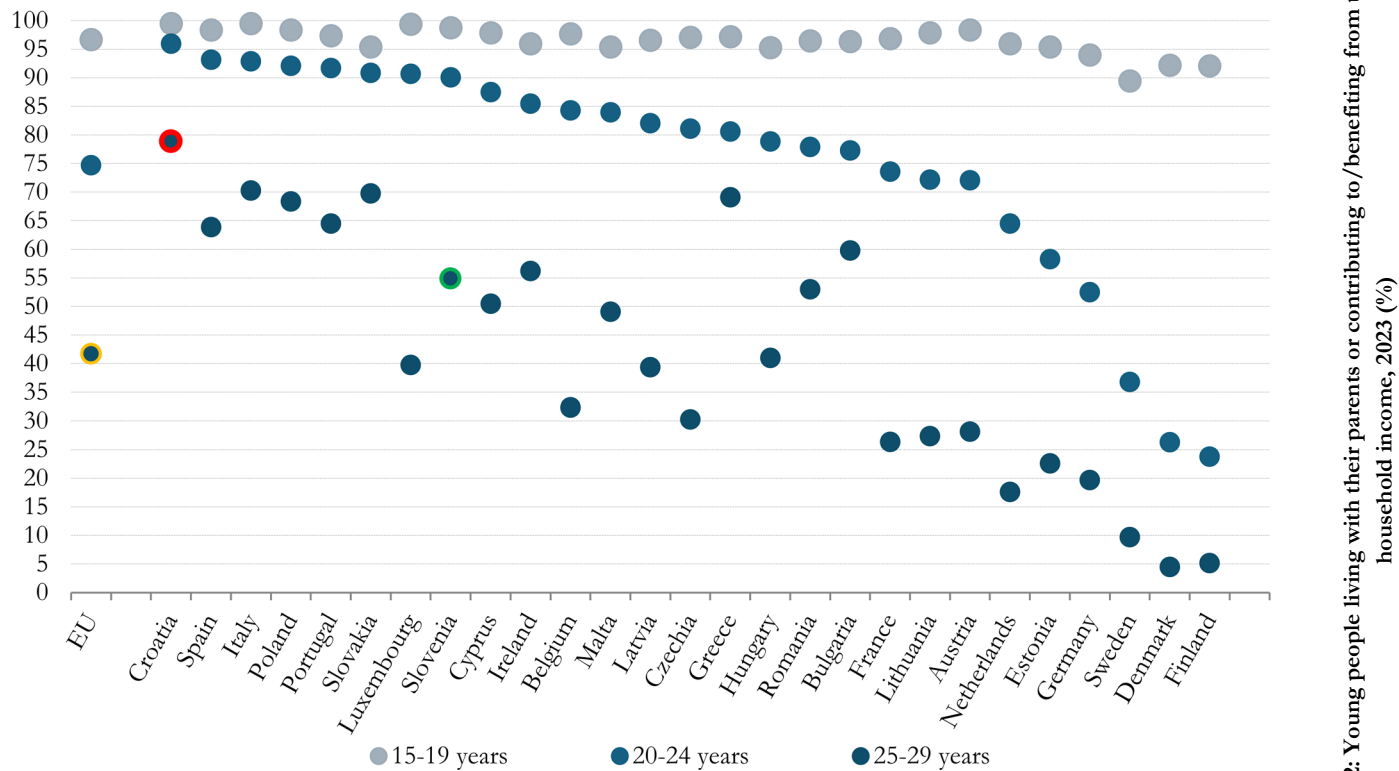
In Croatia, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Greece, the majority of young individuals reside with their parents or contribute to/benefit from the household income. This includes over 95% of 15-19-year-olds, more than 80% of 20-24-year-olds, and over 60% of 25-29-year-olds. Conversely, in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, 8-10% of 15-19-year-olds already live independently or contribute to/benefit from the household income. Moreover, in these countries, more than 63% of 20-24-year-olds and over 90% of 25-29-year-olds have moved out of their parental homes.

Slovenia, with its 55% of 25-29-year-olds still living with their parents stands above the EU average of 42%, however, it is important to note that this share decreased over the years. In 2010 around 66% of 25-29-year-olds were living with their parents. This indicates a certain break from the “Mediterranean pattern” found, for example, in Croatia and Italy, where the share of 25-29-year-olds living with their parents increased in the same time period (2010-2023), from 66% to 79%, and from 62% to 70% respectively.



Source: Eurostat (online data code: yth_demo_30)

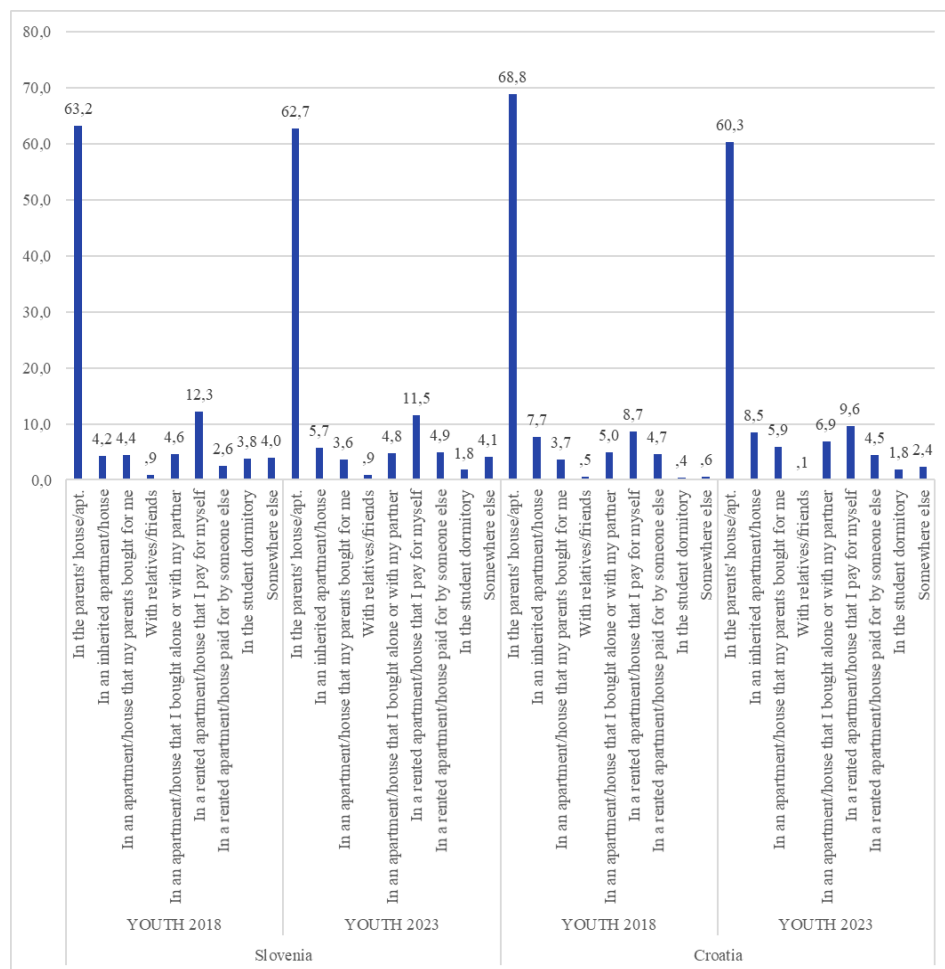
Figure 3.1. Estimated average age of young people leaving the parental household, 2018 & 2023



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lpv08)

Figure 3.2: Young people living with their parents or contributing to/benefiting from the household income, 2023 (%)

As indicated in Figure 3.3., this pattern could not be fully replicated by our data, as in both countries the share of youth living in their parents' house/apartment decreased from 2018 to 2023. Furthermore, Croatia showed a more dramatic decrease in parent-house/apt. living (-8.5 percentage points) compared to Slovenia (-0.5 percentage points).



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

Figure 3.3: Where youth live, by category – 2018 and 2023 Youth Study (%)

Both countries show somewhat different patterns in housing transitions: while in Croatia more young people move to owned properties (both self-bought and parent-bought), in Slovenia there is an increase in rental properties paid by others and

inherited apartments. Student dormitory living shows opposite trends: decreasing in Slovenia and increasing in Croatia. As expected, in both countries the share decreases with respondents' age (Slovenia: $-0.30 < r < -0.37$; $p < 0.001$; Croatia $-0.29 < r < -0.40$; $p < 0.001$).

The decision or ability of youth to depart from their parental residence is influenced by multiple factors. These include their educational pursuits, labour market volatility, economic independence, and housing costs. Additionally, their interpersonal relationships with family and peers, as well as their personal values, all play a significant role. In this context, an expedited departure from the familial home may be associated with the increasing individualisation of young adults, as manifested in their evolving values and perspectives, and with a substantial reduction in youth unemployment – youth unemployment rate (15-24) decreased from 15% in 2010 to around 10% in 2023.

The importance of finance (that is often tied to unemployment) is well indicated by the fact that there is a high percentage of Slovenian youth who are motivated to leave their parents' home, but are unable to do so because of the financial constraints. Specifically, 48% say that they would like to live alone, but they cannot afford to do so (in turn, 41% of youth say that they live with their parents because this is the most convenient and comfortable option for them).

In Croatia, the share of youth who are motivated to leave their parents' home, but are unable to do so because of the financial constraints stands at 41%, indicating somewhat lower motivation to leave parents' home. Additionally, in Slovenia, living with parents is associated with having an own room (only in 2023 sample; $r = 0.19$; $p < 0.001$) and with higher financial status of the household (in both samples; $p < 0.01$). In Croatia, there is only one significant association, i.e., between living in parents' house/apt. and the financial situation of family's household in 2023. This indicates that in Slovenia youth stays at home more often if the living and financial conditions of the family are better, whilst in Croatia such factors do not have an equally important role, suggesting a stronger role of cultural factors. Still, a better financial status of the household is associated with leaving parents' home later in both 2023 samples, where, interestingly, there is no relationship between living with parents and level of parent-child discord, even after controlling for gender, age and financial situation of the household. Furthermore, in Croatia, those who live with

their parents report better mental health, again after controlling for gender, age and financial situation of the household.

In both countries, the average age at which young people leave their parental home is quite high, although there is a trend of decrease in the share of young people aged 25-29 who still live in their parental home. The motivation for moving out of the parental home is associated with the financial independence of young people and the socioeconomic status of the family.

3.2 *Overcrowding¹ rate*

The overcrowding rate for individuals aged 15-29 in 2023 was 26.0%, demonstrating a marginal decrease of 0.2 percentage points from 2022. Young people across all EU nations exhibited a higher propensity to reside in overcrowded households compared to the general population. The youth overcrowding rate surpassed the overall population's rate by 9.2 percentage points, with the latter being 16.8%.

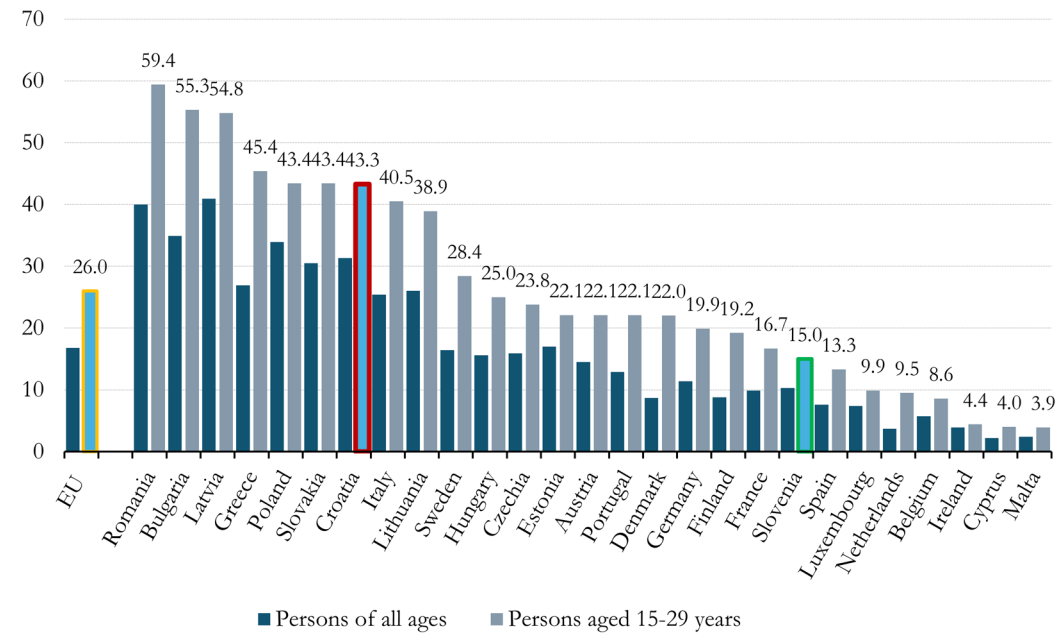
Substantial variations in overcrowding rates exist among EU countries. In 2023, Malta exhibited the lowest rate with 3.9% of young people residing in overcrowded dwellings, while Romania demonstrated the highest rate at 59.4%. Bulgaria and Latvia also reported over half of their youth population living in overcrowded conditions. Greece, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Italy, and Lithuania each had more than a third of their young residents in overcrowded households (Figure 3.4.).

Again, notable differences can be observed between Croatia and Slovenia – the overcrowding rate for youth in Croatia is almost three times higher than in Slovenia. This is also reflected in the YO-VID data – while 17% of Croatian youth said “no” when asked if they had their own room in the household, in Slovenia this share was

¹ The overcrowding rate is defined as the percentage of the population living in an overcrowded household. A person is considered as living in an overcrowded household if it does not have a minimum number of rooms available that is equal to the sum of:

- one room for the household;
- one room per couple in the household;
- one room per single person aged 18 or over;
- one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17;
- one room per single person between 12 and 17 and not included in the previous category;
- one room per pair of children under 12.

notably lower - 10% (those who live with their partners were omitted from the analysis).



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lvho05a)

Figure 3.4: Overcrowding rate in the EU, 2023 (%)

Relatedly, after omitting those who did not live in the parents' house/apartment, the average number of people living in family household slightly changed from 2018-2023 – while in Slovenia it decreased from 4.12 to 4.10, in Croatia it increased from

4.12 to 4.17. Considering that the average number of rooms in Slovenia is higher and increasing (4.10→4.59; Croatia: 3.31→3.93), it is indeed possible to say that the problem of overcrowding is more present in Croatia. Interestingly, the number of rooms or having one's own room was not associated ($p>0.05$) with subjective well-being when controlled for sex, age, financial situation and number of people living with respondents.

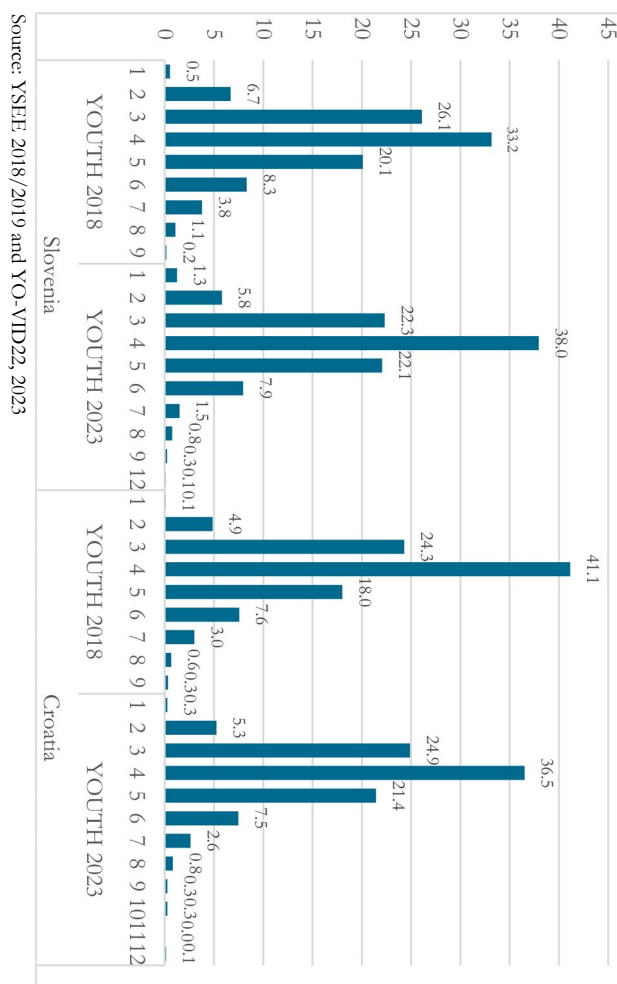


Figure 3.5: Number of indicated rooms in the household, Croatia and Slovenia, 2018 and 2023 (%)

Every fifth young person in Croatia lives in an overcrowded family home, while this is the case with every tenth young person in Slovenia.

The negative impact of overcrowding on general well-being is well-documented, and this effect was further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt from the focus group discussions:

“At the beginning (of the lockdown) they (parents) both stayed at home. At first, I thought he (father) lost his job, but mom was at home all the time (being unemployed). This was a big problem, we were stuck together, 4 of us in a one room apartment. And we were fighting a lot, particularly mom and dad. So, my mother started to go out, leaving us at home. I ‘dunno... she would join the protests on the streets just to get away from it all.”

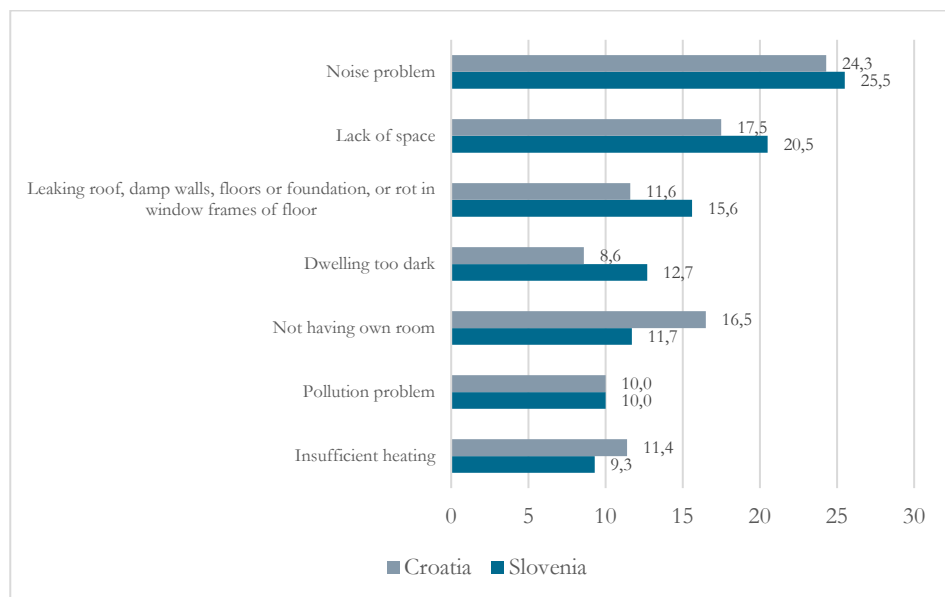
(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

3.3 Living conditions and housing deprivation

There are various indicators typically used to measure the quality of living conditions, including those assessing space, pollution burden and what is understood as measures of housing deprivation. The latter is, according to the EU definition, conceptualised as the percentage of population living in a dwelling which is considered as overcrowded, while also exhibiting at least one of the housing deprivation measures: having a leaking roof, not having a bath/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling that is considered too dark.

In 2023, 10.6% of people in the EU lived in households unable to afford keeping their home adequately warm (see Figure 3.2.). Among EU countries, the lowest rates were observed in Luxembourg (2.1%), Finland (2.6%), and Slovenia (3.6%; Croatia 6.2%). By contrast, the highest rates were recorded in Lithuania (20.0%), Bulgaria (20.7%), and Portugal and Spain, both at 20.8%. Compared with 2022, the percentage of people in the EU living in households unable to keep their homes adequately warm increased by 1.3 percentage points (pp), rising from 9.3% to 10.6% in 2023. However, the share of those not being able to heat their homes properly increased by 53 % in 2021-2023 period (from 6.9 to 10.6 %).

As indicated in Figure 3.6., although the heating problem is among the rarest reported, the youth tend to report higher percentages than those found in the general population: 9.3 in Slovenia and 11.4 in Croatia.



Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 3.6: Living conditions and housing deprivation indices for young people (aged 16-29 years), Croatia and Slovenia, 2023 (%)

Simple correlational analysis reveals that the housing deprivation measure, operationalised as a summation scale of all individual measures, is significantly associated with lower financial status of the household, with living in more urban, densely populated areas, and with various aspects of subjective well-being, satisfaction and mental health (Table 3.1.). The respondents with higher levels of housing deprivation had higher scores on the depression, anxiety and stress scale, as well as lower overall life satisfaction. Also, higher levels of housing deprivation were significantly associated with lower satisfaction with family life and friends, and with lower satisfaction with one's own mental and physical health, as well as with lower satisfaction with physical appearance.

Table 3.1: Housing deprivation, SES, residence type and well-being correlation indices for young people (aged 16-29 years), by country, 2023

SI\ CRO	1. Housing depriv.	2. SES	3. Urbanity	4. The Depression , Anxiety and Stress Scale	5. Life satisfaction	6. Satisfaction with family life	7. Satisfaction with friends	8. Satisfaction with mental health	9. Satisfaction with physical health	10. Satisfaction with physical appearance
1.	1	-.245**	.084**	.257**	-.163**	-.185**	-.156**	-.209**	-.139**	-.087**
2.	-.324**	1	.003	-.149**	.140**	.122**	.107**	.103**	.091**	.062*
3.	.146**	-.039	1	-.011	-.029	-.050	-.020	-.051	-.007	.001
4.	.289**	-.173**	.067*	1	-.445**	-.345**	-.360**	-.535**	-.374**	-.345**
5.	-.276**	.198**	-.044	-.476**	1	.512**	.406**	.602**	.504**	.466**
6.	-.278**	.158**	-.046	-.355**	.502**	1	.391**	.487**	.365**	.353**
7.	-.177**	.079**	-.028	-.334**	.413**	.419**	1	.433**	.376**	.333**
8.	-.189**	.107**	-.062*	-.566**	.614**	.438**	.426**	1	.540**	.503**
9.	-.189**	.112**	-.023	-.396**	.479**	.334**	.304**	.481**	1	.563**
10.	-.178**	.099**	-.011	-.345**	.523**	.306**	.310**	.507**	.509**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The quality of life conditions of young people is linked to the socioeconomic status of the family they live in. Young people living in poorer living conditions report more mental health problems and generally lower life satisfaction, including lower satisfaction with family life and friends, physical appearance, and physical and mental health.

The following quote from the focus groups in Croatia depicts the link between youths' housing preoccupations and mental health and well-being:

“What really worries me as a young person is, first and foremost, the society we live in. I feel like you need huge connections and contacts to even get a job that matches your level of education. I’m really, truly scared of the corruption and everything that’s going on. I’m scared of what’s going to happen after the elections, and what the socio-political situation will look like. And when it comes to all these topics, I completely agree with all of you – from housing, to job quality, to work-life balance, and family planning. Overall, I feel more and more afraid rather than seeing any kind of optimistic future.”

(Female, employed, Croatia).

The data in Figure 3.7. shows housing and accommodation problems with notable differences between rural and urban areas, as well as between Slovenia and Croatia. In Slovenia, the issues are more prominent in urban areas, especially noise (34.1%) and lack of living space (30.1%). Urban residents also report pollution and other environmental problems and insufficiently heated space more frequently than those in rural areas. In Croatia, the differences between rural and urban areas are less pronounced. However, noise remains the most frequently reported problem (20.3% rural, 27.1% urban). Interestingly, lack of living space is reported slightly more in rural areas (15.4%) than in urban areas (18.4%), which is an opposite trend compared to Slovenia. It is also notable that humid living conditions and lack of sunlight are reported at similar rates in both rural and urban areas of each country, though these issues are more commonly reported in Slovenia than in Croatia. Overall, urban residents in Slovenia report more issues across nearly all categories, while in Croatia, the rural-urban gap is less significant.

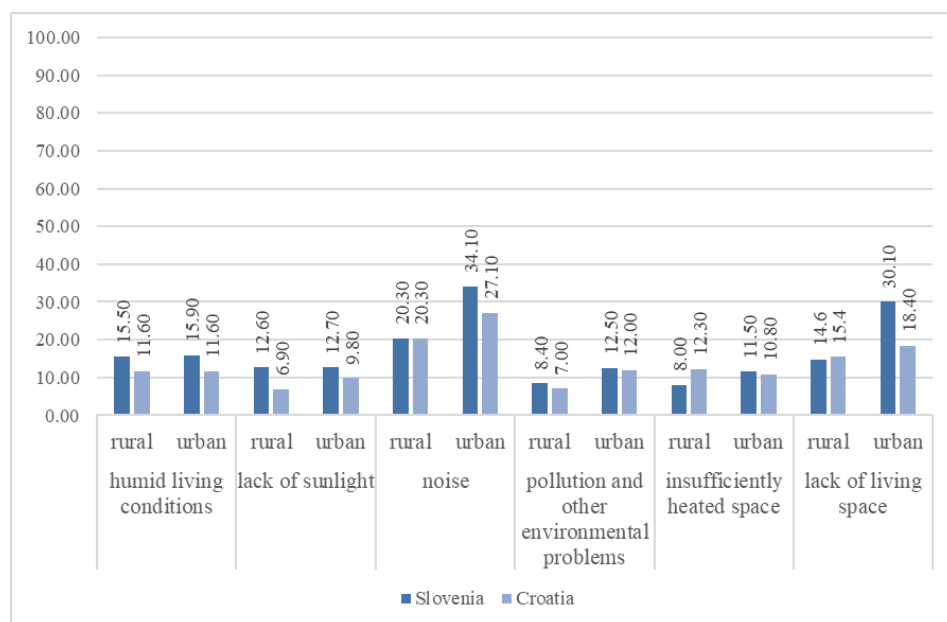


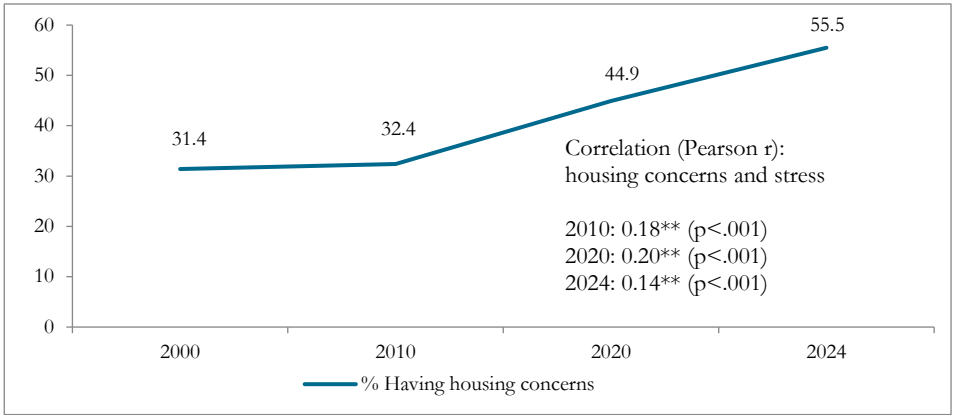
Figure 3.7: Comparison of housing/accommodation problems in Slovenia and Croatia, for urban and rural areas (%)

Young people living in urban areas of Slovenia and young people living in rural areas of Croatia have more prominent housing and accommodation problems. Comparatively, between these countries, young people living in urban areas mostly face problems related to noise and lack of living space.

3.4 The question of affordability

Across the European Union, young people face a range of challenges related to housing affordability and quality. High rental prices, limited availability of affordable housing options, and an increasingly competitive urban housing market are common issues (Pape, 2024). 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). And, as many studies have indicated, rising housing costs, coupled with precarious employment conditions, have led to delayed home-leaving and extended reliance on family households (OECD, 2019; Eurofound, 2018). These challenges are compounded by structural shifts in labour markets and welfare policies that often fail to provide sufficient support for independent living among youth (Klanjšek, 2022). Similar trends could be observed in Slovenia and Croatia as both countries have been grappling with long-standing housing market challenges even before the pandemic. In Slovenia, high housing prices relative to income, coupled with a shortage of affordable rental options, have made it difficult for young people to secure independent living arrangements (Zupančič & Novak, 2021; Klanjšek 2022). Specifically, 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 (Klanjšek, 2024). Importantly, housing concerns proved to be significantly connected to stress (Klanjšek, 2024; Figure 3.8.), which is known to be a significant factor that impacts (mental) health (Pearlin et al., 1981).



Source: Klanjšek, 2024

Figure 3.8: Youth having housing concerns and association with stress, 2000-2024 (%)

Similarly, in Croatia, limited access to affordable housing and a tendency of young adults to remain in family homes well into adulthood are symptomatic of deeper structural issues in the housing market (Novak & Petrovic, 2020). In Croatia, the post-2020 surge in real estate prices and rents has created an acute affordability crisis.

Mid-income youth, who are often overlooked in policy discussions, struggle with high living costs, unattainable loans, and inflationary pressures. A 2024 study notes that Croatia's housing market fails to meet international obligations for ensuring the right to affordable housing, with youth disproportionately affected by speculative pricing and limited social housing initiatives (Lulić, Muhvić & Pašuld, 2024).

The following quotes from the participants in the qualitative part of our study (focus groups) depict the worries of young people in Croatia:

"As far as the housing problems go, as we all can see, the prices are skyrocketing while salaries stay the same. I don't think anyone can actually afford to rent, unless two or three people live together. Our city has enough, I believe, space to be able to provide some apartments or accommodation at normal prices, or at least some laws should be made to bring down these simply unrealistic housing prices in the city. And there should be a reduction or limit on what's now become popular – worker accommodation. It's become absurd. Because before, apartments for students used to cost 200 euros per month – now a bed in an apartment with 18 beds costs 200 euros. That's not normal."

(Female, high school student & employed, Croatia)

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges by disrupting labour markets and increasing the financial insecurity of many young Europeans (Bambra et al., 2020). Lockdowns and social distancing measures have further highlighted inadequacies in housing conditions, particularly in urban areas where overcrowding and limited living space can exacerbate stress and impede effective remote working and learning. In this context, the intersection of housing instability, economic uncertainty, and mental health has become a critical area of inquiry for policymakers and researchers alike. Additionally, the pandemic has further illuminated the precarious nature of youth housing. Economic disruptions have led to increased uncertainty about future housing prospects, and the shift to remote education and work has emphasised the importance of adequate living conditions. Youth in both Slovenia and Croatia are now facing compounded challenges: not only must they contend with the high cost of housing, but they must also navigate the effects of overcrowded or substandard living environments on their educational outcomes and mental health. Due to the number of these reasons, some of them even consider leaving the country and 'stop fighting'. The following quote from one Croatian focus group participant adds to their views:

"I think most young people don't feel any kind of support, and we all feel like we have to fight for ourselves to make things better. For example, many of my female colleagues have already left my profession and gone abroad to find better-paying jobs. And even for me, that option isn't completely off the table, because more and more, every day, you realise that your supposedly normal and modest life goals are becoming more and more out of reach for the middle class, which really shouldn't be the case. Everyone should be able to solve their housing situation, have a stable job, and not have to wonder whether they'll be able to cover all the bills and food by the end of the month – let alone save something for emergencies. And as long as the standard of living means that most people live in constant fear of what tomorrow brings, and no one reaches out to help you but you have to do everything alone... Most people choose to stop fighting in their own country and instead, take the easier route – go somewhere they'll be more respected, better paid, and able to live, at least somewhat, a normal life."

(Female, employed, Croatia)

In sum, at the structural level, the challenges facing youth housing in the EU – and in Slovenia and Croatia in particular – are rooted in broader socioeconomic and policy dynamics. The housing affordability crisis is driven by factors such as market deregulation, urbanisation, and insufficient public investment in social housing (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2019). Aligned with the latter, some of our focus group participants shared reflections on the better times, comparing the housing situation in former Yugoslavia and today's Croatia:

"I'd also like to say something about the housing issue – and I know I'll sound like an old grandma – but back in Yugoslavia, you could sign up for an apartment and somehow get one that way. Now there's absolutely nothing – everyone's just stuck with loans, debts, and so on."

(Female, high school student & employed, Croatia)

While governments in both Slovenia and Croatia have introduced policies aimed at increasing housing accessibility for young people, the effectiveness of these measures remains mixed. Critics argue that piecemeal approaches fail to address the underlying issues of income inequality, labour market precarity, and the lack of coordinated social policies (Zupančič & Novak, 2021). Recent studies suggest that integrated policy strategies—combining housing, education, and employment initiatives—are necessary to create sustainable improvements in youth living conditions (Eurofound, 2018).

The following quotes from a focus group participant in Croatia echoes that need for integrated policy strategies:

"What young people might need is the opportunity and the feeling that they can achieve what they want through their own effort, knowledge, and dedication. Whether that means, you know, I've finished university, I studied for this profession, and I know that after graduation I'll have a stable and well-paid job – not something extravagant, just a job that allows me to live a quality life. Or, for example, knowing that if something happens, I can count on the support of the local community, and that policies will reflect what's actually happening instead of always being the opposite. Speaking from a more professional role, I'd say young people need the opportunity for their voices to be heard, and to be more included in decision-making in general."

(Female, employed, Croatia)

"Everything is very interconnected – from mental health, to housing, to employment opportunities, and everything else."

(Female, high school student & employed, Croatia)

The pandemic has further emphasised the need for such comprehensive interventions, as the intersection of economic insecurity and inadequate housing has led to significant adverse outcomes in mental health and overall well-being (Bambra et al., 2020).

In both countries, the accessibility of one's own living space and the possibility of housing independence remain major problems faced by young people.

3.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The main findings of this chapter are as follows:

- COVID-19 Impact: The pandemic exacerbated housing insecurity among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, leading to increased financial strain, mental health challenges (stress, anxiety), and forced relocations (e.g., moving back to parental homes). Campus closures and job losses in sectors like retail/hospitality disproportionately affected young people.

- Delayed Home-Leaving: In Slovenia and Croatia, youth leave home later than the EU average (Slovenia: 29.1 years; Croatia: 31.8 years). Financial constraints are a primary barrier, with 48% of Slovenian and 41% of Croatian youth unable to afford independent living despite wanting to.
- Overcrowding and Housing Deprivation: Croatia has nearly triple Slovenia's youth overcrowding rate (17% vs. 10% lack own rooms). Housing deprivation (overcrowding, poor conditions) correlates with lower household income, urban living, and reduced well-being (e.g., higher depression, lower life satisfaction).
- Affordability Crisis: Housing prices in Croatia rose 74% and in Slovenia 86% (2015–2023), outpacing income growth. Both countries faces speculative pricing and insufficient social housing, disproportionately affecting mid-income youth.
- Structural Challenges: Labour market precarity, insufficient public investment in housing, and market deregulation underpin affordability issues. Existing policies in both countries lack coordination and fail to address systemic inequalities.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations were developed:

- Significantly increase public investment in social housing and rent-controlled units to
- expand affordable options for young people.
- Introduce rent subsidies or offer tax incentives to landlords who provide affordable rental rates specifically for youth.
- Establish youth-focused housing grants or low-interest loan schemes to support smoother transitions into independent living.
- Strengthen minimum wage regulations and improve job security in sectors with high youth employment, such as the gig economy.
- Integrate housing policies with employment initiatives, like apprenticeships and remote work infrastructure, and embed financial literacy training within education systems.
- Address regional disparities by tailoring policies to the distinct needs of urban and rural areas, for example, by incentivising developers to build affordable housing in high-demand locations.

- Implement anti-speculation measures, such as taxes on vacant properties and short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb), to discourage housing market distortions.
- Advocate for expanded EU-funded housing initiatives, including the Youth Guarantee programme, and promote knowledge-sharing platforms to replicate successful models like Finland's social housing system.
- Tackle youth housing challenges with a dual approach: prioritise immediate COVID-19 recovery while pursuing long-term structural reforms that balance affordability, quality, and accessibility, and ensure cross-sectoral support for youth well-being and economic resilience.

Addressing youth housing challenges requires a dual focus on immediate COVID-19 recovery and long-term structural reforms. Policies must balance affordability, quality, and accessibility while integrating cross-sectoral support to enhance youth well-being and economic resilience.

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4. YOUTH'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This chapter explores shifts in educational trajectories and student well-being in Croatia and Slovenia before (2018), during, and after (2023) the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that participation in formal education remains high, particularly in Slovenia, with girls more often enrolled in graduate studies. However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were disproportionately excluded from higher levels of education, with inequalities especially evident in Croatia at the primary and secondary levels. The pandemic negatively affected subjective well-being, most severely among girls and young people in lower levels of education. Stress levels were consistently high, with differing patterns across countries and education levels, and were strongly linked to diminished well-being and academic performance. During the pandemic, schools and universities acted as crucial support structures, partly mitigating adverse outcomes, yet disparities persisted post-pandemic. Educational aspirations remained generally strong, though shaped by gender and socioeconomic status, revealing both resilience and entrenched inequalities in youth education pathways.

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Over the past few decades, education has gained increasing global importance, driven by policies from organisations such as the United Nations, OECD, and the European Union. Their goals of promoting equitable access, improving quality to enhance the acquisition of knowledge and competencies, and fostering lifelong learning (see, for example, Europe 2020 strategy, 2010; Council of Europe, 2024) have spurred significant changes, notably the growth of secondary and tertiary education and recognition of non-formal and informal learning pathways. However, these trends were overshadowed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted people's lives and challenged the educational systems worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education systems worldwide, leading to school closures, a rapid shift from traditional classroom settings to online learning, and impacting students' educational outcomes and trajectories across different social strata (Schleicher, 2020; Engel et al., 2023). While these effects were felt globally, the specific experiences of students varied across different countries and contexts.

This chapter examines how the pandemic affected education in two Central European countries – Slovenia and Croatia. By analysing data on students' educational experiences, well-being, and aspirations before, during, and after the pandemic in these two nations, we can gain insights into both the shared challenges faced by education systems as well as the unique ways different countries responded to and were impacted by this unprecedented crisis.

The chapter begins by outlining the characteristics of the high school and university student populations in Slovenia and Croatia at the time of our research, providing important context for understanding the subsequent findings. We then explore how effectively both countries' educational systems responded to students' needs during various phases of the pandemic and addressed students' well-being during the pandemic, in the context of the role of schools as a source of support.

The final section of the chapter examines the post-pandemic era, evaluating the extent to which the current educational system effectively addresses the evolving needs of students. It emphasises the educational aspirations of young individuals, offering insights into how their objectives and motivations may have shifted as a

result of the pandemic. This chapter synthesises the principal findings and offers practical recommendations for enhancing educational policy and support mechanisms under both regular and crisis conditions.

4.1 Youth inclusion in education in Slovenia and Croatia

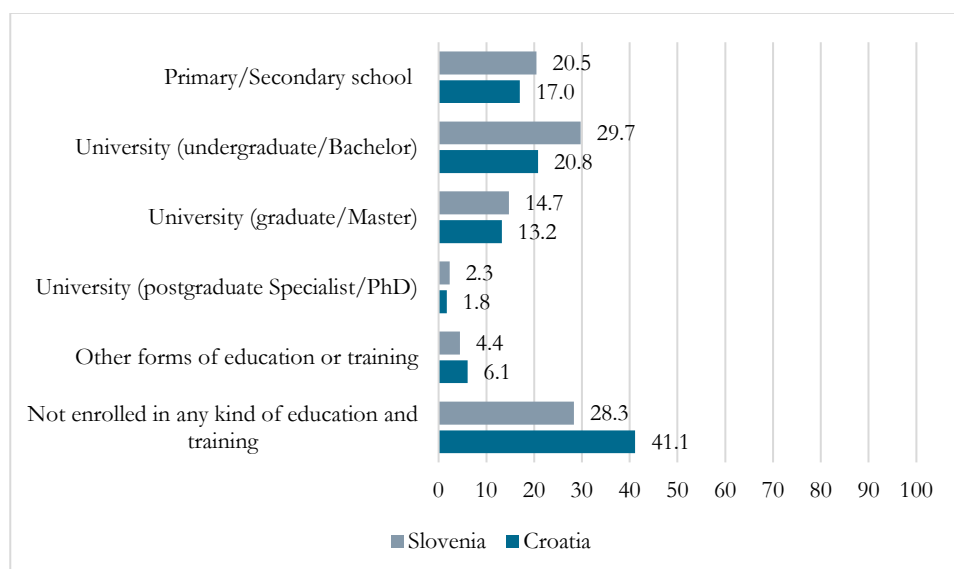
The latest OECD data (2024) show that Slovenia's enrolment rates in formal education remain among the highest compared to other EU member states: in 2022, Slovenia was placed 3rd in the 15-19 age group, with 94.8% enrolled, and 7th in the 20-29 age group, with 34.9% enrolled. Although tertiary education enrolment rates have been declining slowly by 2023 (SURS, 2024), the share of tertiary-educated young people in Slovenia continues to rise from a longitudinal perspective (Eurostat database, 2024). Thus, since 2014, the share of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education has increased from 38.0% to 47.3% in 2022 and is above the EU-27 average (42%).

Croatia's enrolment rates in 2022 for the 15-19 age group were somewhat lower than those for Slovenia, with 85.8% enrolled, and the enrolment rate for the 20-29 age group in Croatia was 28.3%. Like Slovenia, Croatia also had an increased percentage of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education. Since 2014, the share of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education has increased from 30.8% to 36% in 2022, which is below the EU-27 average (42%).

In this study, YO-VID22: Youth Well-being and Support Structures Before, during, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic, our research samples consisted of 71.7% of youth included in some form of education in Slovenia, and 58.9% of youth included in some form of education in Croatia. In both countries, most of our respondents were enrolled in undergraduate university-level programmes (29.7% for Slovenia and 20.8% for Croatia), and the lowest share of the sample in both countries consisted of postgraduate students (below 3%). The detailed structure of the samples from both countries is shown in Figure 4.1.

The enrolment of young people in the education system differs by gender in the sample of young people from Slovenia ($\chi^2 = 11.845$; $p = 0.037$) and in the sample of young people from Croatia ($\chi^2 = 12.002$; $p = 0.035$). In Slovenia, a slightly higher proportion of boys attended primary and secondary education (57.8%), and

postgraduate studies (72.4%). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of girls were enrolled in graduate studies (54.5%) and other forms of education and training (52.6%). Trends were similar in Croatia, where a slightly higher proportion of boys attended primary and secondary education (55.8%), and postgraduate studies (71.4%). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of girls were enrolled in graduate studies (56.9%). Unlike in Slovenia, in Croatia, young men (59.5%) attend other forms of education and training.



Note: given that for the purposes of this chapter, the data on students aged 16 and over were analysed, the first category, the current educational status (primary/secondary school), primarily refers to secondary school. The research conducted in 2018 included 14-year-old students, and therefore, the specified item form was used.

Figure 4.1. Educational status of youth in Slovenia and Croatia in 2023 (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The enrolment of young people in the education system differs in relation to socioeconomic status¹ (SES) both in the sample of young people from Slovenia ($\chi^2 = 51.507$; $p = 0.000$) and in the sample of young people from Croatia ($\chi^2 = 39.664$;

¹ As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item "Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?" was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1 - We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

$p=0.001$). In Slovenia, young people with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be enrolled in other forms of education or training. Differences in access to education are most noticeable at the postgraduate specialist or doctoral study level, in which only 3.3% of young people with lower socioeconomic status are included. Accordingly, the proportion of young people of lower socioeconomic status who do not attend any form of education or training is somewhat higher. In Croatia, young people with lower socioeconomic status are also more often outside the education system. Unlike in Slovenia, young people of lower socioeconomic status are somewhat more likely to be enrolled in postgraduate studies and other forms of education or training, which may indicate a more inclusive educational system, as it demonstrates greater sensitivity of the aforementioned levels of the education system to one of the most vulnerable groups of young people (youth with lower SES).

In both Slovenia and Croatia, there is an increasing trend in the share of tertiary-educated young people. There are still gender differences in involvement in certain forms of education and formal education, especially higher levels of education, which is still not equally accessible to young people from families of lower socioeconomic status.

4.2 Students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the well-being and mental health of students, as well as the educational process. During the pandemic, due to physical distancing and social restrictions, many students experienced increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness (Amerio et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Campos et al., 2024). The transition to online and remote learning has been challenging for many students, particularly because of their lack of structure, technical issues, inadequate learning space, and financial constraints. Social isolation has prevented the normal development of social skills and interpersonal relationships, which has particularly affected students at key stages of development (Gadermann, 2022). In our study, the well-being of young people was observed from the perspective of subjective well-being (SWB; Diener et al., 1999), which includes aspects of pleasant affect (happiness, joy, satisfaction, and pleasure), unpleasant affect (discomfort, sadness, fear, anger), loneliness, meaningful social relationships (feeling important to others, feeling supported by others), and the sense of meaning and purpose of

life. Young people assessed aspects of their well-being during and after the pandemic.

In Croatia and Slovenia, young people in the education system had significantly lower subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic ($M_{Slovenia}=3.23$; $SD=.811$; $N=928$; $t=16.653$; $df=927$; $p<0.01$; $M_{Croatia}=3.28$; $SD=.757$; $N=719$; $t=14.60.01$) than those in the post-pandemic period ($M_{Slovenia}=3.62$; $SD=.752$; $N=928$; $M_{Croatia}=3.65$; $SD=.739$; $N=719$). Both countries confirmed this trend, with no significant differences in young people during the COVID-19 or post-pandemic periods. Figure 4.2. shows students' subjective well-being in both countries by gender.

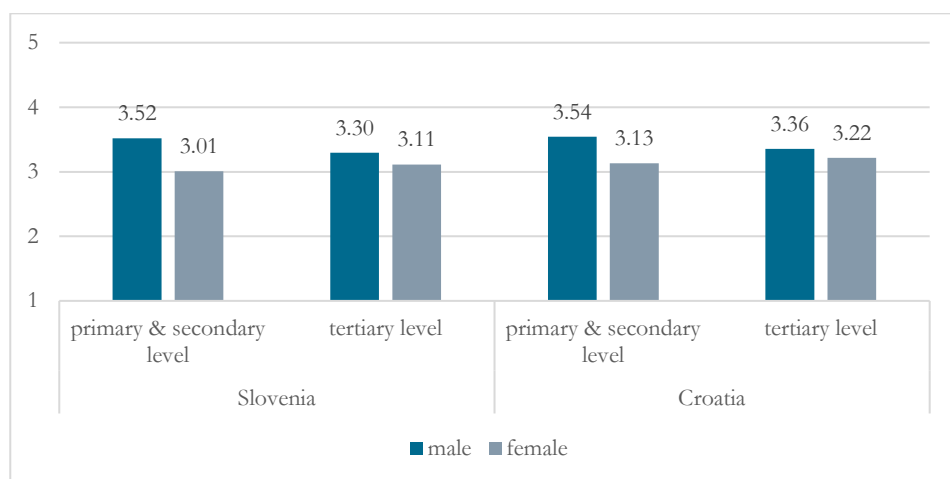


Figure 4.2. Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Croatia by gender

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Statistically significant gender differences in the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic were found in both countries, with the differences being more pronounced at lower levels of education. In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, girls ($M=3.01$; $SD=.800$) reported significantly lower subjective well-being ($t=4.855$; $df=261$; $p=.000$) than boys ($M=3.52$; $SD=.875$). Although at the higher education level, gender differences were less pronounced, they were still statistically significant ($t=2.868$; $df=549$; $p=.004$), and girls also

reported lower levels of well-being ($M=3.11$; $SD=.777$) than boys ($M=3.30$; $SD=.784$). The same trend was observed in Croatia. Girls enrolled in primary and secondary education had statistically significantly lower subjective well-being ($M=3.13$; $SD=.815$) than boys ($M=3.54$, $SD=.726$; $t=3.830$; $df=204$; $p=.000$). As in Slovenia, at the level of higher education in Croatia, gender differences were also less pronounced but significant ($t=1.962$; $df=430$; $p=.050$), and girls also reported lower levels of well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic ($M=3.22$; $SD=.706$) than boys ($M=3.36$; $SD=.777$). These findings are consistent with those of other international studies (e.g., Mendolia et al., 2022; Christensen, 2024), which points to gender differences in coping with the pandemic in educational settings, with girls' well-being being more affected than that of boys.

We also analysed how the pandemic affected students' well-being in relation to their socioeconomic status. Figure 4.3. shows data for both Croatia and Slovenia.

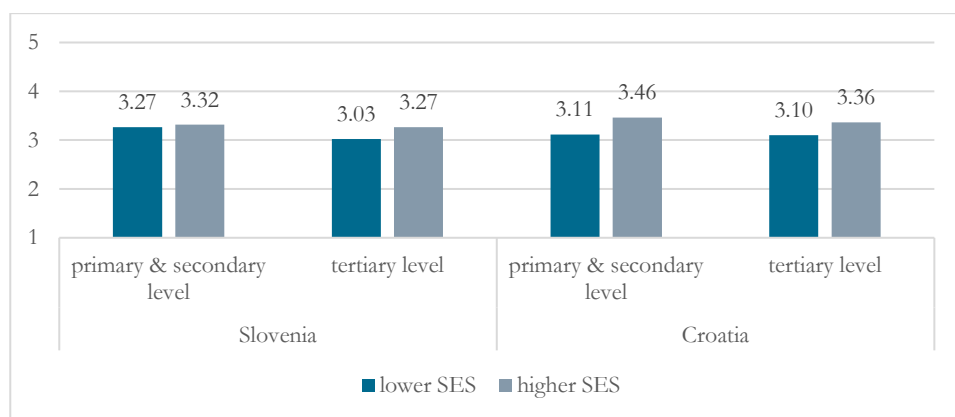


Figure 4.3. Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Croatia by socio-economic status

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was relatively stable, regardless of their socioeconomic status. At the higher education level, statistically significant differences in well-being were found ($t=3.363$; $df=598$; $p=.001$), with higher levels of well-being reported by young people of higher SES ($M=3.27$; $SD=.777$) compared with young people of lower SES ($M=3.03$; $SD=.778$). Statistically

significant differences in the well-being of young people in relation to socioeconomic status were present in the Croatian education system, both at the level of primary and secondary education ($t=2.974$; $df=204$; $p=.003$) and higher education level ($t=3.362$; $df=430$; $p=.001$). At the level of primary and secondary education, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was statistically significantly lower among young people coming from lower SES families ($M=3.11$; $SD=.693$) compared to young people coming from higher SES families ($M=3.46$; $SD=.810$). At the tertiary education level, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was statistically significantly lower among young people with lower SES ($M=3.10$; $SD=.723$) than among young people with higher SES ($M=3.36$; $SD=.777$).

These findings show that the impact of the pandemic was not equally felt across socioeconomic groups. Students from less affluent families reported more significant negative effects on their lives than their wealthier counterparts, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support for vulnerable populations.

“Well, I wouldn't agree that education suffered the most. I mean, maybe at the beginning, it didn't seem like anything, but later on, the professors got used to it, and online learning really has its advantages, but it can't replace a normal school. I think what suffered the most were actually friendships.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

“Since I was in the first year of high school, we didn't really get to know each other as a class. We came to school, more or less, we didn't know each other, and then I would say that what caught us the most was that we didn't even get to know each other properly, so we were in those online classes, and we hardly knew much about each other, and that's where maybe that got us down, but in those first years, later on, we managed to make up for it all and we still managed to connect at the class level.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

The pandemic has significantly disrupted the well-being of young people involved in the education system in both countries. Among the most vulnerable are girls, young people involved in lower levels of education, and young people from families of lower socio-economic status.

4.2.1 Youth well-being in the context of educational institutions

In Slovenia, 78.8% of young people estimate that their daily life at school (primary and secondary level) is difficult and stressful, while 76.7% estimate the same for daily life at university (tertiary level). In Croatia, 77.1% of young people enrolled in primary and secondary education assessed daily life at school as challenging and stressful, while 82.9% of young people enrolled in tertiary education assessed the same for their daily life at university. Among young people in Slovenia, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between students' subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and perceived levels of stress at school ($\rho = -.227$; $p < .001$) and at university ($\rho = -.215$; $p < .001$) with the subjective well-being of young people increasing as the perceived level of stress at school decreases. These trends were recorded among boys in primary and secondary education ($\rho = -.256$; $p < .001$), but not among girls. At the tertiary education level, these trends were recorded among both sexes, both boys ($\rho = -.202$; $p < .001$) and girls ($\rho = -.215$; $p < .001$). Unlike in Slovenia, in Croatia, despite the high perception of stress levels in everyday life at school and university, the above-mentioned results were not confirmed.

4.2.2 Correlation of youth well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and academic achievement

In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, 23.7% of young people had sufficient or good academic performance, while 76.3% had very good or excellent academic performance. In comparison, at the primary and secondary education levels in Croatia, as many as 93.8% of the students had very good or excellent academic performance. At the tertiary education level in Slovenia, slightly more than one-fifth of young people (21.2%) achieved sufficient or good academic performance, while at the same level of education in Croatia, the share of young people who achieved lower academic performance was only 13.4%.

Among young people in Slovenia, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between students' subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and academic achievement ($\rho = .154$; $p < .001$) at the university level, and youth well-being increased as academic achievement increased. This trend was confirmed for both girls ($\rho = .162$; $p < .001$) and boys ($\rho = .175$; $p < .001$). At the primary and

secondary education levels, a significant positive correlation was found only for girls ($\rho=.276$; $p<.001$). Despite the high proportion of young people with high academic achievement in Croatia, the above trends were not confirmed.

4.2.3 Educational institutions as a source of support during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions in many countries have played an important role in supporting students' well-being and mental health. Some schools have implemented different programmes, such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices, to foster student resilience and a sense of belonging (Nadeem and Van Meter, 2023).

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their educational experience during the pandemic.

“If you ask me, it was crazy. Extremely new and negative experience, ranging from family to school. /.../ The main problem within the context of education was transition from primary school to high school, which happened during the lockdown, or better say did not happen. How do I adjust to the new school environment? It was all so sudden, and we (young people) were all alone in this. /.../ During that time, it was hard for me, I had no motivation, bad grades in school time and nobody to turn to for support. But things got even worse after the pandemic, when we returned to school. So, the pandemic was over, and we were thrown back into the classrooms, again no transition, no support...”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Well, I think education suffered the most during the pandemic, because at the very beginning, we were, literally, not really worried about school at all because, the teachers were just sending us assignments and things like that and it wasn't like teaching at all. And, and after that, when we had already adapted and when the teachers themselves were figuring out how it should actually look, I think it was going in the right direction, but that was, I think we definitely lost about six months of teaching due to some, some lack of effort and dissatisfaction with the schooling itself. And I think that's reflected a lot now and that some things, for example, while we don't know in class, then that was, that was under the corona and things like that, so I think education suffered the most.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

In our research, we analysed the support provided by educational institutions for students in Slovenia and Croatia at different educational levels. The findings are shown in Figure 4.4.

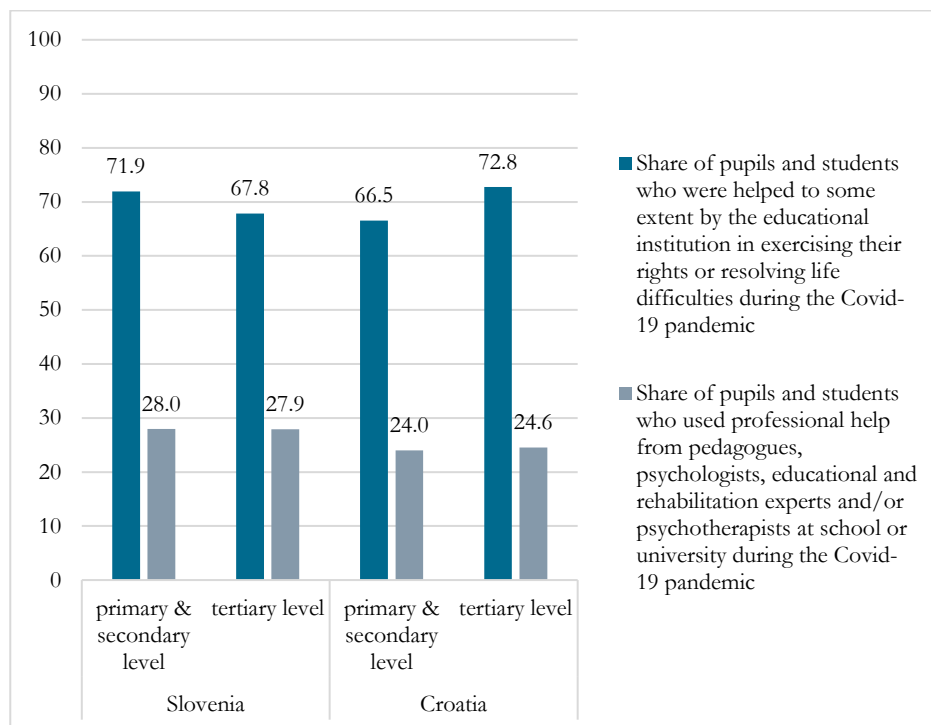


Figure 4.4: The share of pupils and students who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, used the support of an educational institution or an expert in the field of mental health at school or university (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The school and university support use analyses showed no statistically significant differences between Croatia and Slovenia at the primary or university levels. However, a slightly higher proportion of students in Slovenia (in both primary and secondary schools) perceived greater support at the institutional level. In contrast, this was the case among university students in Croatia. No significant gender differences were found in Croatia or Slovenia at the tertiary level. In Croatia, at the primary and secondary school levels, boys were more likely than girls to perceive support from school ($\chi^2 = 8.008$; $p=0.005$). On the other hand, the results on expert

support showed no significant gender differences in the use of expert support in Croatia or Slovenia, regardless of whether the students were in primary or secondary school or university. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences between Croatia and Slovenia in terms of expert support usage at the primary school or university levels. However, the students in Slovenia tended to use educational expert assistance slightly more often.

The importance of educational institutions as a support system to young people can be illustrated with a quote from focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) which highlights the youth's reflection on their educational experience during the pandemic.

"I think that during the pandemic itself, what we missed the most was some support from, for example, the school pedagogue because she was already older and then it all turned out that way, she didn't understand technology, I think that kind of support was just to explain to us that we have to endure it now, what the measures are or something like that, just to introduce us to that world and how it will work now - I think we really missed that."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

During the pandemic, more than three quarters of young people assessed everyday life at school or university as difficult and stressful, with the perceived level of stress significantly affecting students' well-being during the pandemic. In this context, the support of schools and higher education institutions was of utmost importance for the well-being of students.

4.3 Students' well-being in education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected students' well-being in educational settings, leading to psychosocial, mental, and educational challenges. Addressing the needs of students' post-pandemic necessitates a systematic and multidimensional strategy that encompasses mental health support, social assistance, and adaptation of educational systems to the new realities imposed by the pandemic. We analysed student well-being variations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia and Slovenia.

In both Slovenia and Croatia, young individuals within the education system exhibited significantly lower levels of subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (MSlovenia=3.23; SD=.811; N=928; $t=16.653$; $df=927$, $p<0.01$; MCroatia=3.28; SD=.757; N=719; $t=14.650$; $df=718$; $p<0.01$) than in the post-pandemic period (MSlovenia=3.62; SD=.752; N=928; MCroatia=3.65; SD=.739; N=719). This pattern was consistently observed in both countries, with no significant differences in the subjective well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic or post-pandemic period. Figure 4.5. illustrates the mean scores of students' subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia disaggregated by gender.

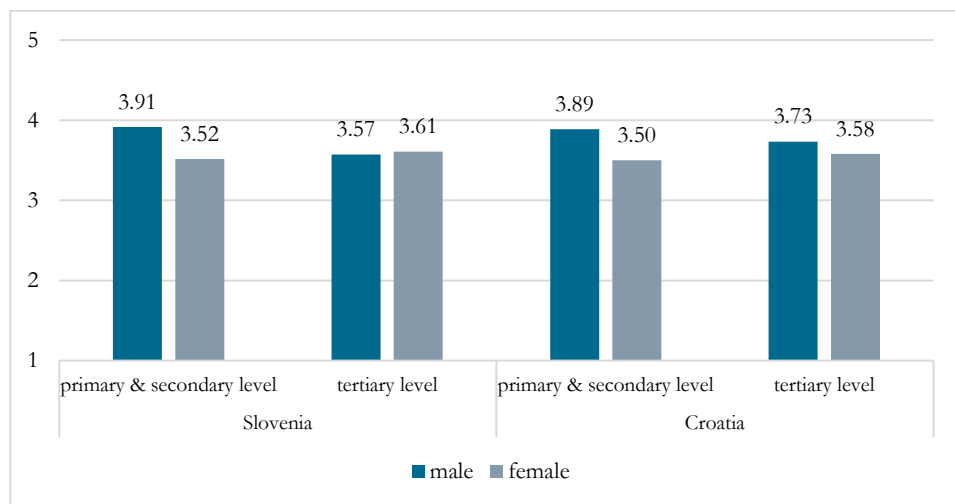


Figure 4.5: Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia by gender

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

During the post-pandemic period, both Slovenia and Croatia demonstrated statistically significant gender differences in student well-being. These differences were particularly pronounced at lower educational levels, except among higher education students in Slovenia. In Slovenia, female students at the primary and secondary education levels ($M=3.52$; $SD=.785$) reported significantly lower subjective well-being than male students ($M=3.91$; $SD=.729$), as indicated by statistical analysis ($t=4.238$; $df=261$; $p=.000$). However, at the higher education level, gender differences were less pronounced and did not reach statistical significance.

In Croatia, female students in primary and secondary education also exhibited significantly lower subjective well-being ($M=3.50$; $SD=.785$) than their male counterparts ($M=3.89$; $SD=.736$), with statistically significant results ($t=3.648$; $df=204$; $p=.000$). Although gender differences were less pronounced at the higher education level in Croatia, they remained statistically significant ($t=2.244$; $df=430$; $p=.025$), and female students reported lower well-being ($M=3.58$; $SD=.739$) than male students ($M=3.73$; $SD=.690$). These findings are consistent with the existing literature on gender and well-being in education, which suggests that female students report lower subjective well-being than male students (Amerio et al., 2022; Campos et al., 2024).

We analysed the relationship between subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period and students' socioeconomic status in Slovenia and Croatia. The findings are presented in Figure 4.6.

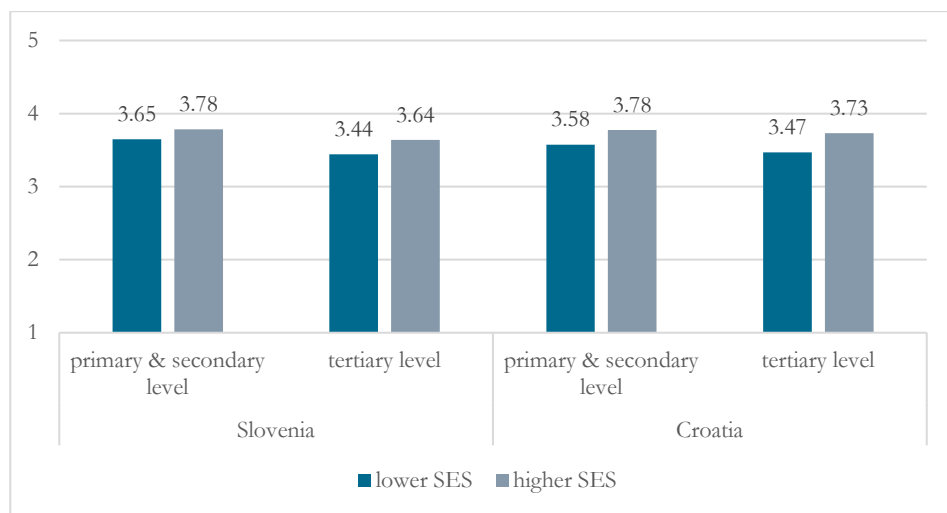


Figure 4.6: Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia by socio-economic status

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In the post-pandemic era, the well-being of young individuals in primary and secondary education in both Slovenia and Croatia has shown relative stability, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the context of higher education, statistically significant differences in well-being were observed ($t=2.985$; $df=598$; $p=.003$), with young individuals from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds reporting greater well-being ($M=3.64$; $SD=.721$) than their counterparts from lower SES backgrounds ($M=3.44$; $SD=.733$). Notably, significant disparities in well-being related to socioeconomic status were also evident within the Croatian higher education sector ($t=3.557$; $df=430$; $p=.000$). During the post-pandemic period, students from lower-SES families exhibited significantly lower well-being ($M=3.47$; $SD=.703$) than those from higher-SES families ($M=3.73$; $SD=.712$). These findings corroborate the thesis that the pandemic has intensified pre-existing educational inequalities (Schleicher, 2020; Gee et al., 2023).

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups ($N=100$; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their educational experience in the post-pandemic period.

"I think the pandemic has taught us a lot of new things. Especially now in high school, where there are a lot of students from all over the county, and some are not from the county, and I think that's one thing that we actually, before the corona, we were doing some live projects and a lot of time was wasted, and I think that, actually, I kind of liked that part of the corona because we learned some new things that we hadn't even thought about before, but we definitely missed that, socializing in person, and when we went back to school, those masks were kind of the worst, especially in those summer months when it was 28 degrees in school, wearing a mask and those partitions, but somehow we survived that. Now, I don't know, the corona had almost no effect, I barely remember what it was like now, actually, I only have some good, good memories, socialising and that."

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

"I think Covid taught us, well me at least, that online connections are not the same as the real world social connections. We need other people, living people."

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

4.3.1 Youth well-being in the post-pandemic period in the context of educational institutions

In Slovenia, 78.8% of young individuals perceived their daily experiences in primary and secondary education as challenging and stressful, while 76.7% reported similar sentiments regarding their daily experiences at the tertiary level. In Croatia, 77.1% of young individuals enrolled in primary and secondary education considered their daily school life challenging and stressful, whereas 82.9% of those enrolled in tertiary education expressed the same assessment of their daily university life.

In a study of young individuals in Slovenia, a statistically significant negative correlation was identified between students' subjective well-being during the post-pandemic period and their perceived stress levels at both school ($\rho = -.298$; $p < .01$) and university ($\rho = -.211$; $p < .01$). Notably, the subjective well-being of these young individuals improved as perceived stress at school diminished. This pattern was observed among both male ($\rho = -.253$; $p < .01$) and female ($\rho = -.219$; $p < .05$) students enrolled in primary and secondary education.

At the tertiary education level, these trends were observed among both male ($\rho = -.265$; $p < .01$) and female students ($\rho = -.161$; $p < .01$). In contrast to Slovenia, despite the high perception of stress levels in daily academic life in Croatia, the aforementioned trends were not confirmed.

4.3.2 Correlation between youth well-being in the post-pandemic period and academic achievement

In Slovenia, a significant proportion of young individuals, 76.3%, at the primary and secondary education levels, achieved very good or excellent academic performance, while 23.7% attained sufficient or good performance. In contrast, in Croatia, a remarkable 93.8% of students at these educational levels demonstrated very good or excellent academic performance. At the tertiary education level in Slovenia, slightly more than one-fifth (21.2%) of young individuals achieved sufficient or good academic performance. Conversely, in Croatia, at the same educational level, only 13.4% of young individuals exhibited lower academic performance.

In Slovenia, a statistically significant positive correlation was identified between university students' subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period and academic achievement ($\rho=.152$; $p<.01$). This correlation indicates that as academic achievement increased, students' well-being increased. This pattern was observed in both female ($\rho=.112$; $p<.01$) and male students ($\rho=.191$; $p<.01$). In contrast, in Croatia, although a substantial proportion of young individuals exhibited high academic achievement, a significant positive correlation was evident only among university-level students ($\rho=.106$; $p<.05$). Such trends were not apparent at the primary and secondary education levels.

4.3.3 School as a source of support in the post-pandemic period

In the preceding section, we analysed how students used the support of educational institutions or experts in schools and universities during the pandemic. However, we were also interested in comparing this practice with that of the post-pandemic period. The results are shown in Figure 4.7.

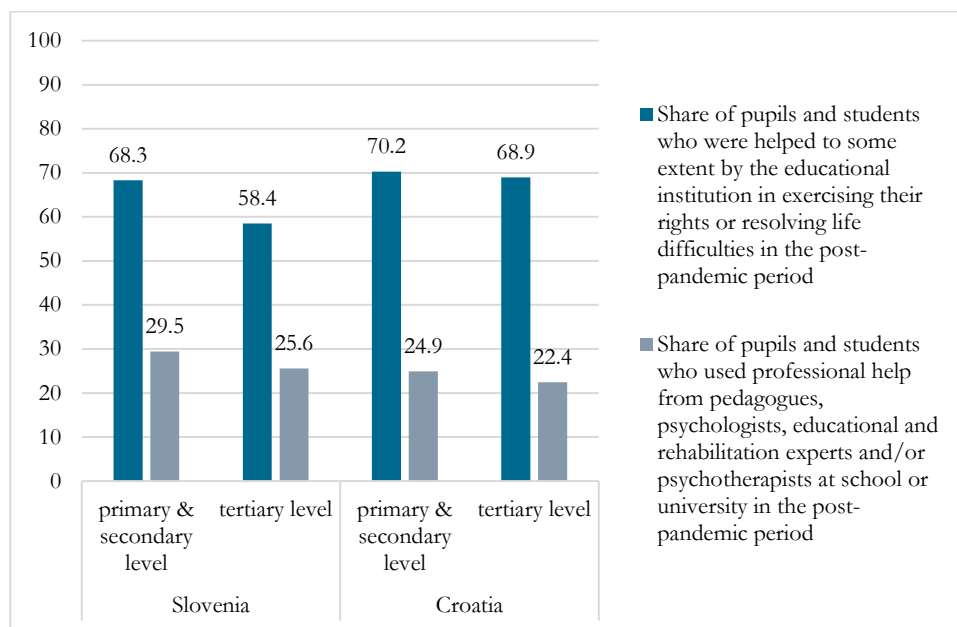


Figure 4.7: Share of pupils and students who used the support of an educational institution or an expert in the field of mental health at school or university in the post-pandemic period (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

We also examined gender disparities in accessing the aforementioned support. Concerning the utilisation of school or university support at the primary and secondary education levels, no statistically significant gender differences were identified in Croatia and Slovenia when using school support. Male and female students reported comparable levels of institutional support across these educational stages. However, gender-based differences emerged between the two countries at the tertiary level. In Slovenia, female university students were more likely than their male counterparts to perceive institutional support from their universities ($\chi^2=5.696$; $p=0.017$). Conversely, no significant gender differences were observed in Croatia's perception of university support.

The analysis of professional assistance utilisation revealed no statistically significant gender differences in engagement with expert support across all educational levels in Croatia and Slovenia. This finding is consistent across primary, secondary, and tertiary education in both nations. Both male and female students accessed professional support at comparable rates irrespective of their educational stage.

As the previous sections demonstrated inequalities in well-being and educational experiences, this analysis of aspirations provides further insight into the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic on educational trajectories and outcomes.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their experiences and perception of educational institutions as a source of support in the post-pandemic period.

“Well, I would also agree that we don't really have any kind of support, that it's very difficult, uh, to find someone, some kind of expert in these moments of crisis since it's widespread today. (...) one person can't reach a professor, let alone negotiate with all the professors, which I understand, but also, let's say, the fact that you don't have any support, in that real sense, that's very bad because there are many, many people who have very great potential, who could do great things for themselves and for society, but they simply don't have the appropriate support and I wouldn't just say that for my faculty, but in general in Croatia, there's not too much focus on that.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I think we should be able to talk to the homeroom teacher during those class periods. Most of the time, we are either let go or we just don't do anything, and then the whole point of the whole form time is lost. There, we should maybe talk about the problems we have or have homeroom teachers come to us or offer some advice. And then when we don't have that class period, we don't have the opportunity to tell them.

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

In the aftermath of the pandemic, despite students reporting better subjective well-being, they continue to experience high levels of stress and difficulties at school and in higher education institutions, and therefore support and assistance aimed at all young people, especially the most vulnerable groups, is still needed.

The following section analyses data on students' educational aspirations in Slovenia and Croatia, comparing pre-pandemic and post-pandemic trends. It examines how factors like gender and socioeconomic status influence aspirations, and whether the pandemic has altered young people's educational goals.

4.4 Educational aspirations of youth in Croatia and Slovenia

The pandemic has influenced young people's educational aspirations. Research indicates that while some students' aspirations have been affected by the challenges faced during the pandemic, others have shown resilience and a committed focus on their educational goals. In our research, we were especially interested in youth aspirations about higher education because they are central to modern youth identities. Thus, it is unsurprising that their educational aspirations were generally high since around two-thirds of Slovenian youth (73.7%) wanted to acquire a university degree (Figure 4.9). Similar indicators were found in Croatia, where over 60% of young people (63.2%) aspire to obtain a higher education degree. In contrast to Slovenia, where one-fourth of young people want to finish high school, Croatia's share is slightly higher (35.6%). Figure 4.8 shows the educational aspirations of youth in Slovenia and Croatia in the post-pandemic period.

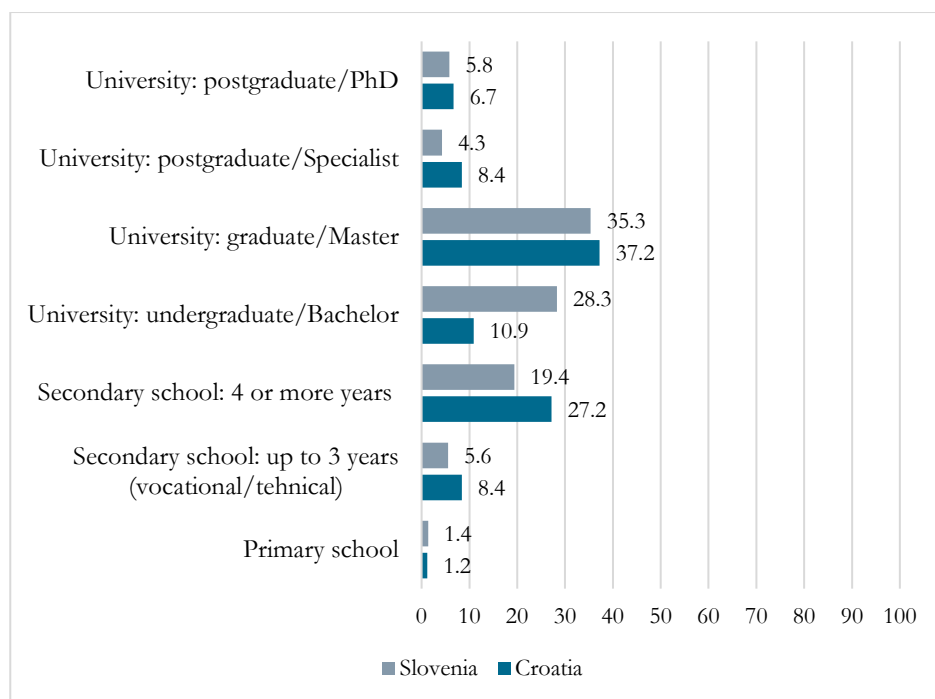


Figure 4.8. Educational aspirations of Slovenian and Croatian young people in the post-pandemic period (2023) (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

4.4.1 Aspirational trends among young people in Slovenia and Croatia in the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) period

Compared to before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, young people's educational aspirations in Croatia are relatively stable. There was a difference in aspirations in Slovenia in the post-pandemic period compared with the pre-pandemic period ($\chi^2 = 36.799$; $p = 0.000$). There has been an increase in the proportion of young people whose highest desired level of education is four-year secondary school (from 12.8% in the pre-pandemic period to 19.4% in the post-pandemic period). In comparison, there has been a decrease in the proportion of young people who want to complete postgraduate specialist studies (from 7.1% in the pre-pandemic period to 4.3% in the post-pandemic period) and postgraduate doctoral studies (from 10.3% in the pre-pandemic period to 5.8% in the post-pandemic period).

Between 2018 and 2023, there was a shift towards more practical and intermediate educational goals, particularly in specialist and secondary schools. At the same time, aspirations for Master's and PhD degrees have declined, suggesting a growing awareness of their time, cost, and perceived return on investment.

4.4.2 Students' gender and educational aspirations

In Slovenia and Croatia, statistically significant gender differences in young people's aspirations were found (χ^2 Slovenia=29.598; $p=0.00$; χ^2 Croatia=36.409; $p=0.00$). In both countries, girls had higher educational aspirations than boys did. In Slovenia, boys were significantly more likely to complete three years (7.8% of boys, compared to 3.1% of girls) and four- or five-year secondary school (21.5% of boys, compared to 16.9% of girls) as the highest level of education. Gender differences are not present in aspirations at the undergraduate level. However, girls are significantly more likely than boys to obtain a higher education diploma, more precisely, to complete a graduate study (Master's; 41.1% of girls, compared to 30% of boys). Gender differences are also not present at the postgraduate specialist and postgraduate doctoral studies levels. Similar trends in the educational aspirations of girls and boys have also been observed in Croatia. In Croatia, 52.8% of girls wanted to complete higher education compared to 43.6% of boys. Unlike girls, boys in Croatia were significantly more likely to choose three years (11.2% of boys, compared to 5.4% of girls) and four- or five-year secondary schools as the highest level of education (31.5% of boys, compared to 22.6% of girls). Girls (17.5%) aspire to complete postgraduate specialist or doctoral studies at the highest level of education more often than boys (13%) do.

These findings align with international research on gender differences in educational aspirations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies have examined how gender influences educational aspirations of adolescents and young adults, which reveal nuanced and context-dependent patterns across countries and educational systems. In the UK, Hartas (2023) found that girls, particularly those from vulnerable groups, were more likely than boys to aspire to post-16 education, especially academic tracks such as A-levels. A similar trend was observed in Italy (Bozzato, 2023), where girls expressed more hope and concern about their future than did boys. These differences were associated with greater self-efficacy and perceived academic success among female students, suggesting that emotional and cognitive

engagement in school life remains gendered in the post-pandemic context (Bozzato, 2023). In addition, researchers in Finland found that girls were more inclined to pursue academic education, whereas boys tended to prefer vocational pathways (Laurell et al., 2022).

4.4.3 Students' socio-economic differences and educational aspirations

Research on differences in educational aspirations based on socioeconomic status consistently shows that students from higher SES backgrounds tend to have higher educational and career aspirations than those from lower SES backgrounds; students from low SES families are less likely to set high educational goals, often due to limited access to resources, role models, and career guidance, which contributes to an "aspirations gap" (Sirin, 2005; Thapliyal & Joshi, 2014; Burger & Mortimer, 2021).

In other words, their families' socioeconomic status greatly influences young people's educational aspirations. The share of young people with the lowest socioeconomic status (do not have enough money for basic bills and food/have enough money for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes) in Slovenia and Croatia is 7%. The share of young people with enough money for food, clothes, and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (fridges, TV, etc.) in Slovenia is 23%, and in Croatia it is 27%. The share of young people living in families that can afford more expensive things, but not expensive things such as a car or an apartment, is 46% in Slovenia and 53% in Croatia, while the share of young people with the highest socioeconomic status (who can afford everything they need for a good standard of living) is 17% in Slovenia and 20% in Croatia. In both countries, statistically significant differences in the educational aspirations of young people were found in relation to socio-economic status (χ^2 Slovenia=76.120; $p=0.00$; χ^2 Croatia=59.227; $p=0.00$), with educational aspirations of young people generally increasing with higher socio-economic status. In Slovenia, the educational aspirations of young people with the lowest socioeconomic status most often remain at the level of completing four-year secondary school (34%), followed by undergraduate studies (Bachelor's, 27.7%), graduate studies (Master's, 16%), three-year secondary school (10.6%), and primary school (5.3%). In contrast, the educational aspirations of young people with the highest socioeconomic status are directed towards higher levels of education. As many as 43.1% of young people with the highest socio-economic status aspire to complete graduate studies (Master's), and

28.7% aspire to complete undergraduate studies (Bachelor's). In comparison, 13.4% aspire to complete postgraduate studies (specialist or doctoral). In Croatia, slightly more than half of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status (52.3%) plan to complete secondary school as the highest level of education, 16.3% a three-year school, and 36% a four-year school, while almost 5% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status do not plan to continue their education after completing primary school (4.7%). Slightly more than a third of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status would like to complete an undergraduate degree (Bachelor's degree, 9.3%) or a graduate degree (Master's degree, 24.4%). Like Slovenia, the educational aspirations of young people from the highest socioeconomic status are directed towards higher levels of education. 45.8% of them plan to complete an undergraduate degree (Bachelor's, 9.2) or a graduate degree (Master's, 36.6%), while 21% aspire to complete a postgraduate degree (specialist, doctoral).

These results are in line with international research, which shows that socioeconomic status strongly shapes educational aspirations. Higher SES is associated with greater access to resources and support, leading to higher aspirations and academic achievement, whereas lower SES students face multiple barriers that reduce their educational ambitions.

Although educational aspirations of students in Croatia are relatively stable, in Slovenia, compared to the pre-pandemic period, there are higher aspirations of students towards more practical and intermediate educational goals. Gender and socioeconomic inequalities in access to education for young people are still present and need to be addressed.

4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) periods highlight important shifts in the educational trajectories of young people in both Slovenia and Croatia. It also points to elements of youth resilience in times of crisis and the effectiveness of educational institutions' responses to youth needs during challenging times. The main findings are:

- Young people's participation in formal education, particularly tertiary education, remains high compared to the EU rates, especially in Slovenia. In both countries, there was a prevalence of girls enrolled in graduate studies. Moreover, both countries register differences in access to education for students from families with lower socioeconomic status, who are more often outside the education system. In Croatia, in comparison to Slovenia, postgraduate education and other forms of education or training are more accessible to the most vulnerable young people.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a measurable and nuanced impact on both countries' educational outcomes and students' well-being. During the pandemic, the most impaired subjective well-being was among young people enrolled in lower levels of education (primary and secondary education), especially among girls. In both countries, students from less-affluent families reported more significant negative effects on their lives, especially those enrolled in tertiary education. In Croatia, these inequalities are present at both primary and secondary levels, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support for vulnerable populations.
- There is a high level of perceived stress related to school or high school among young people in Croatia and young people in Slovenia, with the perceived level of stress being somewhat higher among young people in primary and secondary education in Croatia and young people in tertiary education in Slovenia. Among young people in Slovenia, the perceived stress level is negatively correlated with subjective well-being at all levels of education, especially among boys with lower levels of education. Lower subjective well-being was also associated with lower academic achievement, particularly among girls in primary and secondary education.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system served as a source of support for young people, especially at the primary and secondary levels in Slovenia and tertiary levels in Croatia. The support of educational experts was equally available to both girls and boys, regardless of the education level. These findings confirm the supportive role of school in the lives of young people, which has somewhat mitigated the negative consequences of changed living and schooling conditions, difficult times, and uncertainty during the pandemic.
- In the post-pandemic period, there were still significant differences in student well-being. Especially vulnerable are girls in primary and secondary education

and students from lower socioeconomic status in tertiary education, which indicates that the pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Lower levels of well-being are associated with perceived difficulty and stress in everyday life at school/high school, and lower academic achievement. In both countries, at the primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels, continuous institutional and professional support is available to students, which is extremely important for their mental health, especially for the most vulnerable groups of students.

- Students' educational aspirations were generally high in both the countries. While young people's educational aspirations in Croatia are relatively stable compared to the pre-pandemic period, Slovenia has shifted towards more practical and intermediate educational goals, particularly in specialist and secondary schools. In both countries, girls had higher educational aspirations than boys did. In the post-pandemic period, students' educational aspirations were still shaped by their socioeconomic status, whereby students from lower SES backgrounds still faced multiple barriers.

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and nuanced impact on students' educational experiences and well-being in Croatia and Slovenia. While both countries maintained high levels of educational participation, the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, particularly affecting girls and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Mental health challenges and increased stress levels are prevalent, although educational institutions provide important support. In the post-pandemic period, some disparities in well-being and aspirations persisted, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Moving forward, strengthening support systems, promoting inclusivity, enhancing mental health services, and preparing for future crises. Continuous research is essential to monitor students' well-being, educational outcomes, and aspirations, providing a comprehensive understanding of their evolving needs. These data should inform policy decisions and guide the design of targeted interventions that effectively support students' development and success. By implementing data-driven policies and fostering high aspirations for all students, the education systems in Croatia and Slovenia can work towards creating more equitable, supportive, and resilient learning environments that meet the evolving needs of youth in a post-pandemic world.

Based on these findings, several key policy recommendations have emerged to guide future research and initiatives within the education system. These include enhancing student support systems, promoting inclusivity and equity in education, improving access to mental health and career guidance services, and using data-driven approaches to inform policies and practices. Together, these strategies aim to create a supportive, inclusive, and effective educational environment for all learners.

- Provide targeted support for vulnerable student groups. It is imperative to enhance academic and mental health support services for female students, particularly those in primary and secondary education, to foster well-being and academic achievement. Furthermore, initiatives should be implemented to assist students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by focusing on improving their access to higher education opportunities.
- Address educational inequalities. Strategies should be formulated to enhance educational access and educational experience for students from vulnerable groups (e.g., lower socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants, special needs, etc.) by addressing obstacles they encounter. These initiatives should encompass financial assistance, mentoring, and career guidance to create equitable opportunities and ensure that all students receive the support and resources necessary to achieve academic and professional success.
- Enhance mental health and well-being support. Expanding mental health services and resources within educational institutions, including schools and universities, is necessary to enhance students' well-being. Furthermore, educators and staff must receive training to identify stress indicators and provide appropriate support to foster a more responsive and supportive educational environment.
- Strengthen institutional support systems. Maintaining and enhancing support structures established during the pandemic is essential to ensure their ongoing effectiveness and accessibility. These services must be equitably accessible to all students, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status, to promote inclusivity and provide consistent support throughout the educational system.
- Foster high educational aspirations. Ensuring that all students have access to comprehensive career counselling and detailed information about higher education opportunities is crucial for enabling them to make informed decisions regarding their future paths. In addition, the creation of mentorship

programmes is vital for linking students with role models from a variety of backgrounds, thereby offering essential guidance, inspiration, and support throughout their academic and professional development.

- Address gender disparities in educational goals. Educational systems should actively promote the engagement of female students in STEM disciplines, while simultaneously encouraging male students to consider a wider array of educational and career opportunities. To accomplish this objective, it is imperative to address and dismantle the gender stereotypes present in career guidance and educational resources, thereby cultivating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students.
- Prepare for future crises. Educational institutions are encouraged to establish robust online and hybrid learning systems to ensure continuity of education under all circumstances.
- Promote justice and equity in education. Educational policies and practices should be inclusive of all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, to promote equity and access for everyone. To support this goal, teachers must receive training in inclusive educational practices, social and emotional competences and diversity issues, enabling them to create supportive and effective learning environments for diverse student populations.

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5. SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION AND LABOUR MARKET

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This chapter analyses youth labour market dynamics in Croatia and Slovenia before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show clear signs of post-pandemic recovery, including declining unemployment and an increase in permanent contracts. However, instability persists, with high rates of temporary, part-time, and student work that delay stable career transitions and expose young people to precarity. A rise in non-standard employment further reflects structural changes in youth labour participation. Although perceived employability has improved since 2018, the NEET rate remains a concern, particularly in Croatia. The authors observe that cross-country differences emerged, with Slovenia achieving better alignment between education and employment, while Croatia showed little progress compared to pre-pandemic trends. At the same time, work values remained stable, with good pay prioritised, while the public-private sector job satisfaction gap narrowed. Still, despite policy initiatives, many young people continue to face insecurity and difficulties transitioning into sustainable employment, with long-term socioeconomic consequences.

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The school-to-work transition (STWT) describes the path from the role of student to the role of worker, and the characteristics of this transition affect the entire career path of the individual (ILO, 2019). STWT is considered a key developmental task in the individual's transition to adulthood (Grosemans, et al., 2020), and a “decent and meaningful work” which ensures work-related mental health and “independent life” is generally accepted as a criterion for the success of the process (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2017; Simões, 2022). In addition to the individual characteristics and socioeconomic background of the adolescents involved, the process is deeply influenced by the structural characteristics of the society to which they belong, such as the socioeconomic environment and institutional support. Consequently, the average duration of the process, as well as its success, are different in different countries, and a multidisciplinary perspective on STWT can enable us to understand a complex network between the individual (i.e., micro-level) and contextual (i.e., macro-level) features in the process (Blokker et al., 2023).

The common and roughest assessment of the success of STWT in a society is shown by the share of young people (usually 16-24 or 15-29 years old) who are not in education, employment or training (so-called NEET) and do not live independently (i.e., have not moved out of their parents' home). According to EUROSTAT (2023), the average NEET rate among 15-29-year-olds was 11.7% in the EU in 2022, and there are big differences between the member states. The lowest proportion was in the Netherlands (4.2 %) and the highest in Romania (19.8%). Our data aligns with Eurostat, showing Croatia's NEET rate was 11.8% in 2023 and Slovenia's was 7.8 percent.

Another rough indicator that indirectly measures STWT is the one related to the independent life of young people. Young people in the EU left their parental home at the age of 26.2 years on average. Sweden records the lowest average age of young people leaving their parental home (17.8 years) and Croatia the highest (31.8 years). Slovenia, with 27.7 years, also records an above-average age. In almost all EU Member States, young women moved out of their parental home earlier than young men (EUROSTAT, 2020). Leaving the parental home late in Croatia and Slovenia probably indicates the quality of the STWT outcome. In other words, employment that does not provide young people with enough economic resources for an independent life (e.g., Matković & Caha, 2017; OECD, 2021; Quintini & Martin, 2014) limits the ability of youth to leave their parents' home.

A recent study using EU-Labour Force Survey data (Symeonaki, Stamatopoulou & Parsanoglou, 2023) found that young age, lower pay, and better education characterise the move from weak to strong precarity. This is important because unstable employment arrangements are associated with lower loan ratings and higher income instability, which are crucial factors in solving housing problems (Dotti, Sani, & Acciai, 2017), a problem that is further exacerbated by the fact that young people in the EU face an uphill battle regarding affordable housing, especially in areas with educational and work opportunities (Cournède & Plouin, 2022; Wetzstein, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

The transition from education to work has become more complex in modern societies, characterised by rapid technological development and the disappearance of traditional lifelong occupations and careers driven by organisations. Today we are talking about the concepts of *career construction*, *employability*, and *career adaptability* as keys to lifelong active work and work-related well-being. (e.g. see, Babarović & Šverko, 2016; Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Hirschi, 2018; Matijaš & Maslić Seršić, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). In other words, young people change jobs more often and need more time to establish themselves in the labour market, either by choice or by necessity. Part-time or seasonal work for tertiary education students is becoming more and more common, as well as transitions in both directions. Young people who are employed more often return to education or training.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 became a new social factor that likely affected adolescent STWT worldwide, but again showed the differences between societies in their resilience to such sudden and harmful events. Simões (2022) reported that indicators of STWT trends have evolved very positively for the past decade (2012-2021) in the EU. These positive trends were slightly interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, but most of the member states showed recovery in 2022. The trends include Croatia and Slovenia, with somewhat less favourable data for Croatia. The structural characteristics of Croatian and Slovenian society that impact STWT with special reference to the COVID-19 pandemic were also the focus of the YO-VID22 project.

Our research analysed youth participation in the labour market by measuring their self-reported employment status. We focused on three categories: employed individuals, those classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), and individuals combining part-time work with education. The findings were compared with EU statistics and results from a similar pre-pandemic study

conducted in 2018, based on survey research using comparative, representative samples.

We also examined the quality of employment based on self-reported indicators such as type of contract (fixed-term or permanent), person–organisation fit, and job satisfaction. Additionally, the distribution of employment by sector-public/state versus private/business, was also analysed.

Beyond these broad indicators of the school-to-work transition (STWT) success among Croatian and Slovenian youth, we also analysed psychological mechanisms that precede these outcomes, including career planning, perceived ease of finding a job, and work values.

5.1 Participation in the labour market - youth (un)employment and the issue of age and gender segmentation

In the past decade, the employment situation for young people in Slovenia and Croatia has generally improved, both in terms of unemployment and job precarity (Figure 5.1). The effect of the pandemic is visible, but at the time of our data collection (November 2023), the average youth unemployment rate in the EU was 14.5%, indicating a return to pre-pandemic levels – the last pre-pandemic year, 2019, the average youth unemployment rate was 15.2%, peaking at 19.1% in August 2020 (EUROSTAT, 2025). The data also show that youth unemployment in Slovenia has consistently remained below the European (EU-27) average, while in Croatia just the opposite was (and still is) the case (Figure 5.1).

In Croatia, the youth unemployment rate reached a record high of 50.5% in December 2013 and a record low of 16.7% in December 2019. In Slovenia, youth unemployment followed a similar historical pattern but remained consistently lower, reflecting a generally stronger economic situation. From 1996 to 2025, the youth unemployment rate in Slovenia averaged 14.7% (Trading Economics, 2025a), peaking at an all-time high of 21.6% in April 2013 and hitting a record low of 8.1% in April 2019.

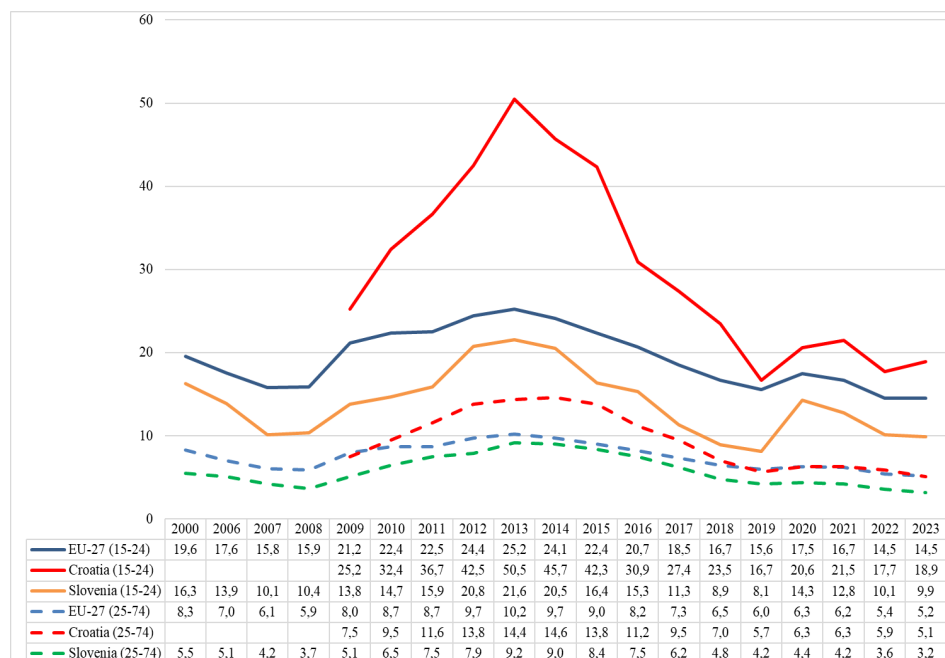


Figure 5.1: Unemployment rate, age group 15-25 and 25-74, 2000-2023, EU-27, Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: Eurostat – Unemployment by sex and age – annual data [une_rt_a] [Data set].

https://doi.org/10.2908/une_rt_a

As can be discerned from Figure 5.1., the youth unemployment rate followed the overall unemployment trend, but is always consistently higher. According to the most recent data from March 2025 (Trading Economics, 2025a), the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the euro area was 6.2%, while the youth unemployment rate stood at 14.5%. This was true also for Croatia and Slovenia, where overall unemployment remains historically low: in Croatia, it was 4.5%, and 16.1% for youth; in Slovenia, 3.2% overall, and 7.3% for youth, a further improvement from 2023. Figure 5.1. also shows the cyclical nature of the labour market, in which young people are hit relatively harder by economic crises (they also find jobs more quickly during economic recoveries; Makeham, 1980; O'Higgins, 2001).

Although official statistics suggest improvements in youth unemployment, the data also highlight persistent age-based segmentation within labour markets, with young people disproportionately engaged in atypical and non-standard forms of

employment such as part-time, temporary, shift, and agency work (Klanjšek, Deželan and Vombergar, 2021; Tomić, 2015). For instance, in Slovenia, the share of youth in temporary employment peaked at 75.5% in 2015 and, despite falling to 48% by 2023, remains significantly higher than both in the general population (8.9% among those aged 25–75) and regarding historical levels (around 30% in 1996). This increased flexibility for young workers is associated with reduced job stability, which undermines their capacity for “full economic and social independence” (Ignjatović and Trbanc, 2009: 40) and affects major life decisions, including family formation (IMAD, 2008: 42). Furthermore, national youth studies reveal that the apparent improvement in youth employment is less pronounced when excluding those still in education, with self-reported unemployment rates among young people consistently exceeding official Eurostat figures (Klanjšek, Deželan and Vombergar, 202).

The results from the current (i.e., YO-VID22) study indicated that this pattern still remains in place for Slovenia, but interestingly not for Croatia. Specifically, in the Croatian sample, 40% of participants, and in the Slovenian sample, 32%, defined their status in terms of the labour market (i.e., they did not identify as students). Among these, 12% reported having no job in Slovenia (which is higher than the official rate of 9.9%) and 16.7 % in Croatia, which is lower than the official rate of 18.9%.

Next, as shown in Figure 5.2., a part of young people are not actively seeking employment or do not categorise themselves within the labour force (categories: “Not seeking job”, “Other”). If we would include participants who identify as students but are not actively studying on a regular basis, the numbers would be probably even higher, which indicates that there is a group of young people that is not engaged in institutionalised activities such as employment or education and could thus be classified as “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

Our data thus concurs with Eurostat findings, which indicates that in Croatia the NEET rate in 2023 stood at 11.8 % and in Slovenia at 7.8 % (EU 27 average NEET rate was 11.2%; in 2018 the NEET rate for Croatia was 15.5 and 8.8 % for Slovenia; EU 27 average NEET rate in 2018 was 13.3%). In other words, although the youth NEET rate decreased in both countries in the post-pandemic period, it remains an issue, which, as indicated by Naterer, Hazemali and Matjašič Friš (2023), deserves special attention and further research. As Andvig and Hummelvoll (2016) have shown, young people not attending school or working may develop feelings of isolation and a lack of control, which might (further) marginalise them.

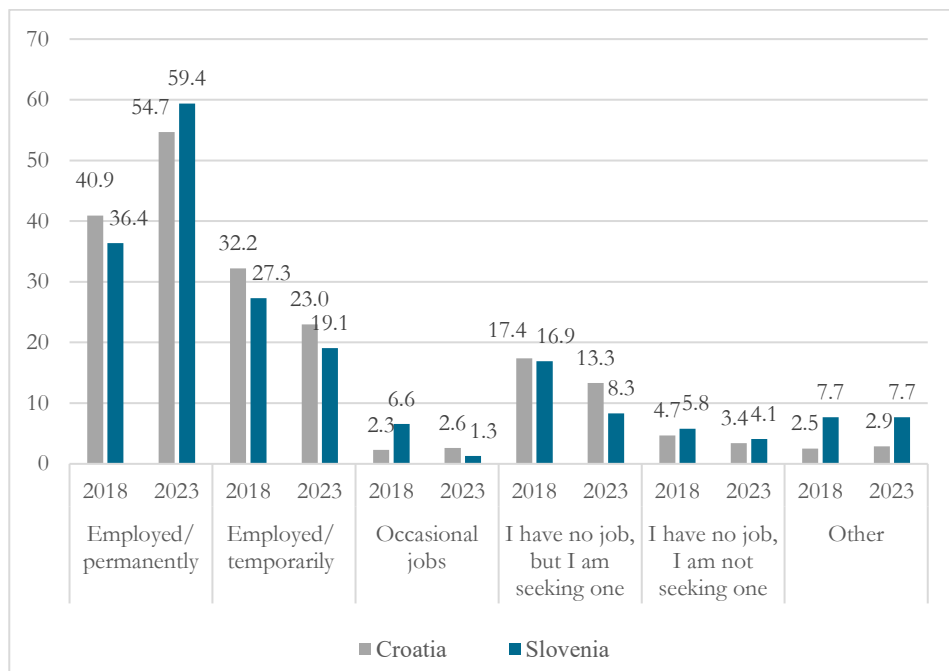


Figure 5.2: Employment status of youth, 2018-2023, by country (%)

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

Next, among the employed participants in the study, around a fifth had a fixed-term or temporary contract – 23% in the Croatian sample and 19.1% in the Slovenian – which is associated with higher objective job insecurity (De Witte & Näswall, 2003) and limits the possibility of obtaining long-term loans (e.g., housing loans). For these reasons, fixed-term employment contracts are generally considered less favourable than permanent ones, and indicate lower job quality. It is thus of no surprise that youth who have permanent employment tend to express higher job satisfaction than those who are in the most precarious position, i.e., those who have occasional jobs. Overall, job satisfaction slightly increased in Slovenia from 2018 to 2023 ($M=3.66$; $SD=1.15 \rightarrow M=3.74$; $SD=1.08$) and decreased in Croatia ($M=3.71$; $SD=1.03 \rightarrow M=3.67$; $SD=1.22$), but the change was not significant (see also Figure 5.3.).

At the time of our data collection, EUROSTAT (2023) reported significant variation across EU countries in the share of employed individuals aged 15–29, not in formal education, who were on temporary contracts. The highest shares of temporary employment in this group were observed in Portugal (40%), Spain (39%), and Italy

(38%). At the other end of the spectrum, the lowest shares were recorded in Lithuania and Latvia (both 3%), Romania (4%), and Estonia (5%). Although our data show that Croatia and Slovenia had relatively high rates of temporary employment among youth, the overall trends are positive, with a decreasing share of temporary employment in the general workforce – and consequently among young people – in both countries. In other words, in both countries, the labour market has shifted from flexible, short-term contracts toward more stable employment. These trends are primarily the result of positive macroeconomic developments, but also, to some extent, of legislation promoting stable work contracts.

In spite of these positive developments, it is important to note that there is a gender-specific pattern in this regard – young women, both in Slovenia and Croatia, more often have jobs that are less stable. Additionally, they are also more often unemployed (see Table 5.1.), which, as reported by the respondents, is something that brings hardship, including stress to young people's lives. Specifically, a majority of those who were unemployed in 2023 reported that for them life is hard and stressful (68% stated so in Slovenia and 70% in Croatia).

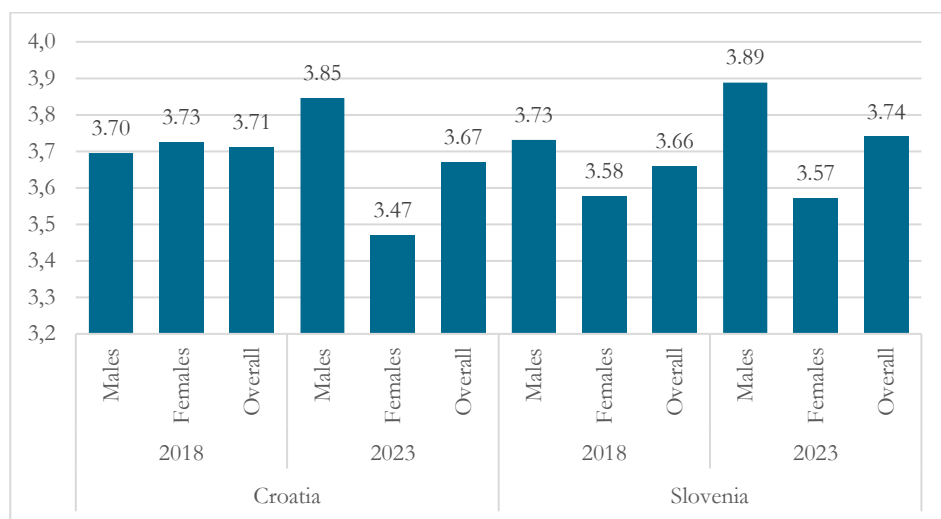


Figure 5.3: Job satisfaction (5 = very satisfied), by country, year and sex (mean score)

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

Table 5.1: Employment type, by gender, year, and country (%)

					Employed / permanently	Employed / temporarily	Occasional jobs	I have no job, but I am seeking one	I have no job, I am not seeking one	Other
Slovenia	2018	Sex	Males	Count	47	40	7	12	7	16
				% within males	36,4%	31,0%	5,4%	9,3%	5,4%	12,4%
			Females	Count	39	32	12	27	10	11
				% within females	29,8%	24,4%	9,2%	20,6%	7,6%	8,4%
		Total		Count	86	72	19	39	17	27
				% within sex	33,1%	27,7%	7,3%	15,0%	6,5%	10,4%
	2023	Sex	Males	Count	124	30	3	14	7	14
				% within males	64,6%	15,6%	1,6%	7,3%	3,6%	7,3%
			Females	Count	92	40	1	16	8	14
				% within females	53,8%	23,4%	,6%	9,4%	4,7%	8,2%
		Total		Count	302	216	70	4	30	15
				% within sex	48,6%	59,5%	19,3%	1,1%	8,3%	4,1%
Croatia	2018	Sex	Males	Count	177	142	10	55	16	7
				% within males	43,5%	34,9%	2,5%	13,5%	3,9%	1,7%
			Females	Count	134	103	7	77	20	12
				% within females	38,0%	29,2%	2,0%	21,8%	5,7%	3,4%
		Total		Count	311	245	17	132	36	19
				% within sex	40,9%	32,2%	2,2%	17,4%	4,7%	2,5%
	2023	Sex	Males	Count	152	47	6	31	9	7
				% within males	60,3%	18,7%	2,4%	12,3%	3,6%	2,8%
			Females	Count	120	67	7	35	8	7
				% within females	49,2%	27,5%	2,9%	14,3%	3,3%	2,9%
		Total		Count	272	114	13	66	17	14
				% within sex	54,8%	23,0%	2,6%	13,3%	3,4%	2,8%

Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID22, 2023

The phenomenon of women holding less secure jobs consequently helps in understanding why young women tend to be less satisfied with their jobs, especially in 2023, when this difference became statistically significant (i.e., females reported lower job satisfaction than males; $p < 0.05$; see Figure 5.3.).

Overall, the results on job satisfaction show a high degree of stability and similarity between the two countries. Average job satisfaction remained virtually unchanged in Croatia while in Slovenia it showed a slight but non-significant increase.

In sum, while unemployment and precarity in Croatia and Slovenia is decreasing, young individuals continue to face challenges. This includes relatively higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of permanent employment, especially for young women, indicating issues in the school-to-work transition.

Possible contributing factors to the higher unemployment rate among young people (ages 16–19 in our study) likely include the temporary nature of their jobs, lack of experience, and evolving labour market demands. Additional contributing factors include the misalignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs (e.g. for women this might be the result of the fact that they are less often included in STEM, which traditionally eases school-to-work transition; UNESCO, n.d.), limited availability of entry-level job opportunities, and broader economic fluctuations (Svetin, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies, such as enhanced vocational training, incentives for youth employment, and stronger support for job placement programmes.

Our results, based on representative national samples of young people aged 16 to 29 in Croatia and Slovenia in 2023, compared with pre-pandemic data from 2018 and 2019, as well as Eurostat data on trends and differences among EU countries regarding youth labour market status indicators, thus point to several general conclusions applicable to both countries: The youth unemployment rate follows the pattern of general unemployment trends but remains considerably higher than that of the overall working population. Young women tend to be more represented among the unemployed.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the thoughts of young people on the labour market.

“So basically, in April I'm going back to work where I worked last summer in a hotel, and it's basically an office job, which is great for me, but, I mean, the conditions and the employer and colleagues and everything, but it's not a permanent job, so of course, it's not good from that perspective. And right now, since I have a little more time now,

I've been thinking about enrolling in some additional courses, but most of it, something online, so somehow I'll do something like eight hours a day every day so I can keep up with it. So yes, I plan to continue to educate myself as much as I can, but, as I said, I'm not really happy with the fact that it's very difficult, almost impossible, to get a job in my field without some connections and stuff."

(Female, unemployed, Croatia)

Although temporary employment among young people is also more prevalent than in the general working population, a shift toward more stable and permanent employment has been observed over the past decade, but again, young women trail young men in this regard. Finally, while the COVID-19 pandemic caused short-term negative trends in the labour market, no long-term effects on youth employment status or unemployment rates have been observed. The share of young people not engaged in education or employment (NEET) has decreased in both countries over the past decade (2013 vs 2023) – from 22.1 to 11.8% in Croatia and from 12.9 to 7.8% in Slovenia, but the problem of NEET still deserves attention due to its potential negative impacts on youth well-being.

5.2 Sectors of employment and education-employment alignment

Although public sector jobs tend to offer higher average wages and more stable employment compared to their private counterparts, influencing the perceptions and choices of young job seekers (Hyder & Reilly, 2022), the allure of entrepreneurial opportunities and dynamic corporate cultures in the private sector frequently attracts youth who prioritise growth and flexibility (Simões & Rio, 2020). Figure 5.4. shows sectoral distribution of youth employment in Slovenia and Croatia.

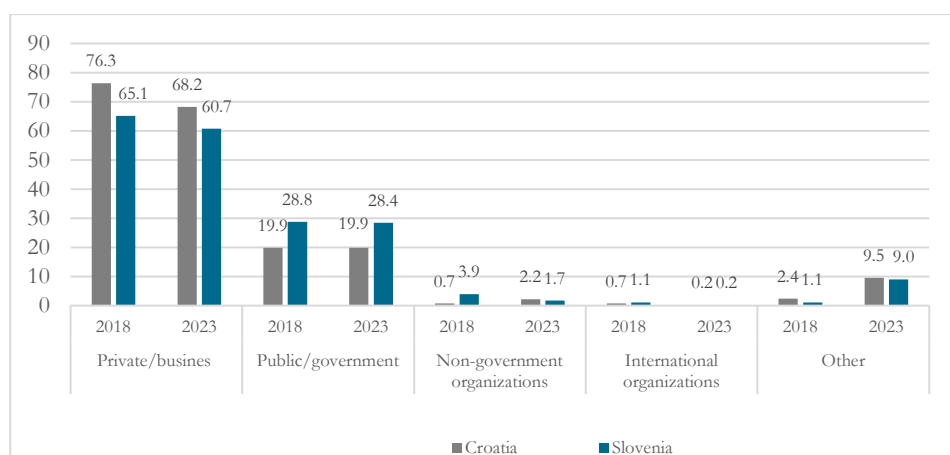


Figure 5.4: Young people employed in each sector, 2018 vs 2023, by country (%)

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

- A decrease in the share of employment in the private business sector – from 76.3% to 68.2% in Croatia, and from 65.1% to 60.7% in Slovenia.
- An increase in the percentage of individuals who selected the response category “other” – from 2.4% to 9.5% in Croatia, and from 1.1% to 9% in Slovenia.

As can be seen, comparison between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years in the share of individuals employed in specific sectors did not reveal major differences. However, some notable changes can be observed in both countries:

This finding is interesting, and the similar pattern in both countries suggests that it is not a methodological artefact but a meaningful trend. The fact that almost 10% of respondents did not select any of the standard answer categories may point to emerging trends in modern careers – most likely non-standard forms of employment or self-employment. This small but significant group of young workers deserves attention in future research.

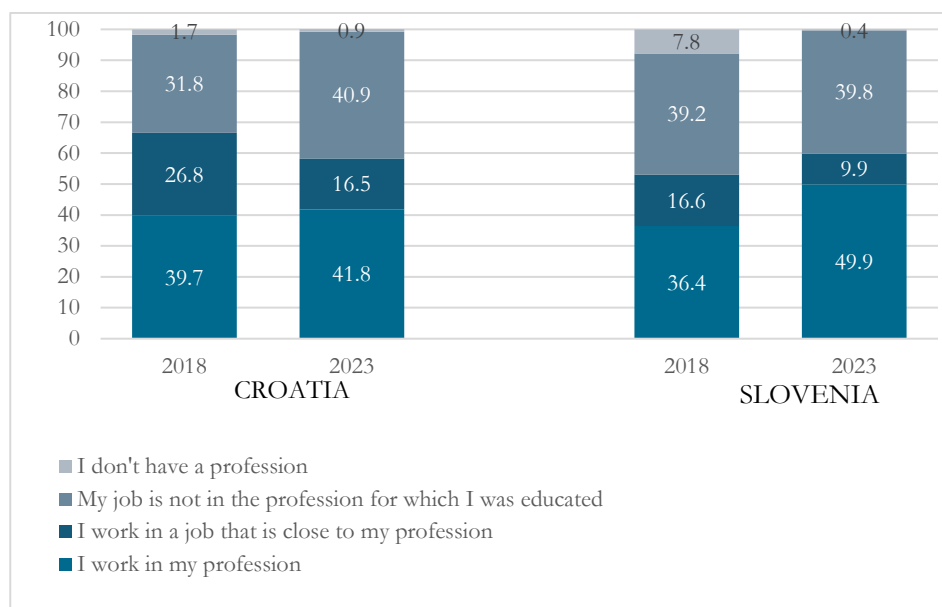


Figure 5.5: Employment and education alignment (%)

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

Next, the data on employment–education fit (Figure 5.5.) indicate an increase in the share of individuals whose employment matches their education in both countries: from 39.7% (2018) to 41.8% (2023) in Croatia, and from 36.4% to 49.9% in Slovenia. Interestingly, the share of young individuals working in jobs closely related to their profession decreased both, in Croatia – from 26.5% to 16.5% – and in Slovenia – from 16.6% to 9.9%. When we combine the percentages of individuals working either in their profession or in a field closely related to it, the cumulative share in Croatia decreased – from 66.5% in 2018 to 58.3% in 2023.

In contrast, Slovenia shows the opposite trend: the share of young individuals employed in jobs aligned with their profession or education increased from 53% in 2018 to 59.9% in 2023. Additionally, the proportion of employed young people who reported not having a profession decreased markedly in Slovenia – from 7.8% in 2018 to just 0.4% in 2023.

On the other hand, the share of young employees working in jobs unrelated to their previous education remains high and stable in both countries. In 2018, this share was 31.8% in Croatia and 39.2% in Slovenia; in 2023, it stood at 40.9% in Croatia and 39.8% in Slovenia. These findings may point to two possible phenomena:

- The education systems in both countries may not be fully aligned with labour market needs, indicating a mismatch between educational programmes and job opportunities.
- Alternatively, the labour market may be highly dynamic and flexible, characterised by the continuous emergence of new occupations and the transformation of existing ones—factors that contribute to the rise of Protean career orientations among young people (see Bazine et al., 2024).

While the first explanation calls for reforms in educational programmes to make them more responsive to current labour market demands, the second suggests that solutions do not lie in narrowly focused vocational programmes designed to meet immediate labour market needs. On the contrary, it emphasises that entering the job market is no longer a one-time occupational choice but a dynamic process of career crafting. In this view, generic competencies, lifelong learning, and proactivity are seen as key drivers of career success. Further investigation into the motives and work-related well-being of young people employed outside their field of study would

make a valuable contribution to the field. Lastly and importantly, no significant differences in terms of gender could be observed, indicating that when employed, the skills mismatch is evenly distributed across gender.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of challenges young people are facing in the labour market.

“Well, I see that most people have bad experiences with the Employment Service. I actually have an okay experience. At least my consultation person was quite helpful and even offered some jobs, maybe I was interested, that were not directly in my field but I could pass the competition based on my qualifications. So, she also offered us some other options so that I could at least do something until I found a job in my field. And even when I was coming, I remember that she also offered me the option of some additional qualifications paid for by the Exchange. I wasn't interested at the time, but I can say that she showed interest in helping me further with employment.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

5.3 Work values, career planning, attitudes and beliefs

To gain deeper insights into school-to-work transitions, it is valuable to measure trends in work values, attitudes, and beliefs among the young population. These findings can serve as important guideposts for policymakers, educators, and employers in several ways. First, they help predict future workforce trends, as the values and attitudes of young people provide a preview of how the labour market will evolve. They also reveal what young people expect from work and how satisfied they are with their current experiences in the labour market, helping employers prepare for future recruitment and retention challenges.

In addition, young people's values, attitudes, and beliefs are indicators of broader social and economic shifts. In this context, we will examine differences in work values among youth in Croatia and Slovenia between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods. We will also explore their beliefs about how easy it is to find first employment, and, finally, their attitudes toward work among those already employed. Since results on job satisfaction were already shown, we will use alternative indicators that measure the extent of work alienation.

5.4 Work values

One of the key questions for employers who want to attract prospective young employees, is what is the most important thing for young people in work and employment – is it earning money, independence or something else. The figure below presents the importance of various elements of work and employment, both for youth in Croatia and in Slovenia at two different time points (2018 & 2023).

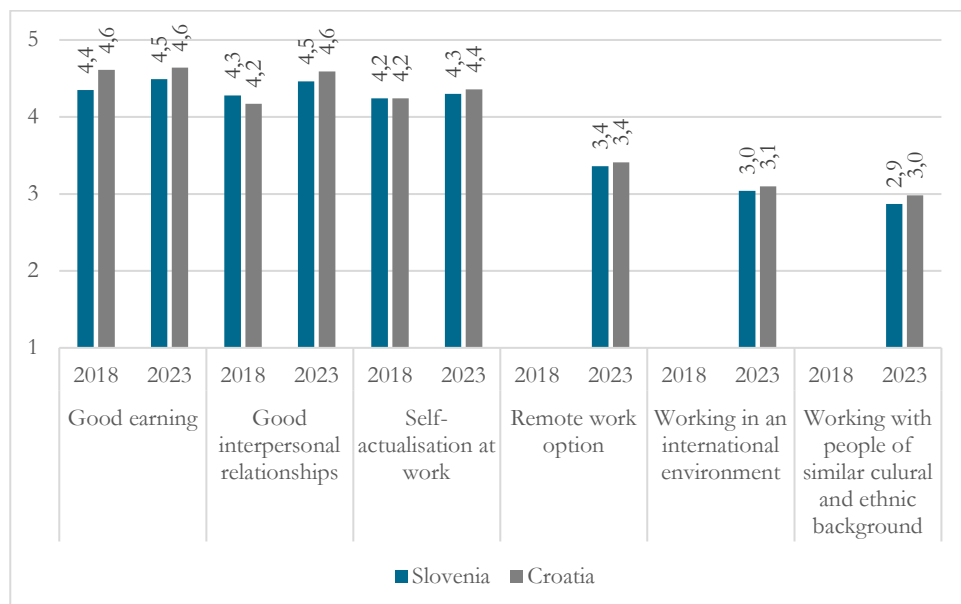


Figure 5.6: Work values (how important in job: 1 = not important, 5 = very important), by year and country (mean scores)

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

Three key work values were measured in both 2018 and 2023: the importance of good earnings, positive interpersonal relationships at work, and opportunities for self-actualisation (a sense of fulfilment through work and the opportunity to engage in interesting and meaningful tasks). These values remained highly important among the young population in both countries, with average scores around 4.5 on a 1–5 scale, indicating their strong significance. The values were similarly rated in the pre-pandemic year (2018) and in the post-pandemic year (2023), but the data suggest a trend of increasing importance across all three. Additional work values, measured only in 2023 – namely, the importance of remote work options, working with people

of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and working in an international environment – showed lower overall salience. However, it is noteworthy that the opportunity for remote work was rated as moderately important in both samples. Furthermore, working in an international environment was considered more important than working with people of a similar cultural and ethnic background.

Importantly, statistically significant gender differences were identified in two key areas: a sense of achievement and pleasant interpersonal relationships. Specifically, women both in Slovenia and Croatia rated in 2023 the importance of doing meaningful and valuable work significantly higher than men ($p < .05$; this was true also for 2018, but only for Slovenia). Similarly, the importance of pleasant interpersonal relationships was rated significantly higher ($p < .05$) by women in both countries (again, in 2018 this difference was present in Slovenia, but not in Croatia). These findings suggest that female respondents, at least in 2023, value intrinsic motivators, such as personal fulfilment and social connection, in the context of employment decisions. In contrast, other factors, such as salary, remote work options, cultural similarity in the workplace, and international work environments, did not exhibit significant gender differences. This implies a shared valuation of practical aspects of employment, such as compensation and flexibility, across genders.

In sum, while both men and women value external factors such as salary and remote work similarly, women tend to emphasise more relational and meaningful aspects of employment. These insights are crucial for employers aiming to create inclusive and motivating work environments, mainly when tailoring engagement and retention strategies that resonate across gender lines.

The results demonstrate a statistically significant negative correlation between the impact of the pandemic on individuals' work situations and the importance attributed to pleasant interpersonal relationships at work ($p < .05$) in both Croatia and Slovenia. This finding suggests that individuals who experienced a greater influence of the pandemic on their work tend to slightly reduce their importance on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Conversely, a statistically significant positive correlation was identified between the impact of the pandemic and the perceived importance of remote working opportunities, such as online work, work from home, or digital nomadism ($p < .05$). This indicates that individuals more affected by the pandemic assign increased importance to the possibility of remote

work when considering employment. Although both correlations are statistically significant, their relatively low magnitude implies modest relationships, suggesting subtle yet meaningful shifts in job-related priorities resulting from the pandemic experience. Overall, in Slovenia around a third of employed young people reported that the pandemic had negative impact on their work, while in Croatia the percentage was lower – 23.4%.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of challenges young people are facing on the labour market.

“I'm doing what I wanted to do, and the only thing I might still have challenges with is balancing work and private life and organising my free time.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

“I think I need to balance work and high school a lot, and I want to earn as much as possible since I'm nearing the end of my studies now, so I want to become independent, and then it's a little more difficult when it comes to the financial aspect.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

The findings reveal that the pandemic has subtly shifted job-related priorities among young people in both Croatia and Slovenia, with those more affected placing less emphasis on interpersonal relationships at work and greater importance on remote working opportunities. Despite the modest strength of these correlations, they highlight meaningful changes in how employment is valued, reflecting the pandemic's lasting impact on work experiences, particularly as around a third of young workers in Slovenia and almost one quarter in Croatia reported negative effects on their jobs.

5.5 Career planning

In today's world, where a single career path can lead to countless outcomes, career planning is a crucial competence. It is developed both through formal education and through the support provided by governmental and non-governmental organisations to young people from the early stages of schooling. This competence relies on the skills of planning, goals setting, and developing a career self-concept. Individuals who have acquired this competence are more likely to find jobs aligned with their abilities and motivations, are less at risk of prolonged unemployment, and have a

better chance of achieving work-related well-being (see Šverko & Babarović, 2019; Valls, 2020).

In our study, we used the *Career Planning and Goal Setting* 5-item scale (Rogers et al., 2008) to measure the extent to which young people in Croatia and Slovenia have planned their careers. In other words, we aimed to determine to what extent their current school or employment status is the result of deliberate planning and goal setting, and how cognitively engaged they are with their careers (Figure 5.7).

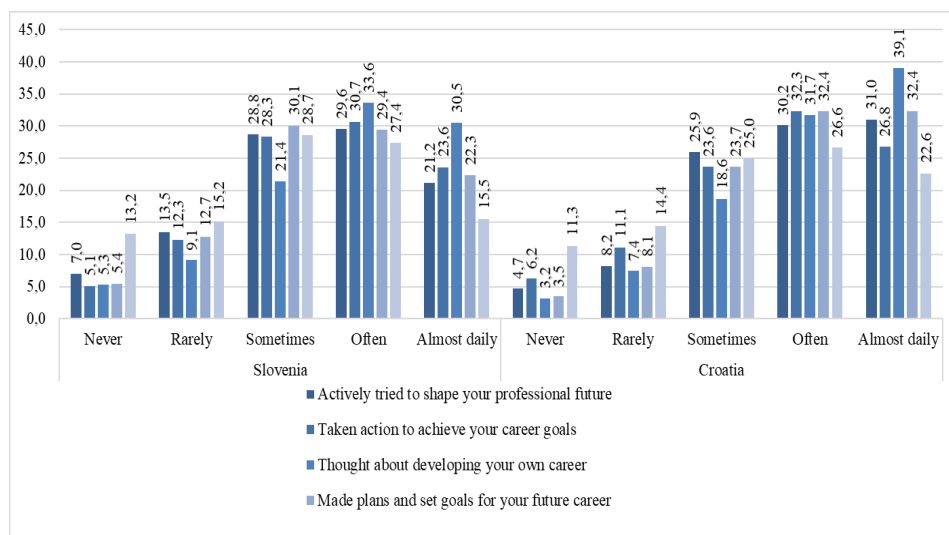


Figure 5.7: Career planning activities of youth, by country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The results showed that, on average, participants in both countries were fairly often preoccupied with their careers over the past six months. They reported engaging in activities such as career planning, taking steps to achieve career goals, thinking about career development, making plans and setting goals, and gathering information about opportunities for further career advancement. In Croatia, the mean score of a combined scale was 3.7 (SD=1.15), and in Slovenia, it was 3.5 (SD=1.16), on a scale from 1 to 5. In addition, the results showed significant positive correlations with the indicators of well-being: the correlation with the burnout syndrome was $-.18^{**}$ and with life satisfaction $.21^{**}$.

5.6 Attitudes and beliefs – future employability

Results related to the perceived employability of individuals enrolled in formal education (secondary and higher education) showed a significant increase in self-reported scores during the post-pandemic period. The same trend was observed in both countries, reflecting broader positive macroeconomic conditions and low unemployment rates in the general working population. Differences between the countries were not statistically significant, with values hovering around the midpoint of the scale (3 on a 1–5 scale; see Figure 5.8.).

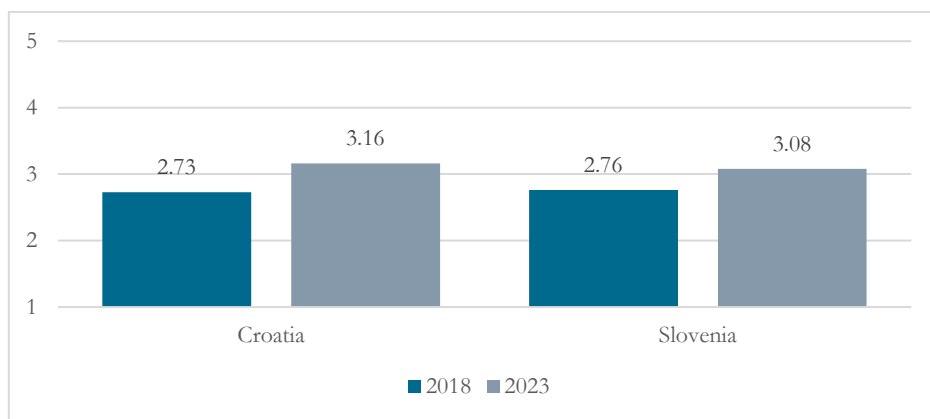


Figure 5.8: Perceived employability of individuals involved in formal education, by country and year (mean scores)

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

At the same time, significant differences emerged between age groups and levels of education. In both countries, younger individuals – those in secondary education – perceived themselves as less employable compared to older individuals enrolled in higher education (the youngest group, 16-19; $M = 3.01$; $SD = .97$ vs. the oldest group, 25-29; $M = 3.31$; $SD = 1.32$ in Croatia; the youngest group, 16-19; $M = 2.84$; $SD = .94$ vs. the oldest group, 25-29; $M = 3.5$; $SD = 1.36$ in Slovenia).

5.7 Beliefs and attitudes – job satisfaction and work alienation

In contemporary labour markets, job satisfaction is increasingly recognised as a critical factor influencing the overall well-being of young individuals entering the workforce. Job satisfaction refers to the positive emotional response and general

attitude that employees have toward their jobs, encompassing various elements such as work environment, job duties, and relationships with colleagues (Gunawan et al., 2023). For youth, who often face unique challenges in adapting to professional roles, the significance of achieving a satisfactory job experience cannot be overstated.

High levels of job satisfaction among young employees are correlated with numerous positive outcomes, including enhanced work performance, lower turnover rates, and a stronger commitment to their organisations (Jung et al., 2024; Okay-Somerville et al., 2019). Research indicates that satisfied employees tend to exhibit greater levels of engagement and resilience, contributing to their overall productivity and career growth Brown et al. (2018). Conversely, low job satisfaction can lead to emotional distress, decreased motivation, and ultimately, unfulfilled potential in professional settings (Triwinanti & Sary, 2024).

Furthermore, the experiences of youth in the workplace are increasingly shaped by evolving economic conditions, organisational demands, and shifts in societal expectations. As a result, understanding the factors influencing job satisfaction for this demographic is crucial for employers wishing to foster a motivated and committed workforce. By addressing the components that contribute to job satisfaction, organisations can enhance not only the performance of young workers but also their personal and professional development (Ramgutty & Sanmukhiya, 2021; Jung et al., 2025). The effective management of job satisfaction through supportive work environments, constructive feedback, and opportunities for growth is imperative to cultivate the next generation of skilled professionals equipped to navigate the complexities of today's job market.

Analysing the European Working Condition Surveys (EWCS), Okay-Somervill et al. (2019) found that career development opportunities had a stronger impact on job satisfaction among young workers than older workers and confirmed the strongest significant direct relationship between meaningfulness and satisfaction for the 16-24 age group. The effect was proven throughout the EU, and was especially strong in the post-recession period and in the countries with liberal employment regimes. These results indirectly show that work and learning should not be viewed as separate activities. In the contemporary world, they are increasingly intertwined, and the border between the role of student and the role of worker is becoming more and more permeable.

As previously shown in Figure 5.3., job satisfaction has shown a high degree of stability and similarity between the two countries. However, significant differences were observed with respect to the employment sector, as well as somewhat different patterns in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years. Due to the large differences in the share of individuals employed across various sectors, we focused only on the two predominant ones: the private/business sector and the public/state sector (Figure 5.9.).

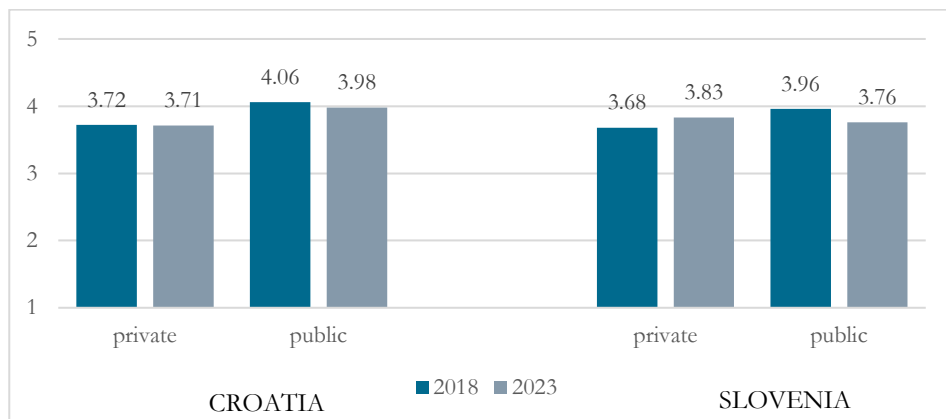


Figure 5.9: Job satisfaction in private/business and public/state sector (mean scores)

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

In 2023, the difference between these two sectors was smaller and non-significant in both countries, while it was somewhat larger and significant in the Croatian sample in 2018 (the average job satisfaction was significantly higher in the public than in the private sector). We can thus again conclude that work values and job satisfaction remained highly stable during the observed period.

Lastly, we analysed the extent to which work alienation (WA) was present among youth. WA is a psychological condition where individuals experience a sense of detachment from their work, perceiving it as meaningless or lacking value. This phenomenon is particularly significant among youth, who face unique challenges in navigating their roles in educational and professional environments. Studies suggest that technological advancements, workplace dynamics, and social contexts contribute to feelings of work alienation in younger populations.

Research has identified several contributing factors to work alienation in youth, including technological impacts and societal expectations. For instance, Karayaman (2024) discusses how technological innovations can lead to feelings of insignificance and anxiety among young workers, increasing their sense of disconnection from their roles. Additionally, Metso & Kianto (2014) found that a lack of positive guidance and opportunity for professional growth in vocational settings negatively influences young individuals' perceptions of their work, fostering alienation. Moreover, the influence of injustice and cynicism in the workplace contributes to these feelings. Mohamed & Shaheen (2022) note that perceptions of organisational injustice lead to significant detachment from work, exacerbating feelings of alienation among young staff. This aligns with findings from Alfuqaha et al. (2023), which showed that alienation affects not only professionals, such as nurses, but also young adults in various occupations.

The effects of work alienation can be detrimental, leading to decreased motivation and engagement among youth. Research by Reijntjes et al. (2010) indicates that feelings of alienation may result in harmful behavioural outcomes, including aggression, particularly in situations involving peer rejection. Additional evidence suggests that alienation is linked to increased turnover intentions and a sense of loneliness among youth, creating a cyclical problem that affects their social and professional lives, as highlighted by Gözükarar et al. (2017) and (Amarat et al., 2018). Furthermore, this alienation often extends beyond the workplace. Young adults experiencing displacement in their roles may engage in negative coping mechanisms, such as isolation from social networks, which further compounds their distress and disengagement. As an indirect indicator of work alienation, we present the participants' responses to the three items of the mental distance scale from the short version of the Burnout Assessment Tool¹ (BAT-12; Schaufeli & De Witte, 2023). Figure 5.10. shows the results for both countries.

Figure 10 shows the presence of various aspects of work alienation among employed youth in Slovenia and Croatia.

As can be discerned from Figure 5.10, the most widespread aspect of work alienation is related to one not seeing his or her work being meaningful to others. This sentiment (taking together those who stated that they feel this way “often” or

¹ Burnout symptoms, measured with BAT-12 will be analysed in the next chapter.

“always”) is present among a quarter of youth in Slovenia and among a fifth of youth in Croatia. Next, around 15 % feels “strong aversion to their work” while a little more express low enthusiasm about their work.

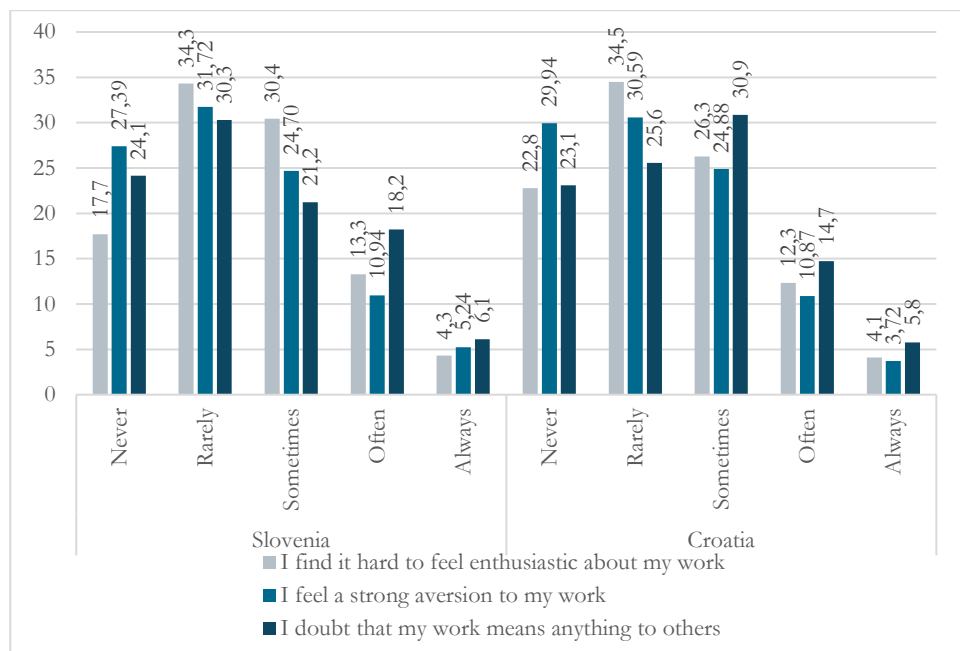


Figure 5.10: Indicators of work alienation of those employed, 2023, by Country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of young people’s strivings on the labour market.

“So, I’m no longer in the education system. As for my current employer, I’m on notice period, but it’s not just the employer’s fault because I simply found a better offer and something that will be absolutely my profession. So, I hope for the better in any case, both in terms of the financial side and in terms of the support itself. I mean, the employer was neat in terms of everything that was written in the contract, and it was achieved. The only thing I didn’t like was the overtime, which was mostly not paid, and that wasn’t even because of the employer, but because the department I worked in was such, where it is simply believed that, under that salary, you should give more than your regular working hours.”

(Male, employed, Croatia)

The results indicated significant associations across all used measures of well-being, thus confirming what was previously indicated by various studies – that understanding work alienation among youth is critical for developing effective interventions to enhance their workplace engagement and mental health. By addressing the structural and societal factors contributing to alienation, stakeholders can create environments that foster connection and motivation among young individuals.

5.8 Conclusions and recommendations

Our results indicate that the labour market in both countries has shown signs of recovery and improvement since the peak of the pandemic, particularly through reduced unemployment and an increase in permanent contracts. However, young people continue to face considerable instability, characterised by high rates of temporary employment, student work, and part-time jobs. While these flexible work arrangements support student life, they also pose risks such as precarity, long working hours, and delayed transitions to full-time, stable employment. Additionally, the proportion of individuals who do not classify themselves within standard employment contract categories has significantly increased in both countries.

Although perceived employability among youth has increased since 2018 in both Croatia and Slovenia, the proportion of young individuals who are neither in education nor in employment (NEET) is still relatively high, especially in Croatia. At the same time, Croatia and Slovenia exhibit different trends regarding the alignment between education and employment. In Slovenia, significant improvement has been observed over the past decade, whereas in Croatia, no substantial changes have been recorded compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Work values have remained stable, with good pay continuing to be the most salient value. Differences in job satisfaction between those employed in the public/state sector and the private/business sector have shown a decreasing trend in both countries, indicating that public sector employment is gradually losing its perceived advantage in this respect.

The government has implemented various initiatives to address this issue, including vocational training programmes and incentives for employers to recruit young workers (European Union, 2025). Despite these efforts, youth unemployment remains a concern, with numerous young Croatians and Slovenians experiencing

difficulties transitioning from education to stable employment. This situation has broader socioeconomic implications, potentially resulting in delayed independence, reduced consumer spending, and long-term career impacts on affected individuals.

These general findings lead to several policy recommendations for both countries:

- Strengthen the transition from education to employment. This includes expanding and modernising vocational education and training (VET) pathways, supporting dual education models that integrate work and study, and ensuring that career guidance is introduced early and systematically across all levels of education, with special focus on young women. These strategies will help reduce the persistently high youth unemployment rate, address skills mismatches, and better prepare young people for the evolving demands of the labour market.
- Address youth employment precarity. While student work offers flexibility, its overuse as a substitute for stable employment should be reconsidered. Strengthening labour regulations, enforcing fair wages, and encouraging employers to offer standard contracts to young workers can reduce economic insecurity and improve long-term career outcomes. At the same time, policies must remain responsive to emerging, non-standard career paths and new vocational trends, ensuring that legislation evolves to provide adequate protection and support for young workers in modern job markets.
- Promote decent working conditions, especially for those in atypical jobs or shift work. Employers should be encouraged to provide flexible yet stable employment that respects rest periods, fosters self-actualisation through work, and supports strong interpersonal relationships - values highly prioritised by young people in both countries. This seems especially important when considering what the negative correlates of work alienation are.
- Institutionalise ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Regular longitudinal research and youth-inclusive policymaking are essential to track education and labour market integration. This will allow for timely responses to emerging challenges and ensure that policy remains aligned with the evolving realities of youth in a rapidly changing world.

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6. MENTAL HEALTH, BURNOUT AND STRESS-RELATED SYMPTOMS AMONG YOUTH: PREVALENCE AND PANDEMIC EFFECTS

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The chapter examines youth mental health in Croatia and Slovenia through validated measures of depression, anxiety, stress (DASS-9), burnout (BAT-12), and self-reported worries. Results indicate elevated levels of impairment, with over one-quarter of young people in both countries reporting severe depressive symptoms, around 20% reporting severe anxiety, and nearly one-third reporting high stress, with Croatian respondents consistently showing slightly higher levels of depression and stress. Burnout symptoms were more pronounced among students than employed youth, which underlines the role of educational settings as environments of heightened psychological strain. There were statistically significant gender and age disparities observed: young women, particularly in the youngest cohorts, reported the highest levels of mental health difficulties, whereas older women showed improvement. Among men, different age-related trends emerged. Socio-economic status also influenced outcomes, with financially better-off youth reporting fewer symptoms.

Keywords:

youth,
mental health,
DASS-9,
burnout,
Croatia,
Slovenia



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Beyond direct health concerns and illness-related stressors pertaining to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, several stressors and life disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have been identified, such as social and relational stressors, school-related stressors, financial and job-security stressors, as well as media-related stressors (Graupensperger et al., 2023). The implications of COVID-19-related stressors may be particularly prominent for adolescents and young adults, who are at higher risk for mental health concerns and risky health behaviours.

The major lifestyle changes experienced by youth, their peers, and their families may act as environmental stressors for mood fluctuation. Young people were encouraged to actively avoid social activities due to fear of the coronavirus and were confined to their homes for extended periods of time. This social isolation was associated with a higher risk of depression and anxiety, increased psychological distress, as well as an increase of negative affect and loneliness as shown in research and meta-analysis involving adolescents, high school students, and young adults (Kauhanen et al., 2023; Loads et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Woon et al. (2021) found that university students who felt frustrated because of a loss of daily routine and study disruption, and who had pre-existing medical or mental health conditions were more likely to experience elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms. More social support from family and friends of those students, as well as studying medicine-related courses, were associated with lower levels of anxiety.

The global economic recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in insecurity and distress as well as anxiety and depression, particularly among youth from families with low socioeconomic status (Xiaochen, 2021). Jeriček Klanšček & Furman (2023) also found that Slovenian adolescents from socially disadvantaged families had poorer conditions for academic performance during the pandemic, fewer opportunities to socialise online with friends, and were more likely to feel lonely, have lower well-being, and be at higher risk for depression. Van Loon et al. (2022) followed adolescents for 15 months during the COVID-19 pandemic and identified three different groups regarding stress, depression, and anxiety reactions over time. Most adolescents (67%) reported stable low levels of depression and anxiety; a smaller subgroup (30%) reported stable moderate levels; and the smallest group (3%) was characterised by initially high levels of depression and anxiety which decreased over the course of the pandemic. These adolescents, with initially high levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, more often lived in one-

parent households and reported lower social support before the pandemic. Although a decrease in mental health was observed for the majority of adolescents, improvement was also noticed in some research. For example, Cost et al. (2022) found that adolescents with internalising symptoms of impaired mental health benefited from the lockdowns and restrictions due to less social pressure and reduced physical contact (e.g., with friends, teachers) and more free time. Forte et al. (2021) studied youth in Croatia, Italy, and Romania, and found that younger age, being a girl, having someone close who died from COVID-19, living in a small flat, and not spending time outside were the characteristics associated with a higher risk of anger, sadness, boredom or emptiness, and anxiety.

Several empirical studies have shown a decline in youth mental health and increased stress levels in Croatia and Slovenia during the pandemic. In Slovenia, Kirič et al. (2022) found an increase in suicidal ideation and attempted suicides among children and adolescents after the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also found that the observed increase did not correspond to the school closures but was more strongly associated with the duration of the pandemic. Matić et al. (2022) found that Slovenian young adults (aged 18-32) exhibited average levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms during the initial phase of the pandemic. However, these symptoms were significantly more pronounced during the final phase, specifically during the Omicron wave. During this period, most participants reported at least moderate levels of depression and anxiety. Only 36% of participants reported normal levels of depressive symptoms, 40.5% reported normal levels of anxiety, and 39.9% reported normal levels of stress.

Buško and Bezinović (2021) studied COVID-19 related stressors among high school students in Croatia and identified differences in the stressfulness of specific distance-schooling situations. Students least often reported concerns about receiving feedback from teachers (around 15%), while 50-70% experienced stress regarding uncertainty about returning to school, missing live lectures, struggling to grasp complex subject matter, assignment overload, and meeting deadlines. They also identified students in the final year of high school education as the most vulnerable since they were exposed to several additional sources of potential stressors connected to uncertainties about the timing and format of final graduation exams and procedures related to university admissions. Jokić Begić et al. (2020) found that about 60% of high school students expressed concern about whether they would

acquire adequate knowledge for their future professions, and 75% were concerned about passing exams and successfully completing the academic year. Additionally, 75% of students were worried about their health, due to prolonged sitting and screen exposure, and their mental health and well-being due to stress. According to the same study, even at that early stage of the pandemic, 3% of high school students had sought and received professional psychological help, while many more estimated they would need it in the near future (27% maybe, 8% probably, 3% definitely).

In a time marked by worry and uncertainty, individuals started self-isolating to reduce COVID-19 transmission rates. Social isolation was a key public health measure mandated by law; consequently limiting access to social support during this stressful period. Accordingly, Szkody et al. (2020) concluded that individuals who are isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic may experience negative effects on their mental and physical health because of a lack of support. They found that perceptions of social support buffered the negative impact of COVID-19 worry on psychological health when the length of time spent self-isolating was considered. The results of this study suggest that anxiety about COVID-19, social support, and self-isolation affect individuals' psychological health during stressful times. In addition, data have shown that COVID-19 also had a negative impact on parents' mental health and their problems. Changes in parenting and pressure on youth increased due to isolation, so the risk of deterioration of communication within families and rates of maltreatment and abuse rose in some families (Ragavan et al., 2020). The lack of communication, along with increased maltreatment in some families, contributed to a rise in mental health symptoms during the pandemic. Tang et al. (2021) found positive effects of parental-child discussion about COVID-19; adolescents who discussed this with their parents experienced less depression, anxiety, and stress and more life satisfaction.

The repercussions of the decline in mental health observed among students in secondary and higher education during the pandemic may be long-lasting, even if mental health itself appears to recover. Mental health is known to function as a psychological mechanism that mediates the relationship between contextual factors and school-to-work transition (STWT) outcomes. An unsuccessful transition, whether from school to the labour market or from secondary school to higher education, can have long-term negative consequences, which may further exacerbate already impaired mental health. Policies that support the mental health of pupils and

students offer a means for society (i.e., institutions) to reduce the negative impact of contextual factors on STWT outcomes. In other words, adverse socioeconomic conditions often lead to unsuccessful STWT outcomes, which are associated with reduced psychological well-being. It also clarifies how institutional (e.g., the education system or labour market) and social (e.g., family or peer) support can influence these outcomes in a given context (Tausig et al., 2011).

According to EUROSTAT (2022), in 2019, Croatia recorded one of the highest proportions of people suffering from symptoms of chronic depression in the EU – 11.6%, compared to the EU average of 7.2%. Although both Croatia and Slovenia (7.9%) reported above-average rates of chronic depression; both countries are unique in terms of the age distribution of affected individuals. In 14 EU Member States, the highest prevalence of chronic depression was reported among the oldest age group (65 years and older). In contrast, Croatia and Slovenia were the only countries where the lowest prevalence was not observed among the youngest group (ages 15-24). Interestingly, the same survey revealed that only in Cyprus, Slovenia, and Sweden a higher proportion of people aged 15-24 reported poor social support than those aged 65 and older.

This chapter focuses on the general mental health of young people in Croatia and Slovenia, specifically, the symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety, as well as contextual mental health, such as burnout related to student or work roles (Schaufeli et al., 2020). To this end, we analysed self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as burnout, among young people aged 16 to 29, using data collected in the two countries.

6.1 The prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms

Experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress were measured using a version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS; DASS-42 and DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), an instrument suitable for screening mental health in the general population aged 16 and older. In this project, we administered the short version of the scale, DASS-9, which has been specifically validated as a triage tool for assessing the psychological health of youth (Yusoff, 2013). The ASS-9 contains three items for each symptom group: depression, anxiety, and stress. Respondents rated their symptoms on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 ("not at all/very rarely") to

3 ("very much/most of the time during the past week"). Depressive symptoms refer to the inability to experience pleasure or happiness, feelings of inertia, and hopelessness. Anxiety symptoms involve physiological arousal, panic, and situational anxiety. Stress symptoms are characterised by irritability, restlessness, and heightened reactivity.

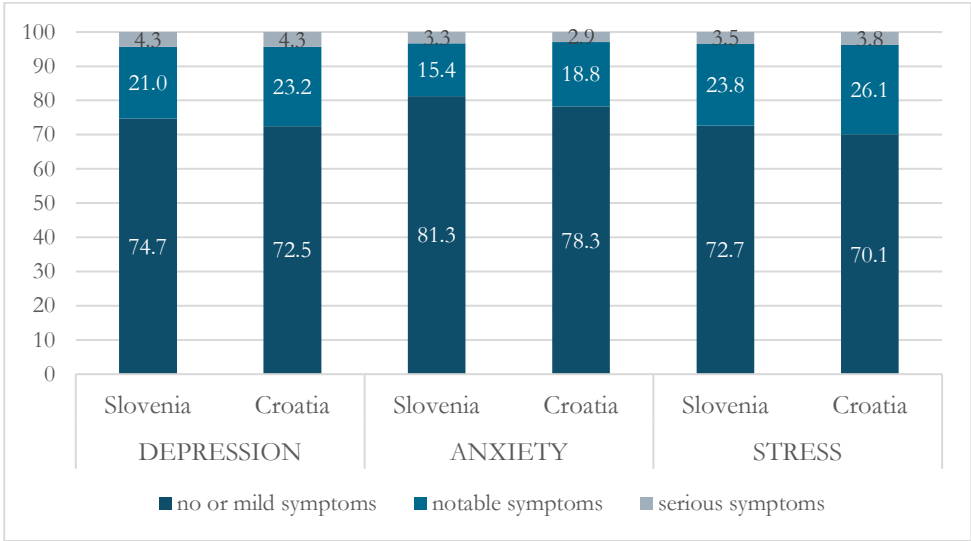


Figure 6.1: Percentage of participants reporting no or mild symptoms, notable symptoms, and serious symptoms (%)
Source: YO-VID, 2023

Our findings, illustrated in Figure 6.1, reveal that on average, over 4% of participants from both countries reported experiencing serious depressive symptoms. This indicates that those young people experienced these symptoms at a high intensity and for a substantial portion of the time. This finding was unexpected, as clinical levels of depressive symptoms are typically observed in around 1% of the population (ranging between 1% and 3% according to the highest estimates). In our samples, extreme levels of symptoms were less prevalent in the domains of stress and anxiety but still exceeded expected levels. On the other hand, the results also indicated that more than 25% of participants in both countries reported notable depressive symptoms; around 20% reported notable anxiety symptoms; and, finally, 30% of participants in the Croatian sample and 27% in the Slovenian sample reported experiencing intense stress.

When we compare our data to the only available internationally validated study of the short form of the DASS-9 (Yusoff, 2013), the results are similarly concerning, demonstrating strong support for the finding of a decline in general mental health among the youth population (ages 16–29) in Croatia and Slovenia. In the validation study, Yusoff (2013) administered the scale to two cohorts of applicants to a public medical school (N=839), along with the longer version of the scale, DASS-21. He adapted the international norms available for the DASS-21 to the short version, DASS-9, which has been shown to be psychometrically sound and suitable for epidemiological research, as in our case. The DASS-9 demonstrated good psychometric properties for this purpose. When we apply these norms to our samples, the results clearly indicate increased symptoms of impaired mental health. Figure 6.2. presents data for the total DASS-9 score and the depressive symptoms subscale. Compared to international norms established a decade ago, our results show that mental health difficulties among the youth population in both countries are higher than expected.

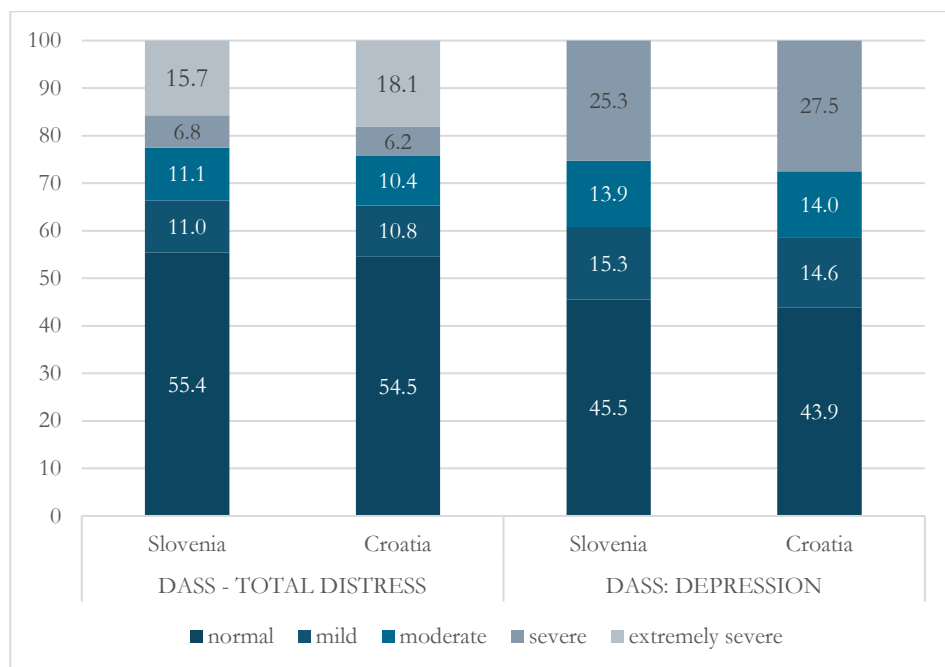


Figure 6.2: The share of individuals according to the available international norms (Yusoff, 2013) (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

It is important to note that the results showed similar trends and levels in both countries. Statistically significant differences between the countries were found in specific symptoms of depression ($t=2.262$; $df=2501$; $p=.024$; Croatia: $M=2.43$; $SD=2.106$; Slovenia: $M=2.24$, $SD=2.122$), stress ($t=2.228$; $df=2501$; $p=.026$; Croatia: $M=2.71$; $SD=1.923$; Slovenia: $M=2.53$, $SD=2.024$) and in total scores ($t=2.107$; $df=2501$; $p=.035$; Croatia: $M=7.12$; $SD=5.270$; Slovenia: $M=6.67$, $SD=5.386$), as shown in Figure 6.3.

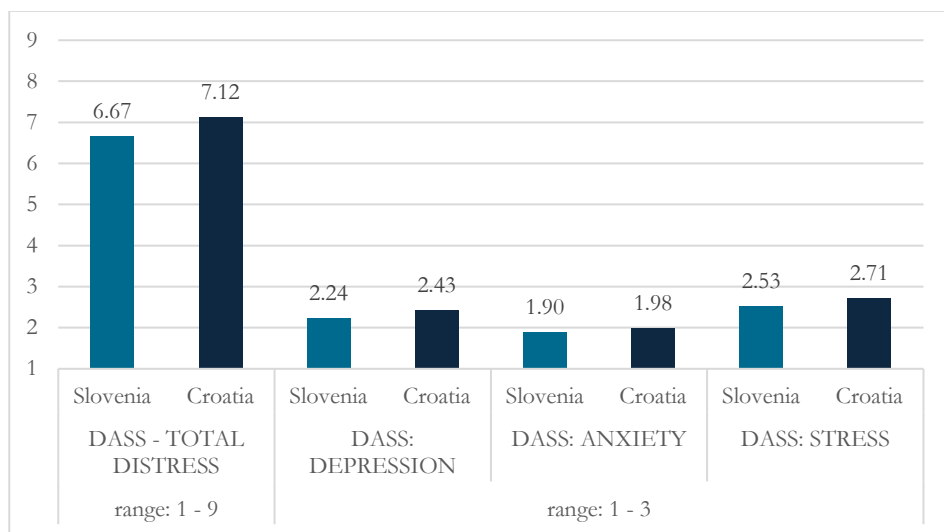


Figure 6.3: Average (mean) scores on DASS-9 total score (range 1-9) and DASS subscales (range 1-3) by country

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Additionally, significant differences were observed based on age and gender, regardless of the country. While young women generally reported higher levels of symptoms compared to young men, the age-related trends varied between genders. Among women, symptom levels tended to decrease with age, whereas among men, the opposite pattern emerged; older young men, on average, reported more symptoms than their younger counterparts. As illustrated in Figure 6.4, and based on combined data from both countries, the most pronounced gender differences were found in the youngest age group, highlighting adolescent girls as the subgroup at highest risk for impaired mental health. This finding suggests that girls aged 16 to 19 constitute a particularly vulnerable group to mental health challenges. Several

factors may contribute to this increased vulnerability, including hormonal and developmental changes typical of adolescence, heightened social and academic pressures, and greater exposure to pandemic-related stressors such as social isolation and disruptions in education and family dynamics. Additionally, research indicates that girls are often more likely to recognize and report emotional difficulties, which may also influence the higher prevalence of reported symptoms. These results highlight the need for targeted mental health support and interventions specifically designed to address the needs of adolescent girls in this age group.

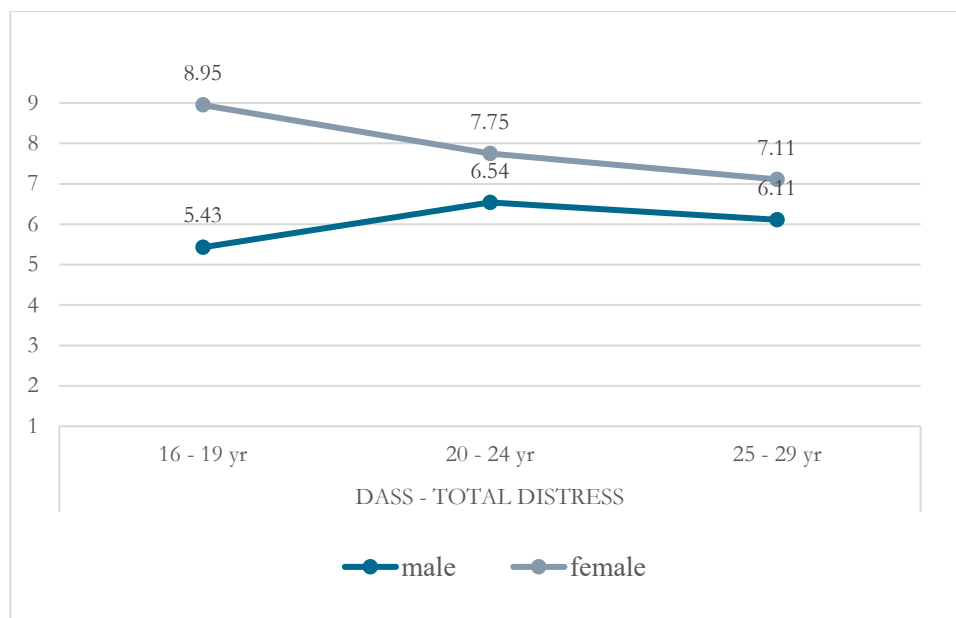


Figure 6.4: Gender and age differences in impaired mental health symptoms: Average total scores on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-9)

Note: Results are averaged across both countries; Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) are included to provide a deeper, qualitative insight into the lived experiences behind the quantitative data. These personal accounts illustrate the specific struggles and worries young people face regarding their mental health, thereby enriching the understanding of the statistical findings and highlighting the real-world impact of the issues discussed.

“Considering that I've been diagnosed with depression, every day is kind of a struggle in itself and it all depends on how I wake up that day, and whether I'll have enough therapy to get me up (...) I mean, logically speaking, my life isn't bad, definitely from the outside if someone were to look at it they would say "You have an okay life, yeah, everything's great" but when you look through that lens of pessimism that's simply built into you, everything looks ten times worse. So, I'm not exactly the most satisfied with life, and now (...).”

(Female, high school student & employed, Croatia).

“Now, as for these mental health needs, I think they are available, maybe more to adults, I mean, they are also available to minors, but in order to get there, they have to go through their parents or someone, and I think the problem is that they don't seek help as much because they would have to go to another institution, if they don't want to seek mental help at school, they would have to go through their parents, and I think a lot of them are prevented from doing so because they don't want to share that information with their parents. I think that more work should be done on this so that it can be achieved in some other way.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

In both countries, young people reported significant mental health issues, particularly depression, during the post-pandemic period. The most vulnerable group identified was girls aged 16 to 19.

6.2 Symptoms of burnout

To gain deeper insights into the mental health of young people in Croatia and Slovenia, we assessed their symptoms of burnout. Burnout refers to impaired mental health that arises as a consequence of prolonged exposure to stress, typically resulting from an imbalance between the demands a person faces and the resources (both personal and situational) available to them. This highly demanding situation requires significant effort, and when such circumstances persist over time, they can lead to chronic exhaustion and the development of burnout syndrome. This syndrome is recognised as a specific form of reactive mental health impairment.

Traditionally, burnout has been measured within the context of employment, where it is most commonly defined and recognised. (WHO, 2019). However, it can also arise from other goal-oriented and mandatory activities, such as schooling. To

measure burnout symptoms, we administered a new instrument – the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT; Schaufeli et al., 2020; Schaufeli & De Witte, 2023) – to individuals engaged in such activities, including secondary and higher education students, those combining study and work, and those who are employed.

The instrument conceptualises burnout syndrome as a second-order factor composed of four primary symptom clusters: (1) exhaustion – a severe loss of physical and mental energy and a reduced ability to recover; (2) emotional impairment – a diminished capacity to regulate emotional responses; (3) cognitive impairment manifested through forgetfulness and lack of concentration; and (4) mental distancing – psychological withdrawal and a sense of detachment from one's job or education. Given that the study participants were engaged in various obligatory activities, educational and professional, a general version of the instrument was used, along with its short 12-item version designed for group triage (Schaufeli et al., 2020; Tomas et al., 2023).

In this section, we present the main findings on observed burnout symptom levels and analyse group differences based on the type of mandatory activity participants were engaged in schooling, higher education, a combination of study and work, or employment.

Firstly, it must be emphasised that, once again, no significant differences were found between the national samples in the average levels of burnout symptoms among the active young population (aged 16–29). The average symptom level, measured on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – not at all; 5 – to the highest extent), was 2.56 (SD=0.77) for the Croatian sample and 2.61 (SD=0.74) for the Slovenian sample; $t=-1.49$; $p=.136$. Although statistical norms for young people engaged in various types of activities are not yet available, these values suggest somewhat higher average levels of burnout symptoms compared to those found in the general working population.

Finally, significant differences were observed between groups with different activity statuses ($F=3.546$; $p=.014$), and *post hoc* tests indicated a significant difference between the employed group and those involved in education. On average, employed individuals reported significantly fewer symptoms of burnout. Besides the group differences, a high interindividual variability of the results should be noted – the vertical lines in the Figure 6.5. illustrate standard deviation that follows

corresponding arithmetic means. The same patterns were observed in the Slovenian and in the Croatian sample, so the cumulative data are presented.

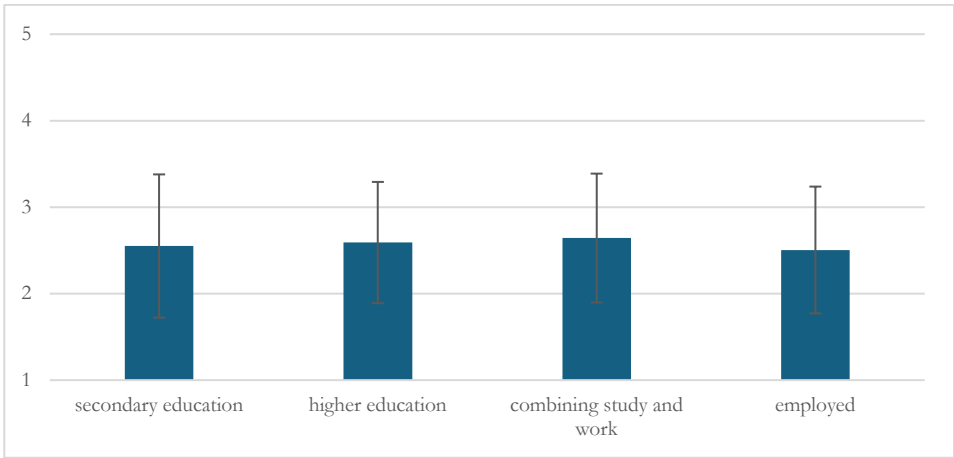


Figure 6.5: Experienced burnout symptoms across groups with different statuses: secondary education, higher education, combining study and work, and employed (both countries – mean scores)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023.

In both Croatia and Slovenia, young people reported significant levels of burnout symptoms during the post-pandemic period. Employed individuals reported significantly fewer burnout symptoms than those in education. The most vulnerable group identified were girls aged 16 to 19.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of young people’s perspectives on their perceived stress in everyday life.

“I am not very satisfied with the faculty. I'm simply not satisfied with the way it was designed for us, the way the timetable was made, the overcrowding with obligations, the simple behaviour of individual professors. There is some support in the sense that they tell us that they have some counselling as part of the high school, something like that, but I think it should start with changing things at the high school so there wouldn't be so much stress about all that and there wouldn't be so much need for these supports.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I train every day – gyms. Sometimes I don't have much time, but I go anyway because I think that sometimes mental health is much more important than any kind of studying and exams, and sometimes, even if I go to training and study less, I achieve better results because I somehow let out all the stress there. And I think that's the most important thing.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

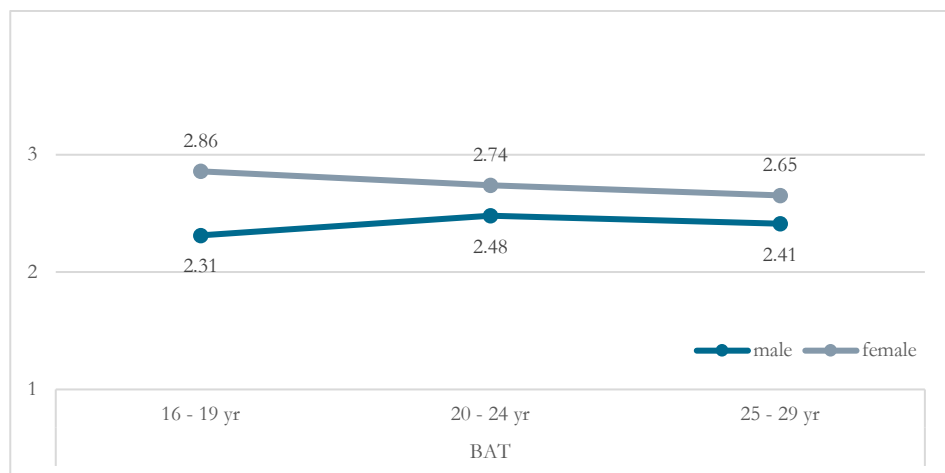


Figure 6.6: Gender and age differences in burnout symptoms: Average total scores on the BAT-12

Gender and age differences in burnout symptoms followed the same pattern observed in general mental health measures (i.e., DASS-9), with the youngest women (ages 16-19) reporting the highest levels of symptoms. In addition to gender and age differences - where young women consistently reported lower levels of general (depression, anxiety and stress symptoms measured by DASS-9) and contextual (burnout symptoms measured by BAT-12) mental health, with the youngest group (ages 16–19) identified as the most vulnerable - a consistent negative correlation with individual socio-economic status¹ was observed for both mental health indicators in both countries. The Pearson correlation coefficients were -0.145 (Croatia) and -0.148

¹ As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item "Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?" was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1 - We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

(Slovenia) with the DASS score, and $-.175$ (Croatia) and $-.136$ (Slovenia) with the BAT score, where all correlations were statistically significant ($p < .001$). These results indicate that the socio-economic status of a young person's family may serve as either a risk or a protective factor for mental health. Individuals who rated their financial background more favourably reported significantly fewer symptoms of impaired mental health. Research suggests that females are generally more attuned to their emotional states and more likely to report psychological distress, which may partly explain the higher reported symptom levels. Additionally, future research should examine the role of self-set goals in the experience of burnout. The goals and expectations of girls may be higher than those of boys at that age. These likely function as self-imposed demands, the fulfilment of which depletes energy and leads to burnout. These factors combined highlight the complex interplay between biological, psychological, and social influences in contributing to gender disparities in burnout during adolescence.

In both countries, young people with a more favourable self-rated socio-economic background reported significantly fewer symptoms of impaired mental health.

6.3 Differences in perceived stress levels between the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) periods

Our results regarding the prevalence of reported symptoms, measured according to available statistical norms defined in earlier periods, indirectly indicate a significant deterioration in mental health. Given the recent emergence of mental health as a public health issue, direct comparisons across time are lacking. Such comparisons require comparable results based on standardised instruments for measuring self-reported symptoms administered to representative samples in different periods, and this kind of data is quite rare. This scarcity holds true for Slovenia and Croatia as well. In this project, we had a unique opportunity to compare data from representative samples of young people from Croatia (Gvozdanović et al., 2019) and Slovenia assessed in 2018 as part of the FES Youth Study Southeast Europe (FES, 2019), and again in 2023, in our study across several well-being indicators. Here, we present a comparison of reported worries related to school, high school, or work—key aspects of young people's central life roles. Our aim was to determine whether

there was a significant difference in those indicators between the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) periods.

The perceived level of stress was examined with the item "In your opinion, what is everyday life like in your school/university?" for young people in the education system, or with the comparable form of the item "How would you assess your current job?" for young people who are employed. Additionally, for unemployed young people, the item was worded as follows: "What is your life like as an unemployed person?" The answers were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "very difficult and stressful," 2 indicated "quite difficult and stressful," 3 indicated "somewhat difficult and stressful," 4 indicated "easy and not particularly stressful," and 5 indicated "very easy and completely stress-free." For the analysis, the items were recoded, whereby a lower assessment implies a lower level of perceived stress, or a higher assessment implies a higher level of stress.

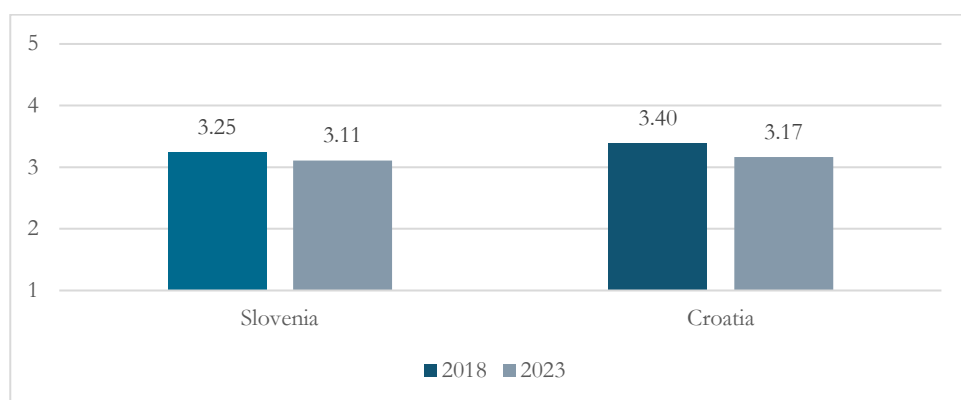


Figure 6.7: Perceived stress level (at school/high school or at work) between 2018 and 2023 by Country (mean scores)

Note: differences between countries in 2018, $t=2.910$; $df=1213$; $p=.004$; Source: YSEE 2018/2019, YO-VID22, 2023.

In the pre-pandemic period, almost 90% of young people in Croatia reported that their daily life at school/higher education or work was at least somewhat difficult and stressful (47.5% somewhat, 34.3% quite a bit, 8% very difficult and stressful). The situation is somewhat better for young people in Slovenia, 43.9% of them reported that their daily life at school/higher education or work was somewhat stressful and difficult, 27% quite a bit and 9.9% of them reported that it was very

difficult and stressful. The average levels of experienced stress are consistent with these findings. As shown in Figure 6.7, in the pre-pandemic period (2018), young people in Croatia ($M=3.40$; $SD=.795$) reported a statistically significantly higher level of perceived stress experienced in their school or work environment ($t=2.910$; $df=1213$; $p<0.05$) compared to young people in Slovenia ($M=3.25$; $SD=.937$). Additionally, in both countries, perceived stress in the educational or work environment was stable across different socio-economic circumstances² of the young people's families.

In both countries, girls perceived their educational or work environment as statistically significantly more stressful (Slovenia: $M=3.34$; $SD=.917$; $t=2,342$; $df=617$; $p=.020$; Croatia: $M=3.47$; $SD=.818$; $t=2,437$; $df=549$; $p=.014$) than young men did (Slovenia: $M=3.17$; $SD=.949$; Croatia: $M=3.31$; $SD=.757$). While the perceived level of stress in the educational or work environment in Slovenia was stable across age groups, in Croatia, young people aged 20 to 24 reported a higher level of perceived stress ($M=3.52$; $SD=.784$) compared to the oldest age cohort (25-29 years; $M=3.26$; $SD=.824$) and the youngest age group (16-19 years; $M=3.34$; $SD=.787$; $F=4.536$; $p<.05$). Young people in the 20-24 age group are mostly involved in the higher education system, and some of them are also working. Some young people at that age are entering the labour market and are in the early stages of career development, which can also be challenging. In addition to the demands of higher education, a possible reason for the higher perceived stress level could be the availability of support systems in an educational or work environment.

Compared to the pre-pandemic period, the perceived level of stress in their school or work environment in the post-pandemic period (2023) is statistically significantly lower, both in Croatia ($M=3.17$; $SD=.948$; $t=5.079$; $df=1795$; $p=.001$) and in Slovenia ($M=3.11$; $SD=.912$; $t=3.130$; $df=1876$; $p=.002$). In the post-pandemic period, 77.2% of young people in Croatia reported that their daily life at school/higher education or work is at least somewhat difficult and stressful (45.8% somewhat, 21.7% quite a bit, 9.7% very difficult and stressful). For comparison,

² As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item *"Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?"* was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1 - We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

45.4% of young people in Slovenia reported that their daily life at school/higher education or work is somewhat stressful and difficult, 21.3% quite a bit and 7.6% of them reported that it was very difficult and stressful. The perceived level of stress in the educational or work environment was analysed with respect to gender and age groups of young people in both countries (Figure 6.8.).

In both countries, the perceived levels of stress related to school, higher education, or work have, on average, somewhat decreased in the post-pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic period. However, the experience remains pronounced; 77.2% of young people in Croatia and 45.4% in Slovenia reported that their daily life in these roles is at least somewhat difficult and stressful. The difference between the countries is consistent with the pre-pandemic period, indicating that young people in Croatia continue to experience significantly higher levels of stress related to central life roles – education and work.

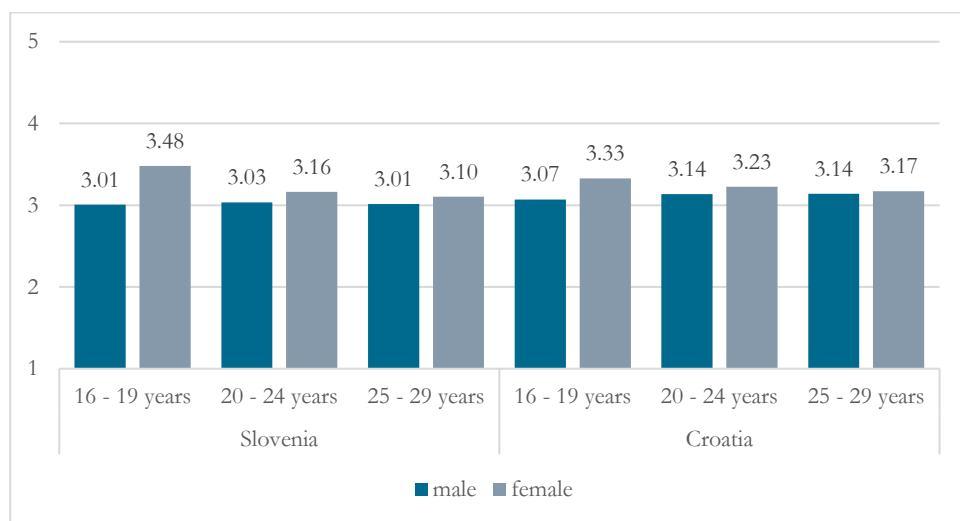


Figure 6.8: Perceived stress level (at school/high school or work) in the post-pandemic period by country (mean scores)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In the post-pandemic period, young people in Croatia ($M=3.17$; $SD=.948$) reported similar levels of perceived stress experienced in their school or work environment compared to young people in Slovenia ($M=3.11$; $SD=.912$). In both countries, girls perceived their educational or work environment as statistically significantly more

stressful (Slovenia: $M=3.23$, $SD=.890$; $t=4.435$; $df=1254$; $p=.001$; Croatia: $M=3.23$; $SD=.927$; $t=2.263$; $df=1199$; $p=.024$) than did young men (Slovenia: $M=3.00$, $SD=.919$; Croatia: $M=3.11$, $SD=.964$). Although the perceived level of stress in the educational or work environment both in Slovenia and Croatia is stable across different age groups, young people in Croatia who are enrolled in the education system ($M=3.23$; $SD=.940$) report a significantly higher level of perceived stress compared to other groups of young people (employed: $M=3.08$; $SD=.923$; unemployed: $M=3.08$; $SD=1.093$; $F_{2,1198}=3.641$; $p=.027$). Compared to the pre-pandemic period, when in both countries the perceived stress in the educational or work environment was stable across different socio-economic circumstances of the young people's families, in the post-pandemic period, there is a weak but statistically significant correlation ($\rho=-.082$; $p<.01$) between perceived stress in the educational or work environment and socio-economic background of young people in Croatia. In Croatia, higher levels of stress in educational and work environments were associated with young people coming from families of lower socioeconomic status.

6.4 Conclusions and recommendations

In this project, we approached mental health from three different perspectives: (1) Measuring the prevalence of self-reported symptoms of impaired mental health; (2) Examining symptoms of burnout among various groups based on education and employment status; (3) Assessing experienced worries regarding central life roles before and after the pandemic. The latter measure refers to traditional single-item indicators, and allowed us to compare the current project's results with parallel data collected in the FES 2018 Youth Study project. On the other hand, the first two sets of measures were based on standard psychological instruments (DASS-9 and BAT-12) and were applied exclusively in the current research. Several key findings emerged from the results. Below, we present these findings and discuss their implications for social policy:

Young people report elevated levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress. Over 25% report serious depressive symptoms in both countries; around 20% report serious anxiety symptoms; and 30% of young people in Croatia and 27% in Slovenia report experiencing high levels of stress. These findings are consistent with recent data from the WHO (2024), which indicate that depression, anxiety, and

behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents. Additionally, suicide is identified as the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29. It is also worth noting that some significant differences were found between the countries - young people in Croatia reported, on average, higher levels of depressive and stress symptoms. However, the effects were small and do not indicate any qualitative differences between the samples.

The results of this project demonstrate that Croatia and Slovenia are not exceptions in the global trend of deteriorating mental health among young people. In this context, both countries should follow global recommendations for institutional and public strategies to support youth mental health and well-being. These strategies should adopt an interdisciplinary approach, integrating efforts from governmental, non-governmental, and civil sectors. Moreover, addressing this issue should involve not only mental health professionals, such as psychologists and psychiatrists, but also educators, managers, and others who work directly with young people. Furthermore, tackling this challenge requires close collaboration between research and practice. Such cooperation can yield insights into the causes of the phenomenon, the development of valid assessment tools, identify effective coping strategies, and ultimately implement them at individual, group, and societal levels.

- Additionally, the use of a burnout assessment tool, administered as a supplementary measure of context-related psychological well-being, revealed that burnout symptoms are more prevalent among younger individuals in education than among those who are employed.

Burnout symptoms among youth deserve greater attention in the future, as this particular form of mental health impairment may help us better understand its underlying causes. Burnout is a specific, reactive type of mental health impairment that arises from prolonged exposure to stress. This stress results from a disbalance between situational demands and the resources available to the individual for effective coping. In other words, burnout shifts the responsibility for mental health impairments onto the environment, specifically, schools and workplaces. Theories explaining the situational causes of burnout serve as a valuable guide for targeted, context-based interventions. These interventions should focus on shaping environments in which young people engage with their life roles (education and work) in ways that are aligned with their needs. Focusing on the quality of

employment and education will likely have a more profound and lasting impact on well-being than treating the individual or group-level consequences of unhealthy environments. The key to mitigating burnout symptoms lies in the hands of employers, managers, teachers, and education policymakers. The role of mental health professionals is to support and enhance the competencies of these stakeholders in creating healthier, more supportive environments.

- In general, young women reported more symptoms of mental health impairment than young men, which is a pattern also observed in other age groups. Interestingly, when analysing all symptoms, i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout, we observed distinct trends for young men and women. Among young women, the youngest age groups reported the highest levels of mental health difficulties. Older young women (those in their late twenties) reported fewer symptoms, suggesting an improvement in mental health with age. For young men, the trend differed, with adolescent girls emerging as the highest-risk group for impaired mental health in both countries.

Beyond highlighting the need for gender- and age-sensitive approaches to mental health, these findings accentuate the heterogeneity of the young population respecting their socio-economic status.

- Socio-economic status of a young person's family may serve as either a risk or protective factor for mental health. Individuals with a better self-rated financial background reported significantly fewer symptoms of impaired mental health.

The observed individual differences in all measures used to assess the mental health of young people in Croatia and Slovenia exceeded the differences in their demographic characteristics. Policy measures should consider the psychological needs of the target population and respect individual differences in responses to the same environmental demands.

- Strategies aimed at supporting youth mental health must take into account the diversity among young people. Individual differences in mental health may stem from variations in psychological needs and the subjective experience of objective stressors. Effective strategies should be grounded in this

understanding and should tailor interventions to the specific experiences and challenges faced by different subgroups within the youth population.

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7. YOUTH IN TRANSITION: NAVIGATING EXPECTATIONS IN THE POST-COVID ERA

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This chapter compares youth perceptions of societal norms in Croatia and Slovenia, revealing distinct mechanisms shaping their views. Croatian youth exhibit age-dependent patterns where growing autonomy influences the internalisation of societal expectations, leading to increasing self-confidence paired with a realistic reassessment of attainable life goals, particularly in education, housing, and financial independence. Slovenian youth, especially women, confront pronounced gender disparities rooted in structural inequities, burdening them with extensive societal and familial responsibilities. Both cohorts experience tension between individual aspirations and collective norms, with maturity prompting a shift from optimism to pragmatic evaluation of social milestones. Socioeconomic status (SES) strongly correlates with youths' belief in personal success and adherence to societal expectations, with higher SES linked to greater confidence and internalisation, although national contexts mediate these effects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, age differences in justifying public health norms were minimal, but SES differences were significant, especially in Slovenia. Croatian youth showed less overall support for health measures but greater familial duty endorsement.

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In contemporary Croatia and Slovenia, the expectations placed upon young people by older generations and wider society are deeply embedded within shifting economic, cultural, and policy landscapes. These expectations encompass various life domains, including education, employment, housing, family formation, and intergenerational care. While aspirations among youth remain notably high, structural inequalities, labour market transformations, and changing cultural norms have significantly complicated the trajectories traditionally associated with the transition to adulthood. What was once perceived as a linear and predictable progression, from education to stable employment, followed by independent living and family formation, is increasingly fragmented and uncertain.

Educational expectations have become increasingly central to societal narratives surrounding youth success. In Croatia and Slovenia, we can observe a trend noted across Europe, with a significant increase in the normative assumption that young people will pursue higher education, regardless of parental education or socio-economic background (Brooks et al., 2021). This widespread emphasis on educational attainment reflects broader global trends linked to the expansion of tertiary education and the perceived necessity of credentials for labour market competitiveness (Reay et al., 2005). Despite this trend, the pathways to higher education are not equally accessible. Families with limited educational capital often lack the navigational knowledge to support their children's academic progress, leading to mismatches between aspirations and realistic educational trajectories (Ball et al., 2002). Furthermore, while parental expectations are typically high, especially among middle-class families, research indicates that in earlier cohorts these expectations may have exceeded those of their children, though this intergenerational discrepancy appears to be narrowing over time (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002). For working-class families, high aspirations may coexist with structural constraints that impede educational mobility, such as limited financial resources or poor institutional support (Devine, 2004).

Successful placement on the labour market, following the completion of formal education, remains a cornerstone of societal expectations regarding the transition to adulthood. However, the structural realities of contemporary labour markets often present obstacles to these ambitions. The post-socialist transition, globalisation, and neoliberal economic reforms have all contributed to labour market instability, with young people disproportionately affected by precarious employment,

underemployment, and extended job search periods (Müller & Gangl, 2003). This mismatch between expectation and opportunity has led to a protracted transition from education to economic independence. Many young people now remain financially reliant on their families well into their twenties and beyond, a phenomenon often referred to as "delayed adulthood" (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), which was confirmed by comparative studies conducted in Croatia and Slovenia (Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Gvozdanović et al., 2024; Naterer et al., 2019; Lavrič, 2024).

The prospect of achieving independent living, particularly through homeownership, has become increasingly elusive for young people in Croatia and Slovenia. The interplay between low youth wages, high property prices, and insufficient rental housing options has forced many to remain in the parental home for longer periods (Mandic, 2008). The Eurostat data show that the average age at which young individuals moved out of their parents' homes across the European Union in 2023 was 26.3 years and remained unchanged in the last five years. This figure, however, differed significantly among EU member states, with Croatia at 31.8 years and Slovenia at 29.1 years¹. This phenomenon, often framed as "prolonged co-residence", is not simply a cultural preference but a response to economic challenges. As a result, the traditional, linear model of housing transitions has given way to more fluid and uncertain pathways, with many young people experiencing periods of housing precarity, including moving in and out of different living arrangements, which creates patterns of jo-jø generation (Kovacheva, 2012). The symbolic value of independent living as a marker of adulthood remains strong, yet its realisation is increasingly conditional on factors beyond young people's control, such as inheritance, parental support, or state subsidies.

Residential independence is strongly aligned with the possibilities for creating one's own family. While older generations may continue to hold normative expectations that young people will marry and have children, these life milestones are being delayed or redefined for the contemporary generations of young people. In both Slovenia and Croatia, the average age of marriage and first childbirth has increased significantly, reflecting broader European trends (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). Although many young people continue to aspire to family life, these aspirations are

¹ Source: Eurostat [yth_demo_30]

often reframed around ideals of emotional maturity, financial readiness, and partnership stability, rather than mere conformity to social expectations. Consequently, young people approach family formation with a higher sense of reflexivity, weighing individual preferences against perceived constraints and opportunities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), which is reflected in the YO-VID22, 2023 data on 80.9% of young people in Croatia and 74.1% of youth in Slovenia who aspire to become parents.

Expectations concerning young people's anticipated role in providing care for their own family and for older family members become more central to social care provision. However, the retreat of the public social care system, delayed economic independence and increased geographical mobility further complicate young people's ability to assume caregiving roles. At the same time, the extension of parental support, both financial and emotional, has become a key feature of intergenerational relationships, reinforcing a dynamic of prolonged dependency (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). This mutual interdependence represents a departure from traditional models of linear generational succession. Furthermore, there is growing evidence of a disjuncture between these aspirations and young people's sense of their attainability (Arnett, 2004).

7.1 Societal expectations and self-expectations of young people in the context of contemporary uncertainty

In both Croatia and Slovenia, young people's self-expectations reflect a growing tension between traditional markers of adult success and the shifting realities of contemporary life. Shaped by both personal ambition and societal pressure, these expectations also reflect a cultural shift towards valuing mental health and emotional stability, though the pressures of achieving this ideal within unstable conditions often intensify psychological distress. Despite recognising the obstacles, many young people continue to strive for relational and domestic milestones, though these are often deferred or reimagined. The YO-VID22 research paid special attention to the aspirations and expectations of young people, striving to comprehend a patchwork of various expectations that society and the elders have of the youth, and of the self-imposed expectations. Starting from the statements *"I have plans for my future and ways to achieve them"* and *"I am ready to take on the responsibilities expected of an adult"* we gained valuable insights into how young people in Croatia and Slovenia perceive their

transition to adulthood. In both countries, a high proportion of youth expressed agreement with these affirmations, suggesting a generally proactive and responsible orientation among the younger population. In Croatia, 83.4% of respondents agreed with the statement about future planning, while the figure was slightly lower in Slovenia at 77.6%. Conversely, when it comes to assuming adult responsibilities, the proportions were higher: 87.2% in Croatia and 89.4% in Slovenia. For both items and in both national contexts, there were no statistically significant gender differences, which implies a relatively uniform self-perception across male and female youth regarding these developmental markers.

Age-related differences emerged more distinctly. In Croatia, the readiness to take on adult responsibilities showed a modest yet statistically significant variation across age groups ($\chi^2=6.127$; $df=2$; $p=.047$). Here, 83.4% of individuals aged 16-19 felt prepared, rising to 87.6% in the middle age bracket and peaking at 89.4% among those aged 25-29. This upward trajectory likely reflects the natural progression of maturity and experience. In Slovenia, the age effect was slightly more pronounced ($\chi^2=9.258$; $df=2$; $p=.010$), with readiness increasing from 85.1% in the youngest group to 91.5% in the oldest cohort. These findings underline how the subjective sense of adult responsibility strengthens with age, reinforcing the developmental nature of emerging adulthood.

Socio-economic status (SES) appears to exert a differential influence in the two countries. In Croatia, SES did not significantly shape young people's responses to either statement, suggesting a potentially more equitable perception of future orientation and responsibility among Croatian youth regardless of socio-economic background. In contrast, SES-related disparities were evident in Slovenia. For the statement on future plans and their attainability, a statistically significant SES gradient was observed ($\chi^2=8.599$; $df=2$; $p=.014$), with a 73.5% agreement in the lowest SES group, 78.1% in the middle, and 83.8% in the highest. A similar pattern emerged for readiness to assume adult responsibilities ($\chi^2=7.563$; $df=2$; $p=.023$), with agreement rates increasing from 86.0% in the lowest SES stratum to 92.6% in the highest. These disparities suggest that in Slovenia, socio-economic positioning plays a meaningful role in shaping young people's confidence in both their futures and their preparedness for adult roles.

The Figure 7.1 presents comparative data on the societal expectations and youth self-expectations and societal expectations among young people in Croatia and Slovenia across various life goals.

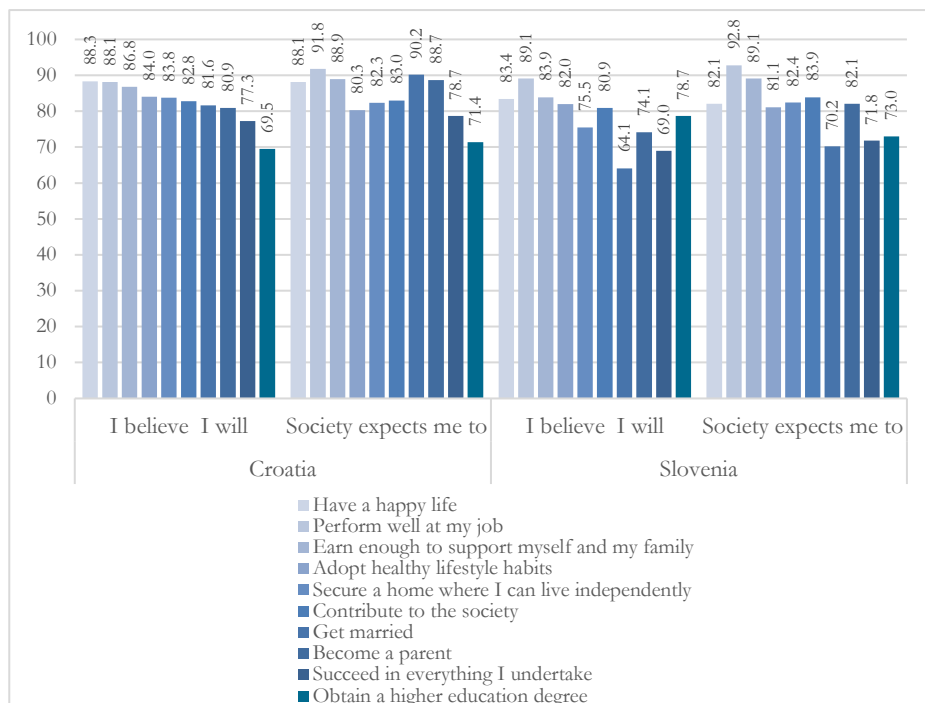


Figure 7.1: Societal expectations and youth self-expectations in Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In both countries, individuals exhibit a high level of confidence in their ability to "perform well at my job" (Croatia: 88.1%, Slovenia: 89.1%) and to "earn enough to support myself and my family" (Croatia: 86.8%, Slovenia: 83.9%). An opposite pattern is observed in educational aspirations: 78.7% of young Slovenians believe they will obtain a higher education degree, compared to only 69.5% of Croats. This is coupled with marginally higher societal expectations in Slovenia (73.0% vs 71.4%). A striking disparity emerges in the intention to "get married", with 81.6% of Croatian respondents believing they will do so, compared to only 64.1% in Slovenia. This gap is mirrored in societal expectations, where 90.2% in Croatia perceive this as expected

versus just 70.2% in Slovenia, which highlights a stronger normative emphasis on marriage in Croatian society. Similarly, becoming a parent is more strongly anticipated in Croatia (80.9%) than Slovenia (74.1%), with societal expectations following a comparable trend (Croatia: 88.7%, Slovenia: 82.1%). We can conclude that while both countries show strong personal ambition and perceived societal pressure to achieve, Croatian youth appear more inclined toward traditional life milestones such as marriage and parenthood, whereas Slovenians demonstrate higher academic aspiration.

Regarding the socio-demographic differences, in Croatia, several statistically significant gender differences emerged in young people's perceptions of societal expectations and self-beliefs regarding future life milestones. First of all, women reported significantly higher ($t(1214) = -3.127$; $p = .002$) perceived societal expectations to attain a university-level education ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .372$) than their male peers ($M = 1.67$; $SD = .469$). This difference was mirrored in self-belief ($t(1214) = -3.504$; $p = .000$), where women expressed higher confidence in achieving university-level education ($M = 1.76$; $SD = .430$) than men ($M = 1.65$; $SD = .477$).

In terms of perceived societal expectations related to parenthood, men reported a significantly stronger ($t(1214) = -2.695$; $p = .007$) sense that society expects them to become parents ($M = 1.86$; $SD = .344$) compared to women ($M = 1.74$; $SD = .438$). Interestingly, despite this, women expressed a stronger personal belief ($t(1214) = 2.061$; $p = .040$) that they will become parents ($M = 1.91$; $SD = .284$) than men ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .374$). Conversely, regarding societal expectations to marry, women reported slightly higher agreement ($M = 1.91$; $SD = .284$) than men ($M = 1.89$; $SD = .330$), with $t(1214) = -3.157$; $p = .002$. A significant gender difference was also identified in beliefs regarding independent housing acquisition ($t(1214) = 2.235$; $p = .026$). Women expressed higher belief in their ability to secure housing independently ($M = 1.86$; $SD = .352$) than men ($M = 1.79$; $SD = .411$).

When considering broader life expectations, men were more likely to agree that society expects individuals to have a happy life ($M = 1.85$; $SD = .357$) compared to women ($M = 1.81$; $SD = .390$), with $t(1214) = -3.302$; $p = .001$. Moreover, women expressed a slightly lower belief ($t(1214) = 2.142$; $p = .032$) in contributing to society through their actions ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .372$) than men ($M = 1.85$; $SD = .356$). Finally, a statistically significant difference was observed in beliefs regarding success across all

endeavours ($t(1214)=2.621$; $p=.009$), with men reporting higher confidence across different domains ($M=1.80$; $SD=.398$) than women ($M=1.74$; $SD=.439$).

In Slovenia, the analysis revealed several statistically significant gender differences in young people's perceptions of societal expectations across a range of life domains. Women consistently reported higher levels of perceived societal pressure in comparison to their male peers. Most prominently, women more frequently indicated perceived expectations to maintain healthy lifestyle habits ($M=1.85$; $SD=.356$) than men ($M=1.78$; $SD=.417$), with $t(1282)=-3.483$; $p=.001$. Moreover, there is a significant gender difference in self-belief concerning higher education ($t(1282)=-2.194$, $p=.028$), as women expressed higher belief in their ability to attain a university-level education ($M=1.81$; $SD=.390$) than men ($M=1.76$; $SD=.425$).

Perceptions regarding future family roles also demonstrated statistically significant differences in regard to gender. Women more frequently reported higher ($t(1282)=-6.237$; $p=.000$) societal expectations to become a parent ($M=1.89$; $SD=.313$) than men ($M=1.76$; $SD=.428$). In the domain of marriage, women also reported higher perceived expectations ($M=1.74$; $SD=.439$) than men ($M=1.67$; $SD=.471$), with $t(1282)=-2.793$; $p=.005$. Concerning housing, a statistically significant gender difference ($t(1282)=-3.068$; $p=.002$) was found in perceived expectations to secure independent living arrangements, with women again reporting higher expectations ($M=1.86$; $SD=.349$) than men ($M=1.79$; $SD=.405$). Moreover, women perceived stronger societal expectations to lead a happy life ($M=1.87$; $SD=.340$) compared to men ($M=1.78$; $SD=.414$), with $t(1282)=-4.053$; $p<0.001$.

Beyond personal and familial aspirations, significant gender differences were evident in perceived societal expectations to contribute to society through one's actions, with women once again reporting higher levels ($M=1.87$; $SD=.337$) than men ($M=1.81$; $SD=.391$), with $t(1282)=-2.843$; $p=.005$. Finally, women reported higher ($t(1282)=-2.585$; $p=.010$) perceived societal expectations to succeed in all endeavours ($M=1.75$; $SD=.431$) than men ($M=1.69$; $SD=.464$).

Concerning the age differences among Croatian youth, age appears to be a significant factor in shaping perceptions of adult responsibility and self-belief across various developmental domains. Regarding educational expectations, 74.9% of both the 16-19 and 20-24 age groups perceived societal pressure to attain a university-

level education. This proportion declined to 65.6% among 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=12.229$; $df=2$; $p=.002$). A similar, but more pronounced, downward trend was observed in personal belief in achieving this goal: 74.4% of 16-19-year-olds, 72.2% of 20-24-year-olds, and only 63.2% of the 25-29 cohort expressed this belief ($\chi^2=13.589$; $df=2$; $p=.001$). These findings may reflect changing priorities or growing awareness of structural barriers as youth age. Confidence in one's ability to perform well in a job increased with age: 84.4% of those aged 16-19 reported confidence in their job performance, compared to 87.4% of the 20-24 age group and 91.4% of 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=9.201$; $df=2$; $p=.010$). This trend suggests that older youth generally feel more prepared for the demands of the labour market.

Perceptions of societal expectations to maintain healthy lifestyle habits showed a statistically significant, though less linear, pattern. Among 16-19-year-olds, 84.4% reported feeling such expectations, followed by 77.0% of the 20-24 age group, and 80.6% of 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=6.478$; $df=2$; $p=.039$). Perceived societal expectations to lead a happy life declined modestly across age groups. While 90.3% of the youngest cohort agreed with this statement, the figure fell slightly to 89.8% among those aged 20-24, and more notably to 84.8% among 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=7.437$; $df=2$; $p=.024$). Finally, belief in personal success across all endeavours varied significantly with age. Among the youngest group, 77.2% endorsed this belief, compared to 73.8% in the middle group, and a higher 81.0% among the oldest group ($\chi^2=6.645$; $df=2$; $p=.036$).

Among Slovenian youth, several statistically significant age-related differences were observed in both perceptions of societal expectations and personal beliefs regarding key developmental milestones and adult responsibilities. In terms of perceived societal expectations to attain a university-level education, 70.5% of the youngest group held this perception, increasing to 78.3% among 20-24-year-olds, and then decreasing slightly to 69.8% in the oldest group. Despite this fluctuation, the overall association with age remained statistically significant ($\chi^2=9.964$; $df=2$; $p=.007$), pointing to shifting educational expectations or awareness across developmental stages.

Regarding marriage, 65.0% of the youngest group in Slovenia perceived a societal expectation to marry, which increased to 71.9% in the 20-24 age group and 72.3% among 25-29-year-olds. This age-related difference was statistically significant

($\chi^2=6.045$; $df=2$; $p=.049$), indicating a progressive internalisation of societal norms related to long-term relationships. However, personal belief in getting married showed an inverse pattern. While 70.0% of 16-19-year-olds believed they would marry, this proportion dropped to 66.7% among 20-24-year-olds and further to 59.2% in the oldest age group, a statistically significant decline ($\chi^2=11.458$; $df=2$; $p=.003$). This contrast between perceived societal expectations and personal belief may reflect growing scepticism or evolving attitudes towards marriage with age.

Perceptions of societal expectations to perform well in one's job were also widely endorsed across age groups, though with slight variation. Among 16-19-year-olds, 90.6% perceived this expectation, rising to 95.1% among those aged 20-24, before declining slightly to 92.1% among the 25-29 cohort. The age-related pattern was statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.354$; $df=2$; $p=.042$), indicating that while expectations are generally high, they are perceived more intensely during early adulthood. In contrast, belief in securing independent housing declined with age. Among 16-19-year-olds, 82.2% believed they would be able to live independently, compared to 74.9% of 20-24-year-olds and just 71.2% of those aged 25-29. This decline was statistically significant ($\chi^2=13.352$; $df=2$; $p=.001$), potentially reflecting the growing awareness of financial and structural barriers associated with housing autonomy as youth age.

A statistically significant decrease was also observed in the perception that society expects one to lead a happy life. While 87.1% of 16-19-year-olds reported this perception, the figure declined to 83.1% among 20-24-year-olds and further to 77.7% among the 25-29 group ($\chi^2=12.775$; $df=2$; $p=.002$), suggesting a diminishing belief in idealised societal expectations over time.

A position on the spectrum of socio-economic status (SES), estimated by a degree of possession and access to the goods, appears to play a statistically significant role in shaping both perceived societal expectations and personal beliefs of Croatian youth across a range of developmental and aspirational domains. In terms of maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, belief increases significantly with SES: 78.2% of youth with low SES hold this belief, rising to 85.8% among those with medium SES and 89.5% with high SES ($\chi^2=16.928$; $df=2$; $p=.000$). A more modest SES-related pattern is observed in belief in getting married, reported by 78.5% of low SES youth, 81.9% of medium SES youth, and 86.5% of those from high SES backgrounds. This

difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.491$; $df=2$; $p=.039$), indicating increasing personal belief in marriage with higher SES.

Perceived societal expectation to attain university-level education also varies significantly by SES. While 64.0% of low SES youth perceive such an expectation, this increases to 75.6% among those with medium SES and 74.3% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=16.840$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), indicating lower awareness or internalisation of educational norms among the lower SES group. This trend continues in personal belief in attaining university-level education, reported by only 61.5% of youth from low SES backgrounds, but increasing to 73.9% and 73.0% among those from medium and high SES backgrounds, respectively ($\chi^2=18.885$; $df=2$; $p=.000$).

With regard to perceptions that society expects good job performance, 88.4% of individuals from low SES backgrounds hold this view, increasing to 93.1% among those with medium SES and 94.9% among those with high SES. This upward trend is statistically significant at $\chi^2=10.878$; $df=2$; $p=.004$, suggesting a correlation between SES and perceived pressure to meet employment standards. A similar pattern is observed in belief in personal job performance, where 84.5% of youth from low SES backgrounds believe they will perform well in their job, compared to 89.6% of those from medium SES and 90.7% from high SES backgrounds ($\chi^2=7.718$; $df=2$; $p=.021$).

Belief in earning enough to support oneself and one's family is shared by 82.1% of low SES youth, increasing to 86.9% for those with medium SES and 92.0% for those with high SES. This relationship is statistically significant at $\chi^2=12.824$; $df=2$; $p=.002$, reflecting greater financial optimism with increasing SES. In relation to securing independent housing, belief rises significantly from 79.2% among low SES youth to 83.6% among medium SES and 92.4% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=19.451$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), which underlines the critical role of socioeconomic resources in perceptions of housing autonomy.

Regarding the belief in achieving a happy life, 85.3% of youth with low SES express this belief, increasing to 89.2% among those with medium SES and 91.2% among those with high SES ($\chi^2=6.042$; $df=2$; $p=.049$). The perception that society expects individuals to contribute to society also varies by SES, with 79.2% of low SES youth holding this view, compared to 85.1% of those with medium SES and 84.5% of

those with high SES ($\chi^2=6.352$; $df=2$; $p=.042$). Finally, personal belief in contributing to society increases from 77.2% among low SES youth to 85.5% and 86.5% among medium and high SES youth, respectively ($\chi^2=14.152$; $df=2$; $p=.001$), which further accentuates the role of SES in shaping civic self-perception.

In the Slovenian youth sample, perceptions of societal expectations regarding university-level education are also SES-sensitive. Among youth from low SES backgrounds, 69.2% believe society expects them to pursue higher education, compared to 73.2% of those from medium SES and 78.8% from high SES ($\chi^2=6.573$; $df=2$; $p=.037$). These perceptions are mirrored in personal belief in attaining university-level education, where a significant SES-based divide emerges: 69.2% of low SES youth believe they will attain a university-level education, rising sharply to 82.1% in the medium SES group and 84.7% in the high SES group ($\chi^2=30.175$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), highlighting a pronounced disparity in educational self-efficacy. When considering the perception that society expects them to marry, a similar trend emerges, with 75.6% of low SES youth who perceive such an expectation, compared to 68.3% and 67.1% among medium and high SES youth, respectively ($\chi^2=7.473$; $df=2$; $p=.024$), suggesting that traditional social norms may exert stronger influence on youth from less advantaged backgrounds.

Regarding perceived societal expectations to earn enough to support oneself and one's family, 85.8% of low SES youth report feeling this expectation, rising to 91.1% among medium SES and slightly decreasing to 88.4% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=7.375$; $df=2$; $p=.025$). In terms of personal belief in earning sufficient income, the differences are more pronounced: 75.6% of low SES youth believe they will achieve this, in contrast to 86.0% of medium SES and 92.1% of high SES individuals ($\chi^2=32.750$; $df=2$; $p=.000$).

A similar trend appears in belief in securing independent housing, which is reported by 65.8% of low SES youth, increasing to 78.4% for medium SES and 83.3% for high SES youth ($\chi^2=29.843$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), reinforcing the influence of SES on perceived housing autonomy.

Analysis of youth in Croatia and Slovenia reveals that both countries' young people display high confidence in their ability to perform well at work and support themselves financially, but notable differences emerge in educational and family-related aspirations. Slovenian youth report higher academic ambitions and perceive higher societal expectations regarding higher education, while Croatian youth are more inclined towards traditional milestones such as marriage and parenthood.

In terms of belief in maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, 77.2% of low SES youth express confidence, rising to 82.9% in the medium SES group and 87.5% in the high SES group ($\chi^2=10.827$; $df=2$; $p=.004$), further reflecting a SES-based pattern in health-related expectations. Concerning the belief in leading a happy life, 79.2% of youth from low SES backgrounds express confidence in this outcome, compared to 83.9% from medium SES and 89.4% from high SES backgrounds ($\chi^2=10.547$; $df=2$; $p=.005$), which indicates higher optimism among those from more advantaged socioeconomic positions.

Socioeconomic status (SES) exerts a significant influence; higher SES is consistently associated with stronger beliefs in personal success, higher internalisation of societal expectations, and higher optimism regarding employment, financial independence, housing autonomy and maintaining healthy lifestyle habits.

7.2 Pandemic-related expectations

In the very beginning of the pandemic, the voice of the general public became polarised and distorted as a consequence of the imposed anti-pandemic measures and a clash between the informed expert circles and pseudo-science narratives. These differences may reflect broader distinctions in public trust, institutional credibility, and political culture between the two countries. Slovenia has consistently ranked higher than Croatia in international measures of governance effectiveness and public trust in institutions (European Commission, 2021), factors that have been shown to correlate with public compliance and support for collective health measures (Van der Weerd et al., 2011). The difference may also be partially explained by the framing and enforcement of public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Slovenian authorities, particularly during the earlier phases of the pandemic, adopted a relatively technocratic and science-driven approach to

pandemic management, which may have resonated more with youth who identified with expert authority and collective responsibility. In contrast, Croatia experienced more political contestation and fragmented public messaging, including mixed signals from authorities and less consistent enforcement (Koprić, 2020). Such inconsistencies may have eroded the perceived legitimacy of public health expectations among young people, resulting in lower justification ratings for many of the measures. The listed disparities can also be identified in the data presented in the Figure 7.2.

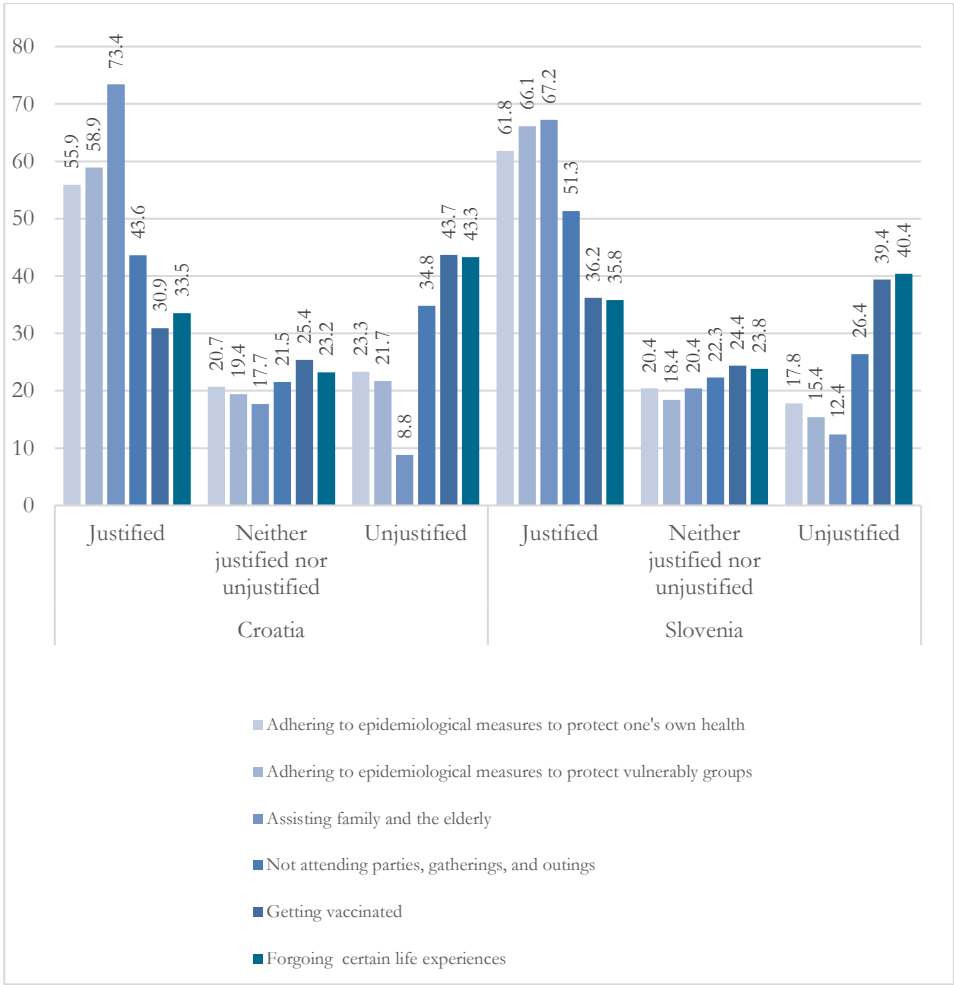


Figure 7.2: Perceived pandemic-related expectations of youth in Croatia and Slovenia (%)
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

A comparative analysis of public attitudes towards pandemic-related behaviours in Croatia and Slovenia reveals differences in the perceived justification of specific epidemiological and social measures. Slovenian respondents consistently reported higher justification rates across all behaviours. The most significant divergence is observed in the category of “not attending parties, gatherings and outings”, where 51.3% of Slovenians considered such behaviour justified, compared to only 43.6% of Croats. Similarly, adherence to measures aimed at protecting vulnerable groups was deemed justified by 66.1% of Slovenian participants, surpassing the Croatian figure of 58.9% by 7.2 points. Conversely, young people in Croatia showed a stronger tendency to view these actions as unjustified, particularly in relation to vaccination and the forgoing of certain life experiences. In Croatia, 43.7% deemed vaccination unjustified, compared to 39.4% in Slovenia. A similar pattern is noted in forgoing life experiences, with 43.3% of Croats versus 40.4% of Slovenians expressing this sentiment. The narrowest gap appears in the domain of assisting family and the elderly, which was widely supported in both countries (Croatia 73.4%; Slovenia 67.2%), which suggests a stronger familial or intergenerational commitment within Croatian society. Also, the focus groups provided us with insights on the possible explanations of country differences, one of which is related to inadequate response to the pandemic from the educational institutions:

“I believe that during that time, specifically during the pandemic, we particularly lacked support from, for instance, the school counsellor in primary school. She was already older, and as a result, the situation unfolded in such a way that she was not familiar with the necessary technology. I think what we truly needed was some form of guidance; someone to explain that we simply had to persevere, what the measures were, and how things would function moving forward. Essentially, we needed to be introduced into that new reality and how it was going to work”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

Regarding the statistically significant differences, there were significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting one's own health. In Slovenia, women ($M=3.79$; $SD=1.18$) rated these expectations as significantly more justified than men ($M=3.56$; $SD=1.23$), $t(1275.16)=-3.43$; $p<.001$. The same pattern was observed in Croatia, where women ($M=3.70$; $SD=1.22$) again rated the expectations more highly than men ($M=3.26$; $SD=1.31$), $t(1213.24)=-6.07$; $p<.001$.

There were also significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Men reported significantly lower justification than women in both Slovenia, $t(1274.94) = -2.59$; $p = .01$, and Croatia, $t(1213.42) = -5.15$, $p < .001$. In Slovenia, the mean score for men was 3.73 ($SD = 1.21$), compared to 3.90 ($SD = 1.15$) for women; in Croatia, men scored 3.38 ($SD = 1.31$) and women 3.76 ($SD = 1.22$).

There were no significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to help family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands in Slovenia ($p > .05$). However, in Croatia, a significant difference was observed, with men ($M = 3.93$; $SD = 1.12$) reporting lower justification than women ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .96$), $t(1199.71) = -3.24$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, there were no significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to refrain from attending social gatherings, parties, and outings in Slovenia ($p > .05$). However, in Croatia, a significant difference was observed, with men ($M = 2.95$; $SD = 1.37$) reporting lower justification than women ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.30$), $t(1213.98) = -3.56$, $p < .001$.

We can say that on average, young women express higher levels of justification for societal expectations regarding obeying epidemiological preventive measures for protecting one's own health, as well as protecting the health of the family and the elderly. This aligns with a broader body of literature showing that women tend to express greater health-related risk perception and stronger endorsement of protective behaviours during health crises (Galasso et al., 2020; Moran & Del Valle, 2016). Women are also more likely to adopt a care-oriented ethical stance, particularly in relation to family and vulnerable groups (Carreras et al., 2023; Skinner & Sogstad, 2022), which may help explain their higher agreement with expectations framed around interpersonal responsibility and collective well-being. Furthermore, prior studies during the COVID-19 pandemic found that women were more compliant with public health measures and more willing to endorse restrictive interventions when framed in terms of protecting others (Clark et al., 2020). They also tend to experience greater fear and anticipate more severe health-related consequences of COVID-19, and are also more likely than men to adopt preventive behaviours in response to the pandemic, which mirrors the gender differences observed here (Alsharawy et al., 2021). In contrast, there are no significant gender

differences in the assessment of justification of the societal expectations about getting vaccinated and foregoing life experiences in either country. This could be due to the fact that these expectations were framed more as collective civic duties or biological imperatives, which may elicit less variation by gender and instead reflect broader normative consensus. Prior research has shown that vaccine attitudes and acceptance during COVID-19 were shaped more by trust in authorities, political ideology, and perceived risk than by gender alone (Lin et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021), which may help explain the absence of a gender gap in this domain.

Furthermore, there are some differences between countries in how justifiable men and women find the societal expectation about helping family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands; in Slovenia, there is no gender difference, and in Croatia, women find it more justifiable than men on average. This is likely related to more traditional gender role orientations in Croatia, where women may be more culturally expected to take on caregiving and domestic support roles, in contrast to Slovenia, where gender norms may be comparatively more egalitarian (Knight & Brinton, 2017; Lomazzi et al., 2018).

A similar pattern emerges regarding the justification of societal expectations to avoid social gatherings and outings. In Croatia, women find this expectation significantly more justifiable than men, whereas no such difference is observed in Slovenia. This may reflect differences in how gendered norms of autonomy and social participation are enacted across the two countries. In more traditionally gendered societies, restrictions on social life may be perceived by men as a greater infringement on personal freedom or masculine identity, which has been linked in past research to lower compliance with public health measures (Capraro & Barcelo, 2020). In contrast, Slovenia's more progressive gender norms may buffer against such divergent interpretations of social restrictions.

Regarding the age differences, no significant age-related effects were found in either country regarding the justification of any of the societal expectations ($p > .05$). On the one hand, the finding that there were no significant age differences in either country with respect to the justification of societal expectations during the pandemic is somewhat unexpected. One might anticipate that older youth (due to greater cognitive maturity, more developed risk perception, and a stronger sense of social responsibility) would evaluate societal expectations (e.g., protective health

behaviours or sacrifices for the collective good) as more justified than younger adolescents. Prior research suggests that age is positively associated with risk awareness and future orientation, particularly in relation to health-related behaviour (Steinberg et al., 2009). In this sense, one could reasonably expect that older youth might show stronger endorsement of measures perceived to protect both self and others. On the other hand, the absence of significant age differences may reflect the relative developmental and attitudinal homogeneity of youth as a group in this specific socio-political context. The entire sample falls within the broader adolescent and emerging adult range, which, despite developmental variation, may share common experiences of pandemic-related disruption (e.g., school closures, limitations on social life, uncertainty about the future) that contribute to a shared generational perspective. It is possible that the salience of these shared experiences, amplified by peer dynamics and digital media exposure, led to relatively uniform attitudes toward public health expectations across age subgroups. In line with social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), youth may have interpreted these expectations not primarily through the lens of age-based developmental stages, but through a collective "youth identity" that was acutely shaped by the perceived societal impact of pandemic restrictions on their generation.

Moreover, the public health messaging and institutional framing of pandemic rules often did not differentiate substantially between younger and older adolescents, especially in media narratives targeting youth behaviour. This lack of differentiation may have further contributed to a shared interpretive frame and similar levels of perceived justification across age. The finding suggests that while age can be a meaningful predictor of public health attitudes in broader population samples, it may exert less influence within relatively narrow age bands during periods of intense collective experience, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification for the societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting one's own health in both countries. In Slovenia, there was a significant main effect of SES, $F(2, 1283) = 14.16$; $p < .001$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.17$) and the highest SES group (SES 3; $M = 3.73$; $SD = 1.21$) rated the expectations as significantly more justified than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.26$), with $p < .001$ and $p < .004$, respectively. In Croatia, the effect of SES was also significant, $F(2, 1212) = 3.56$; $p < .05$, with youth in the middle

SES group ($M=3.54$; $SD=1.28$) reporting significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group ($M=3.34$; $SD=1.30$); $p<.05$.

SES was also significantly associated with justification for the societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting the health of families and vulnerable groups in both countries. In Slovenia, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of SES, $F(2, 1283)=18.83$, $p<.001$. Youth in both the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.89$; $SD=1.15$) and the highest SES group (SES 3; $M=4.07$; $SD=1.10$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.52$; $SD=1.24$); $p<.001$. Similarly, in Croatia, SES differences were significant, $F(2, 1212)=5.25$; $p<.01$. Youth in the middle SES group ($M=3.62$; $SD=1.27$) and SES 3 ($M=3.71$; $SD=1.20$) scored significantly higher than those in SES 1 ($M=3.41$; $SD=1.32$); $p<.05$.

Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with differences in perceived justification of the societal expectation to help family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands in both Slovenia, $F(2, 1283)=11.86$; $p<.001$, and Croatia, $F(2, 1212)=3.35$; $p<.05$. In Slovenia, youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.87$; $SD=1.10$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.58$; $SD=1.14$); $p<.001$. A similar pattern was observed in Croatia, where youth in the middle group ($M=4.08$; $SD=1.00$) reported higher justification than the ones in the lowest SES group ($M=3.92$; $SD=1.10$); $p<.05$.

Socioeconomic status also had a significant effect on the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to avoid social gatherings, parties, and outings in Slovenia, $F(2, 1283)=4.86$, $p<.01$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.42$; $SD=1.28$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.18$; $SD=1.26$), $p<.01$. In Croatia, socioeconomic status was not significantly associated with justification for this expectation.

In Slovenia, socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification of the societal expectation to get vaccinated, $F(2, 1283)=11.26$; $p<.001$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=2.88$; $SD=1.43$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=2.60$; $SD=1.45$), $p<.01$. Those in the highest SES group (SES 3; $M=3.17$; $SD=1.40$) reported significantly higher justification than both the lowest ($p<.001$) and middle SES

group ($p < .05$). In Croatia, no significant differences in justification were observed across SES groups.

In Slovenia socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification of the societal expectation to forego life experiences (such as school trips, excursions, prom, or wedding ceremonies), $F(2, 1283) = 5.20$; $p < .01$. Youth in the highest SES group (SES 3) reported significantly higher justification ($M = 3.13$; $SD = 1.38$) than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.28$), $p < .01$. The highest SES youth also reported significantly higher justification than those in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.31$); $p < .05$. In Croatia, by contrast, no significant SES differences were observed in relation to this expectation.

Regarding socioeconomic differences, we generally found that individuals with higher SES reported greater justification for societal expectations related to pandemic restrictions in both countries. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that individuals with higher socioeconomic status tend to show greater compliance with and endorsement of public health measures (Reed-Thryselius et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2023), likely due to higher levels of health literacy, greater institutional trust, and more resources that enable adherence (Van der Weerd et al., 2011). Higher SES individuals may also experience fewer practical barriers, such as job insecurity or caregiving strain, that complicate compliance with restrictive measures, making such expectations appear more reasonable and justified from their perspective (Bambra et al., 2020). In this sense, socioeconomic status not only shapes material conditions but also mediates access to dominant narratives and norms around civic responsibility and public health.

SES-related differences were more consistent in Slovenia, where significant effects were observed for every justification item, whereas in Croatia, differences emerged only in relation to expectations involving the protection of oneself and one's family (i.e., obeying preventive measures and helping family members obtain supplies). In Croatia, no SES differences were found for expectations more directly targeted at youth, such as avoiding social gatherings, receiving vaccination, or foregoing life experiences. This pattern suggests that expectations framed in terms of familial responsibility and care may be more broadly endorsed across SES lines in Croatia, potentially reflecting cultural norms that place strong emphasis on intergenerational solidarity and caregiving roles (Montoro-Gurich & Garcia-Vivar, 2019). These

expectations may be viewed less as public health mandates and more as moral imperatives, thus minimizing class-based divergence. In contrast, youth-oriented expectations (such as limiting social life or complying with vaccination campaigns) may have been perceived as more negotiable, individualised, or potentially politicised. The lack of SES variation in Croatia for these expectations may reflect a more homogeneous scepticism or ambivalence toward these types of restrictions, or a less differentiated information environment across class lines. Conversely, in Slovenia, where SES differences were more pervasive, it is possible that public health discourse was more strongly internalised among higher SES groups, resulting in clearer stratification in attitudes across a wider set of behavioural domains.

These contrasts can be illustrated by a focus group's quotation:

"So, there was a kind of hysteria as if there was some kind of scabies and leprosy around, and within a year or two people simply got used to it, as they do to everything, to something they call the "new normal".

(Male, employed, Croatia)".

When analysing the trends between the total samples, we can observe that youth in Slovenia expressed significantly higher justification for several societal expectations related to pandemic-related behaviours compared to their peers in Croatia. Specifically, Slovenian youth reported greater justification for the expectation to get vaccinated ($M=2.85$; $SD=1.44$) than Croatian youth ($M=2.70$; $SD=1.44$), $t(2501)=2.53$, $p<.05$. A similar pattern emerged for the expectation to refrain from attending social gatherings and outings, with higher justification reported among Slovenian youth ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.28$) than among Croatian youth ($M=3.08$; $SD=1.34$), $t(2501)=4.97$; $p<.001$. Slovenian youth also expressed stronger justification for adhering to epidemiological measures aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and other vulnerable groups ($M=3.81$; $SD=1.19$) compared to Croatian youth ($M=3.56$; $SD=1.28$), $t(2460.38)=4.94$; $p<.001$, as well as for measures aimed at protecting their own health ($M=3.67$; $SD=1.21$ vs. $M=3.48$; $SD=1.29$); $t(2468.11)=3.82$, $p<.001$. In contrast, Croatian youth expressed significantly greater justification for the societal expectation to help family and elderly individuals obtain supplies and run errands ($M=4.02$; $SD=1.05$) compared to Slovenian youth ($M=3.80$; $SD=1.10$); $t(2500.81)=-5.23$; $p<.001$. There were no significant differences between countries in the assessment of the justification of the societal expectation to forego life experiences ($p>0.05$).

Conversely to the above elaborated trends, no statistically significant differences were observed between countries in the justification of the societal expectation to forego significant life experiences, such as milestone celebrations, travel, or rites of passage. This may suggest that such sacrifices were viewed as deeply personal and equally difficult across national contexts, transcending broader socio-political narratives. Youth in both countries may have perceived these expectations as disproportionately burdensome and emotionally costly, regardless of their broader stance on compliance with health measures. One notable exception to the general trend was found in relation to the expectation of helping family and elderly individuals obtain supplies and run errands, where Croatian youth expressed greater justification than their Slovenian peers. This could reflect cultural differences in family orientation and intergenerational ties. Croatia is often characterised by stronger familism and more traditional caregiving norms, where youth may be more socialised to view assisting family members as a moral duty, particularly in times of crisis (Hlebec et al., 2016). In Slovenia, where intergenerational responsibilities are more frequently institutionalised or supported by formal services (e.g., eldercare systems), youth may perceive such expectations as less central to their individual role.

A comparative analysis of public attitudes in Croatia and Slovenia reveals that young Slovenians consistently reported higher justification rates for pandemic-related behaviours, while Croatian youth showed a stronger tendency to view actions such as vaccination and forgoing life experiences as unjustified, which highlights potential differences in societal values and institutional trusts.

7.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The Croatian and Slovenian data reveal contrasting mechanisms through which societal norms shape youth perceptions. In Croatia, age-dependent patterns reflect evolving self-concepts tied to life-stage transitions, where accumulating autonomy moderates the internalisation of external expectations. In contrast, Slovenia's pronounced gender disparities highlight structural inequities that persistently burden women with broader societal and familial obligations. Both contexts, however, share a tension between individual aspirations and collective norms. While Croatian youth struggle with reconciling early societal ideals with the realities of adulthood, Slovenian women navigate heightened pressures to fulfil multifaceted roles. These

findings underline the need for policy interventions that support Croatia's ageing youth cohort in bridging aspirational gaps through targeted educational and vocational frameworks, as well as address systemic gender biases in Slovenia.

Across both countries, there is a general trend of self-assurance and perceived readiness for adult roles with age. In Croatia, this is especially visible in findings centred on readiness and self-confidence. However, this growing maturity is accompanied by a more tempered or realistic appraisal of what is achievable, particularly in relation to education, housing, and financial independence. Slovenian data, by contrast, capture a broader set of societal expectations, ranging from work and education to happiness and marriage. Despite these differing emphases, both contexts reveal that as youth mature, they do not merely absorb societal expectations; they also begin to interrogate them. Optimism in the youngest cohorts gives way to a more pragmatic worldview, suggesting that exposure to institutional structures and economic constraints may temper earlier idealism. The result is a dual process of empowerment and recalibration, wherein youth feel increasingly capable yet more circumspect about the likelihood of achieving socially prescribed milestones.

Taking into account youth age and gender dynamics alongside clear SES-related gradients, we can further illuminate the socio-structural forces shaping youth perspectives. In both countries, higher SES is consistently associated with stronger beliefs in personal success and greater internalisation of societal expectations across domains such as employment, education, health, and housing. Croatian data reveal similar patterns to Slovenia, though with slightly more moderate SES gaps and some unexpected fluctuations, such as the elevated societal contribution expectations among middle SES youth. In contrast, Slovenian youth from affluent backgrounds display particularly strong confidence in future outcomes, especially in higher education and income generation, while lower SES youth report markedly lower levels of self-efficacy, except in domains such as marriage, where traditional expectations appear more deeply entrenched. These findings suggest that while SES powerfully shapes aspirations, its influence is also mediated by national contexts and cultural narratives.

Research data in the COVID-19 pandemic context suggests the absence of significant age differences in how youth from Croatia and Slovenia justified societal expectations during the pandemic, which is somewhat surprising, particularly given previous research linking age with heightened risk perception and future orientation. One might reasonably expect that older adolescents and emerging adults, who typically exhibit more developed cognitive maturity and a stronger sense of social responsibility, would be more likely to view public health expectations as justified, such as adhering to protective behaviours or making personal sacrifices. However, the lack of variation suggests that the shared disruptions brought about by the pandemic may have exerted a levelling effect. In Croatia, experiences such as school closures, social restrictions, and widespread uncertainty appear to have cultivated a cohesive generational outlook, wherein youth across age groups interpreted societal expectations not through the lens of developmental stages, but as part of a broader collective youth identity. This pattern was similarly evident in Slovenia. Such homogeneity may have been reinforced by the uniform framing of public health messaging, which seldom distinguished between younger and older adolescents, as well as by digital media and peer discourse that amplified a shared narrative of generational impact.

Socioeconomic status, on the other hand, emerged as a more robust predictor of justification for pandemic-related expectations. In both countries, higher SES was associated with stronger endorsement of public health measures, likely reflecting greater institutional trust, higher health literacy, and fewer practical constraints to compliance. In Croatia, SES variation was observed only in domains tied to familial care, such as helping relatives or observing preventive measures at home, while expectations that directly affected youth autonomy do not demonstrate such divergence, such as limiting social gatherings or getting vaccinated. This pattern may speak to the strength of cultural norms around family in Croatia, where caregiving roles are widely shared and morally salient across class boundaries, while more youth-centred expectations may be subject to broader scepticism or politicisation, diminishing SES-related distinctions. On the other hand, in Slovenia, socioeconomic differences were evident across all justification items, indicating a deeply stratified internalisation of public health norms.

At the national level, Croatian youth were generally less likely than their Slovenian peers to justify a range of public health expectations. Slovenian youth expressed stronger support for vaccination, missing social events, and following protective guidelines to safeguard both oneself and vulnerable groups. These differences likely stem from wider political and institutional contexts, with Slovenia exhibiting higher levels of governance effectiveness and public trust, which are conditions that tend to bolster compliance with collective health measures. The technocratic approach adopted by Slovenian authorities, particularly in the pandemic's early stages, may have further reinforced a sense of legitimacy and responsibility among youth. In contrast, Croatia's more fragmented and politically contested response may have undermined consistent messaging, leading to greater ambivalence among its youth population. However, there were notable exceptions to these trends. Croatian youth were more likely than their Slovenian peers to endorse helping family and elderly individuals, suggesting the influence of cultural values around intergenerational duty. Moreover, both groups of youth showed similar levels of justification when it came to foregoing major life experiences, highlighting the universal emotional toll of such sacrifices.

Corresponding to the research insights, we propose three sets of recommendations:

- Recommendations concerning youth expectations and self-perceptions, which concern promoting critical reflection in the educational settings by integrating curricula that encourage critical engagement with societal norms, helping young people to interrogate, rather than passively internalise, expectations related to success, gender-related roles, adulthood, and life milestones.
- Providing tailored support aligned to the youth SES. Programmes that enhance self-efficacy, such as inclusive career guidance, financial literacy workshops, and access to extracurricular opportunities, can help narrow the aspiration and confidence gap evident across SES lines, especially in domains such as education and employment.
- Enhance trust through transparent governance, citizenship education, science popularisation and media communication. Future crisis management should prioritise transparent communication, consistency in messaging, and the visible involvement of scientific expertise to maintain legitimacy and engagement among youth.

In concluding the recommendation section, we will refer to the quotation from the youth worker and youth expert who expressed during the interview that more targeted actions are needed. The expert explicitly mentions young women, but this recommendation is actually addressing a need of all young people:

“I believe that more meaningful and higher-quality work could be undertaken with young women. There is definitely potential for increased engagement.”

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8. FAMILY AND PARTNERSHIP

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This chapter examines how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped family relationships, partnerships, and youth well-being in Croatia and Slovenia. The findings reveal that family ties acted both as a protective buffer and a source of strain. Slovenian youth reported significant declines in satisfaction with family life and parent-child relationships, likely linked to strict lockdowns, economic pressures, and rising individualism. In contrast, Croatian youth demonstrated greater relational stability, reflecting strong familial norms and resilience reinforced during concurrent crises. Friendships weakened in both countries, particularly in Slovenia, while romantic partnerships proved comparatively stable, with evidence of accelerated cohabitation among Croatian youth. Across both contexts, mothers and family networks remained the dominant influence on young people's key decisions. Mental health, however, emerged as the most negatively affected domain. Policy implications stress the need for targeted family support, expanded youth mental health services, and programmes that rebuild peer connections and address evolving aspirations for family life.

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Family relationship quality emerged as a critical buffer or risk factor for youth well-being during the pandemic. Positive, supportive family relationships had a potential to protect adolescents from COVID-related stress, whereas conflictual or chaotic home environments exacerbated mental health problems, and studies across Europe and North America found that most adolescents experienced some change in how they related to family members (e.g. Bülow, Keijsers, Boele, van Roekel, & Denissen, 2021; Martin-Storey, Dirks, Holfeld, Dryburgh, & Craig, 2021). Notably, youth who saw their family relationships improve during the pandemic showed better psychological functioning (e.g. fewer internalising symptoms), whereas those experiencing heightened family instability or conflict fared worse. This aligns with longstanding research linking high family support and cohesion to better adolescent outcomes, and conversely, associating high family conflict with increased anxiety, depression, and stress in youth (*ibid.*). Several longitudinal studies confirm these trends. For example, a systematic review of international longitudinal research by Lin, Soejima, Zhang, & Kitao (2025), which included 15 studies from 2020-2024, concluded that overall “parent-child relationship quality generally declined” during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. Both parents and youth reported reduced family functioning and satisfaction, and increased family chaos and conflict under lockdown conditions. For example, one Italian study (*ibid.*: 2025: 8) noted more arguments and stress in families as everyone stayed home, while a German survey (*ibid.*: 2025: 6) found parent-adolescent communication worsened for many families in 2020. At the same time, heterogeneity was evident and some families adapted or even thrived in closer quarters, reporting improved relationships or no significant change in family satisfaction (*ibid.*). Some researchers suggest a possible “enhancer effect,” (e.g. Campione-Barr, Skinner, Moeller, Cui, Kealy, & Cookston, 2025:13) where already-strong family relationships grew stronger under adversity, while already strained relationships deteriorated further.

Factors influencing these dynamics and outcomes are numerous and include family structure (e.g. multigenerational households), prevailing cultural norms about interdependence, and pre-pandemic social trends. In many Southern and Eastern European societies, strong family ties and co-residence norms meant that young people typically live with parents well into their twenties, implying that pandemic lockdowns often occurred in extended family settings. In societal contexts in which tight intergenerational bonds and norms of mutual aid are prevalent, young people tend to rely on family as a primary safety net, and they also feel obligated to support

their parents in return. Such familism can be a double-edged sword in crises, for on the one side, it provides built-in support networks (emotional, financial, practical) that help families pull together during hard times, but on the other, close concentrated dependence induced stress within the household. During the pandemics in Slovenia and Croatia, parents faced intense pressure juggling remote work, household management and caring for the children out of school (at home), all within often crowded homes, which often led to heightened family strain. This was particularly hard for families already struggling socio-economically before the pandemics. Within this context, low-income, precarious employment positioned families were hit harder by pandemic disruptions, and working-class parents had less flexibility to work from home or to afford tutoring for remote schooling, which could intensify stress at home and limit the time and energy parents could devote to teens. Youth from disadvantaged families in Europe therefore understandably experienced greater declines in family life satisfaction and mental well-being during COVID-19, reflecting how existing inequalities were amplified (e.g. Moxon, Bacalso, & Șerban, 2021). The exploration of family dynamics and youth during the pandemic cannot be separated from their broader social context, including cultural norms, living arrangements, and socio-economic resources all interacted to shape whether the crisis brought European families closer together or pushed them further apart.

8.1 Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their satisfaction with family life

In Slovenia and Croatia, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the time spent at home, heightening both the opportunities and the pressures within family life. Understanding how satisfied youth are with these relationships therefore offers a critical lens on their overall well-being, complementing the findings presented in other sections of this book. This section examines the quality of family interactions, explores how satisfaction levels shifted through the pandemic, and considers what these patterns reveal about the resources and strains of Slovenian and Croatian youth and their families.

Analysis of youth satisfaction with family life in Slovenia and Croatia between 2018 and 2023 presented in Figure 8.1. reveals both continuity and subtle shifts in perceptions, likely shaped in part by the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, there was a noticeable decline in the proportion of youth who reported being “very satisfied” with their family life, dropping from 47.1% in

2018 to 32.8% in 2023. At the same time, there was an increase in those reporting moderate satisfaction, with level 4 responses rising from 30.2% to 37.4% and level 3 responses from 16.2% to 20%. While dissatisfaction remains relatively low, a slight rise is observed in the lowest categories (“very dissatisfied” and “2”), indicating that a broader range of experiences emerged over time, possibly reflecting increased family tensions during periods of social isolation, economic uncertainty, and disrupted daily life.



Figure 8.1: Satisfaction with family life of youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (%)

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

In Croatia, by contrast, youth satisfaction with family life remained relatively stable. The share of “very satisfied” respondents changed only marginally, from 42% in 2018 to 40.4% in 2023, and those reporting level 4 satisfaction remained virtually unchanged. However, a minor increase in dissatisfaction is evident, with a rise in the lowest satisfaction categories, including a doubling of those who felt “very dissatisfied.” This suggests that while the overall assessment of family life remained largely positive, a small segment of youth may have experienced increased familial strain.

Furthermore, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between the perceived impact of the pandemic on family relationships and satisfaction with family life in Slovenia (Spearman's $\rho = -0.205$, $p < .001$) and Croatia (Spearman's $\rho = -0.194$, $p < .001$) in 2023, indicating that greater perceived harm to family relationships due to the pandemic was associated with lower levels of family life satisfaction in both countries.

The results show an uneven impact of COVID-19 on family-related well-being in Slovenia and Croatia. Both countries share some regional and cultural commonalities, yet their youth experienced different shifts in family satisfaction. Slovenia's notable decline suggests that Slovenian youths in 2023 felt significantly less satisfied with their family life than their counterparts did pre-pandemic. Several factors could explain this drop. Firstly, Slovenia imposed some of Europe's strictest lockdowns in 2020-21, including very long school closures and a ban on movement between municipalities, which might have intensified family confinement stress. Several Slovenian surveys and qualitative reports indicate many young people felt isolated and frustrated during this period, and some perceived a lack of autonomy or increased friction with parents (e.g. over lockdown rules or use of time) (e.g. Lavrič & Deželan, 2021). Additionally, pre-pandemic trends in Slovenia showed rising youth pessimism and perhaps a more individualistic outlook among the younger generation (e.g. Lavrič et. al, 2011; Lavrič & Deželan, 2021.). It is therefore possible that the pandemic exacerbated this generational gap, with youth becoming more critical of their family situation or disappointed by how their families coped, resulting in lower reported satisfaction. Secondly, Slovenia's economy was hit hard in 2020, and although it rebounded, many families experienced financial strain which can dampen the quality of family interactions.

Croatia's steady satisfaction levels, on the other hand, hint that Croatian families might have navigated the pandemic with less perceived damage to family life, at least from the youth perspective. Culturally, Croatian society places a very strong emphasis on family solidarity. This could mean Croatian youths felt well-supported at home during the crisis, or that they viewed the hardships as something the family faced together (thus not reducing their overall satisfaction with family life). Empirical research supports this notion. Croatian youth consistently report high expectations of mutual help within families, and many likely experienced the pandemic in the comfort of a close family network. It is also worth noting that the Croatian survey data may have been influenced by timing and additional challenges,

most notably a series of earthquakes in 2020, which saw families coming together for support, potentially reinforcing familial appreciation among youth.

Excerpts from a focus group could serve as an illustration:

“Family. It could be better, but I think there are some tensions, probably due to the generational gap, and I think that will always be the case. However, in general, when it comes to advice and support, we are good to each other, in both directions.”

(Male, employed, Croatia).

“I would say that (the lockdown during the pandemic) brought us closer again. At the beginning we had to get used again of spending time together. And that certainly changed the whole dynamics, for I had to move from the high-school dormitory back home /.../ I had to get used to living at home and spending a lot of time with my family. So, in that sense, it helped us (family members) getting back together, particularly with my sister. We helped each other, studied together and after a while (since lockdown persisted and stress within the family increased), we also distanced ourselves from our parents together, because they (parents) had different views and perceptions which me and my sister could not accept easily. /.../ we could not agree on vaccination, and around other things too. There was also a lot of tension.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Many people were not used to it, spending time together and you could see this in numerous families. The same was with me. I was shocked because I was not used to spend so much time with my father...”

(Male, NEET, Slovenia)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping these patterns. In both countries, prolonged lockdowns, reduced access to social spaces, and the pressures of remote learning may have strained family dynamics.

Overall, the pandemic appears to have amplified existing family dynamics, strengthening relationships in some cases, while exacerbating tensions in others.

In Slovenia, the data suggest that the crisis may have led to a slight erosion in the quality of family relationships or at least the perception thereof, with fewer youth expressing full satisfaction. In Croatia, the relative stability of family satisfaction may point to stronger familial bonds or support systems that buffered youth from the worst psychological effects of the pandemic, although the slight uptick in dissatisfaction signals that this support was not universal.

8.2 Relationship with parents

In order to further our understanding of family relationships we focused our attention on the relationship with parents.

In general, young people in Slovenia and Croatia get along well with their parents in 2023, while girls have a slightly better understanding with their parents ($M=1.79$; $SD=.70$; 1=get along very well...4=very conflictual relationship) than boys ($M=1.74$; $SD=.67$).

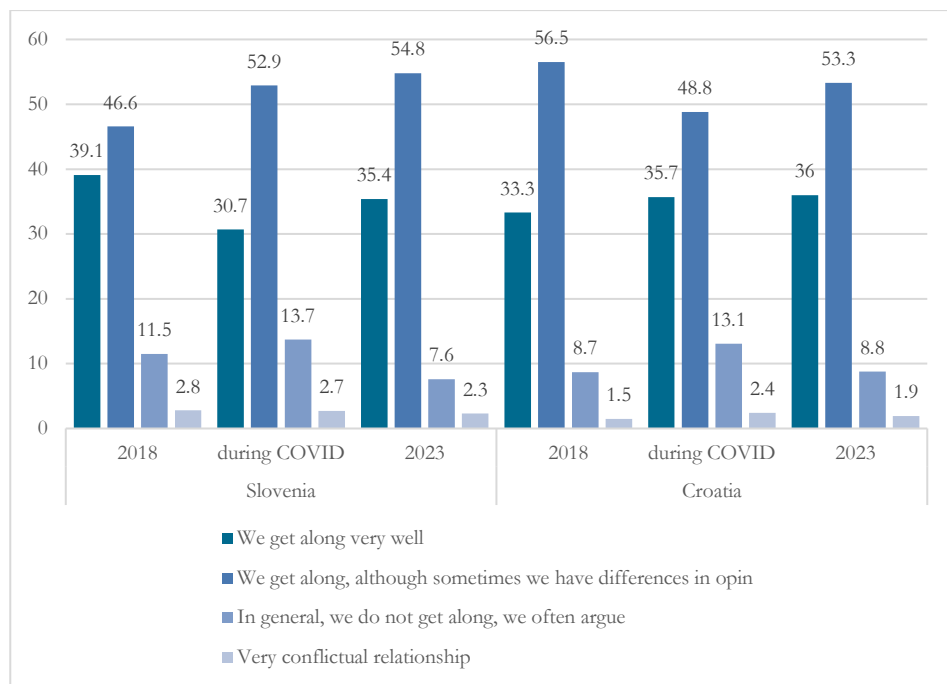


Figure 8.2: Relationship with parents in 2018, during COVID and in 2023 (%)

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

The Figure 8.2. illustrates how young people in Slovenia and Croatia described their relationships with their parents in 2018, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2023. Data from both samples reveal mostly positive but nuanced shifts in how youth evaluated their relationships with their parents across three points in time. In Slovenia, the proportion of youth who reported that they "get along very well" with their parents dropped notably during the pandemic, from 39% in 2018 to 30% at the height of COVID-19, before recovering partially to 35% in 2023. Correspondingly, the share of respondents selecting the more moderate option ("we get along, although sometimes we have differences in opinion") rose steadily from 47% in 2018 to 55% in 2023. Conflictual responses remained a minority, but there was a temporary increase in those reporting frequent arguments (from 11% in 2018 to 14% during the pandemic), which then fell back to 8% by 2023.

In contrast, Croatian youth reported greater consistency in their parent-child relationships. The proportion saying they "get along very well" increased slightly from 33% in 2018 to 36% during and after the pandemic, while moderate responses ("we get along, although...") declined slightly during COVID-19 but rebounded in 2023. Reports of frequent arguing rose during the pandemic (from 8% to 13%) but similarly declined to pre-pandemic levels by 2023. Across both countries, the percentage of youth describing their relationship as "very conflictual" remained low.

The results of the t-test reveal statistically significant differences ($t(2470) = -2.952$; $p < 0.01$) in the relationship with parents between men ($M = 1.81$; $SD = .72$) and women ($M = 1.90$; $SD = .75$) during the COVID in both countries. This suggests that women, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, generally perceive their relationships with parents more positively or maintain closer ties with their parents than men do. It was expected that among young individuals residing in the same household as their parents, having a private room would influence the relationship. Although the differences are not statistically significant, it is noteworthy that, on average, young individuals without a private room ($M = 1.93$; $SD = .83$) report a better relationship with their parents than those who have one ($M = 1.84$; $SD = .72$). This unexpected finding suggests that shared living spaces may promote closer family bonds and more frequent interactions. It is probable that young individuals without private rooms spend more time in communal areas, leading to increased communication and shared activities with their parents. Further research is warranted to explore the underlying factors contributing to this counterintuitive relationship between personal space and parent-child dynamics.

The socioeconomic status of families plays a significant role in shaping parent-child relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia, but not in Slovenia. Lower socioeconomic status correlates with poorer parent-child relationships ($\rho=0.53$; $p<0.001$) among Croatian youth suggests that financial stress and limited resources in lower socioeconomic families can increase conflict and reduce interaction quality. Disparity between Croatia and Slovenia may reflect differences in social welfare systems, economic resilience, or cultural factors affecting family dynamics during crises. Further research is needed to explore how socioeconomic status impacts parent-child relationships in these countries. Understanding these nuances could inform interventions and policies to support vulnerable families during future health emergencies.

These patterns reflect a dynamic interplay between stress, adaptation, and resilience. According to the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 2002), external stressors, such as job loss, confinement, and disrupted schooling, can heighten parental strain, which spills over into more tense or reactive parenting. European research confirms that the early phases of the pandemic were associated with declines in parent-child relationship quality, especially in households facing economic insecurity or psychological distress (Skinner et al., 2021; Martinsone et al., 2022). In Slovenia, as already mentioned, lockdown measures were among the strictest in the EU and included long school closures and municipal travel bans. It is plausible that increased proximity and stress exacerbated familial tensions, leading youth to downgrade their evaluations of family harmony. While many relationships rebounded by 2023, the decrease in “very good” ratings suggests a lingering shift in how young people assess closeness with their parents.

Resilience theory offers a complementary perspective. Families with strong pre-existing bonds, open communication, and shared coping mechanisms were better positioned to maintain or even strengthen relationships under pressure (Walsh, 2020). In Croatia, where familialism and intergenerational support are deeply embedded cultural norms, family networks may have served as stabilizing structures throughout the pandemic and in the wake of additional national crises (e.g., the 2020 Zagreb earthquakes). This could explain the relatively stable levels of satisfaction and the quicker recovery in relational harmony compared to Slovenia.

From a sociological and anthropological standpoint, family structure, housing conditions, and digital access shaped everyday interactions. Studies across Europe found that homeschooling, crowded living spaces, and limited digital infrastructure increased household stress, particularly where parents struggled to balance remote work with caregiving (e.g. Thorell et al., 2022). Youth in Slovenia, where more individualistic cultural norms prevail (e.g. Lavrič et al, 2011; Lavrič and Deželan, 2021), may have experienced these stressors more acutely, while in Croatia, strong kinship ties and collective coping could have buffered the worst impacts.

Two examples from focus groups could be used as an illustration of both positions:

“I get a lot of support from my parents, I think, both regarding education and social life. I mean, like all parents, when it comes to education, we always have different views, especially regarding grades. But, for example, my parents don’t mind that much, I mean, we have conversations like "why didn’t you study" and stuff like that, but there are no punishments or anything like some others have, like not being allowed to go out or other things ...”.

(Male, high school student, Croatia).

“I provide the most support to my friends and brother and sister. I realised that I don't really give my parents too much support and maybe I need more, considering how much support they give me.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

“... (during the lockdown) we got along great. It is not that we were not doing good before, we were good... but lockdown made us closer, more connected. /.../ We (4 family members in a family house) were together all the time, waking up together, having breakfast together, playing games, working together, lunch together... and over the weekend grill with chevapchici together...”

(Female, high school participant, Slovenia)

“My family dissolved because of the lockdown. /.../ we (family of 4) were locked together (in a one room apartment), and we quickly and most brutally realised we are not used to living together. My mother found an escape by going to the streets to attend the protests and there she would socialise with other men. /.../ we all knew that but when my father found out, he threw us (mother with two teenage girls) out to the street. We were sleeping in a car for a few days and then they accepted us at the safe house (house for abused women in Maribor).”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the strengths and fragilities of family relationships among youth in Slovenia and Croatia. While most young people continued to report positive relationships with their parents, the pandemic catalysed temporary shifts toward more moderate or conflicted appraisals, particularly in Slovenia. These changes reflect broader processes of familial stress, resilience, and adaptation under extraordinary circumstances, shaped by cultural norms, developmental expectations, and national policy contexts. The data highlight the need for targeted youth and family support systems that can better withstand future societal disruptions and reinforce relational well-being within the home.

8.3 Influence of family members on important decisions of youth

Exploring the influence of family members and friends on young people's important life decisions is essential for understanding youth experiences, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As findings in other chapters of this book show, the pandemic not only disrupted formal political engagement and democratic trust but also reshaped everyday life and interpersonal dynamics. With schools closed, public life restricted, and peer interactions limited, family members, particularly parents, became central sources of guidance, support, and influence. These intensified family relationships directly shaped how youth perceived their future, navigated uncertainty, and made key decisions during a period of profound social and economic disruption. Understanding these relational dynamics adds critical depth to the broader picture of youth agency, resilience, and post-pandemic recovery.

As depicted in Figure 8.3. in both countries, nuclear family plays a primary role. Mothers are the most influential figures, but their influence is more pronounced in Slovenia, where 66.2% of youth identify their mother as the primary influence, compared to 58.9% in Croatia. This suggests a strong maternal role in shaping personal and life decisions among youth in both contexts, likely tied to family structure, caregiving roles, and cultural norms. Fathers on the other hand, hold the secondary position in both countries but are more influential in Slovenia (44.4%) than in Croatia (28.3%). This significant gap may reflect cultural differences in paternal involvement or perceived emotional closeness in the parent-child dynamic. Siblings also play a notable role, with Croatian youth (24.1%) reporting slightly higher influence from siblings than Slovenians (20.2%). Meanwhile, friends exert relatively low influence overall, with similar responses in both countries -15.4% in

Slovenia and 13.5% in Croatia - suggesting that while peer relationships are important, family remains the dominant influence on major life decisions.

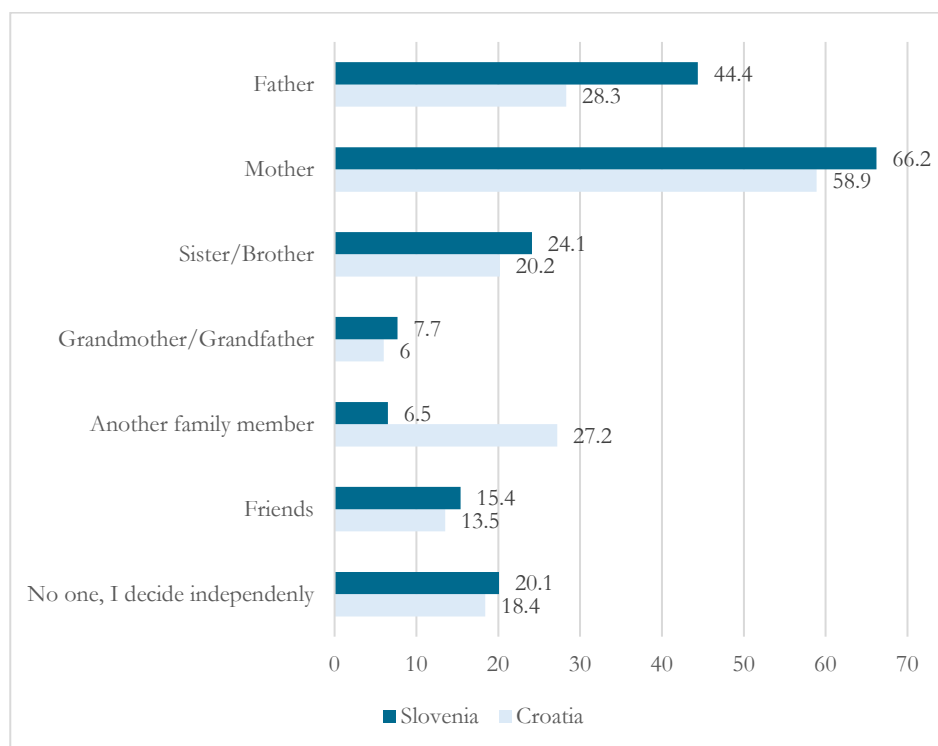


Figure 8.3: Influence of family and friends on important in 2023 (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Secondary role is assigned to other family members. These, interestingly, other family are far more influential in Croatia (27.2%) than in Slovenia (6.5%), pointing to broader familial involvement or extended family dynamics in Croatian households.

And lastly, the share of youth who state that “no one influences them” and that they decide independently is relatively modest, though slightly higher in Slovenia (20.1%) than in Croatia (18.4%). This may reflect a greater sense of autonomy or individualism among Slovenian youth, albeit still within a largely family-influenced decision-making context.

The COVID-19 pandemic likely reinforced these family-centred patterns of influence. During lockdowns and periods of restricted mobility, young people were more physically and emotionally dependent on their households, which may have strengthened parental and familial influence, especially among mothers, who often assumed caregiving and emotional support roles more intensively during the crisis. Reduced contact with peers and external mentors may have also diminished the relative influence of friends, pushing youth to rely more on familial advice and support networks when making decisions about education, health, or future plans.

Qualitative data supports these findings, however, the relationship appears more complex and apart from pure harmony also includes tensions:

“And during the pandemic and Covid, my situation at home with my parents improved a lot; somehow, we grew closer. Before, we were all kind of distant, no one really spent much time with anyone. My relationship with my sister also improved. Because we somehow looked for ways to spend quality time together, and basically, we all became more connected then.”

(Female, university student, Croatia)

“/.../ in that situation (during the lockdown), my mother was the one who was standing by my side the most. /.../ However, we also argued a lot, because she is stubborn by nature and each of us wanted something else. /.../ and then I figured that there are things that parents cannot offer but could only be offered by friends (peers). And I was lucky enough to have such a friend living only 500 meters from our place. /.../ so I would go for a walk with her (friend) and we would slander our mothers (to relieve tension experienced at home).”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

These results underscore the enduring and even heightened importance of family and friends.

While patterns vary somewhat between the two countries, the data suggest that family influence remains central, a dynamic that was likely reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings highlight the importance of involving families in youth-targeted initiatives, especially during periods of societal stress and transition.

8.4 Satisfaction with friends

As shown in the previous section, friends and peers represent a critical group for young people. Understanding young people’s satisfaction with their friendships is crucial for gaining a fuller picture of youth well-being and resilience, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted earlier, the pandemic not only affected family dynamics but also deeply impacted on peer relationships due to prolonged social isolation, school closures, and digital communication replacing in-person interaction. Friendships play a vital role in emotional support, identity development, and social learning during adolescence and early adulthood. Assessing satisfaction with these relationships helps us understand how youth coped with stress, maintained social connections, and rebuilt their social lives in the aftermath of crisis, offering important insight into their broader social integration and mental health.

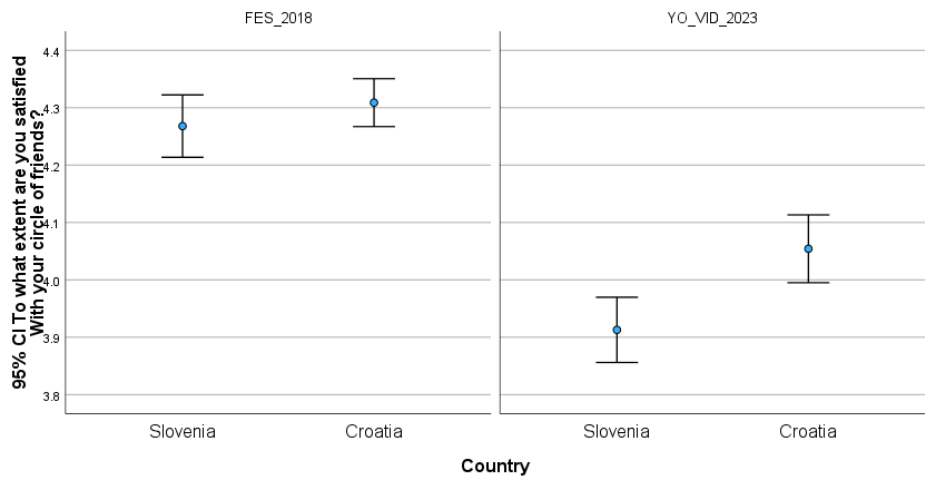


Figure 8.4: Satisfaction with friends among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 in 2023 (mean scores)

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

The figure illustrates youth satisfaction with their circle of friends in Slovenia and Croatia. In 2018, young people in both countries reported high levels of satisfaction with their friendships, with average ratings exceeding 4.2 on the satisfaction scale. Croatian youth expressed slightly higher satisfaction than their Slovenian peers, though both groups reflected strong and stable peer connections. By 2023, however,

satisfaction had declined in both countries, with a more pronounced drop observed in Slovenia. Slovenian youth reported average satisfaction scores below 4.0, indicating a more noticeable reduction in the perceived quality of their friendships. While Croatian youth also experienced a decline, their satisfaction remained relatively higher, just above the 4.0.

Statistical analysis shows significant differences in friendship satisfaction in 2023 among Slovenian and Croatian youth based on gender ($t(2488)=-3,12; p<0.01$) and age ($\rho=-0.80; p<0.01$). Men report higher levels of satisfaction with their circle of friends ($M=4.04; SD=1.03$) compared to women ($M=3.91; SD=1.0$) and younger respondents tend to express greater satisfaction with their friendships. The study also found a correlation between the perceived negative impact of the pandemic on friendships and overall satisfaction levels ($\rho=-0.178; p<0.01$), suggesting that those who felt their relationships were more severely affected by the pandemic reported lower satisfaction with their circle of friends. These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing friendship satisfaction and underscore the need for targeted interventions to support social connections in the post-pandemic era.

Data from focus groups provide some insight:

"I totally lost my motivation (because of the lockdown), since I could not go to my football practice. I was locked at home. /.../ there was nothing to do (locked at home), so I ended up watching YouTube or playing online videogames with my friend. /.../ in the end even this (playing games with a single friend) got boring and I ended up playing games by myself on my telephone."

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

"I connected more easily with my peers and I could hang out with them more easily. It was easier to talk to them at that time (in contrast to adults). When the pandemic persisted and we could not go out anymore, even this became harder, so I naturally became more closed off and isolated..."

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

"My friends have really helped me in some key moments, both mentally and specifically with some services when needed, even though each of us is employed and we work quite a lot, it is very difficult to coordinate, we are not even all from Zagreb, but if I were only evaluating the relationship, I would still give it a 10, but if we are talking about frequency - then something less, but okay, it's better less often but quality than every day and "God forbid."

(Female, employed, Croatia).

This downward trend is likely linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly disrupted social interactions among youth:

Lockdowns, school closures, and the shift to online communication reduced opportunities for in-person peer bonding and may have led to feelings of isolation or weakened social ties.

The sharper decline in Slovenia may point to differences in pandemic response, post-lockdown social reintegration, or mental health support structures. These findings emphasise the lasting impact of the pandemic on peer relationships and highlight the importance of restoring and supporting social connectedness as part of broader youth recovery strategies.

8.5 Youth, their partnership and projections of the future

Partnerships and romantic relationships are a central aspect of youth development, shaping emotional well-being, identity formation, and social integration. During adolescence and early adulthood, young people begin to explore intimacy, trust, and long-term connection, experiences that influence their future relationships and personal stability. Understanding youth partnerships provides valuable insight into their emotional lives and social maturity, especially in times of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As public life narrowed and social routines shifted, the ability to form, maintain, or grow intimate relationships was significantly challenged, making this area a critical dimension of youth well-being in the post-pandemic context.

The figure compares the partnership status of young adults in Slovenia and Croatia in 2018 and in 2023, offering an insight of how relationship patterns evolved through the COVID-19 period. In Slovenia, the situation remained remarkably stable, since roughly half of young adults remain single (46.7% in 2018 and 47.3% in 2023). Small shifts appear among both in cohabitation (21.6 % to 24.1%) and married (4.4% to 5.7%), while the share of those who are “in a relationship but not living together” dropped from 26.4% in 2018 to 22.5% in 2023. These shifts suggest that some couples formalised their partnerships, possibly by moving in together or marrying. Divorce and widowhood remain negligible (below 1%).

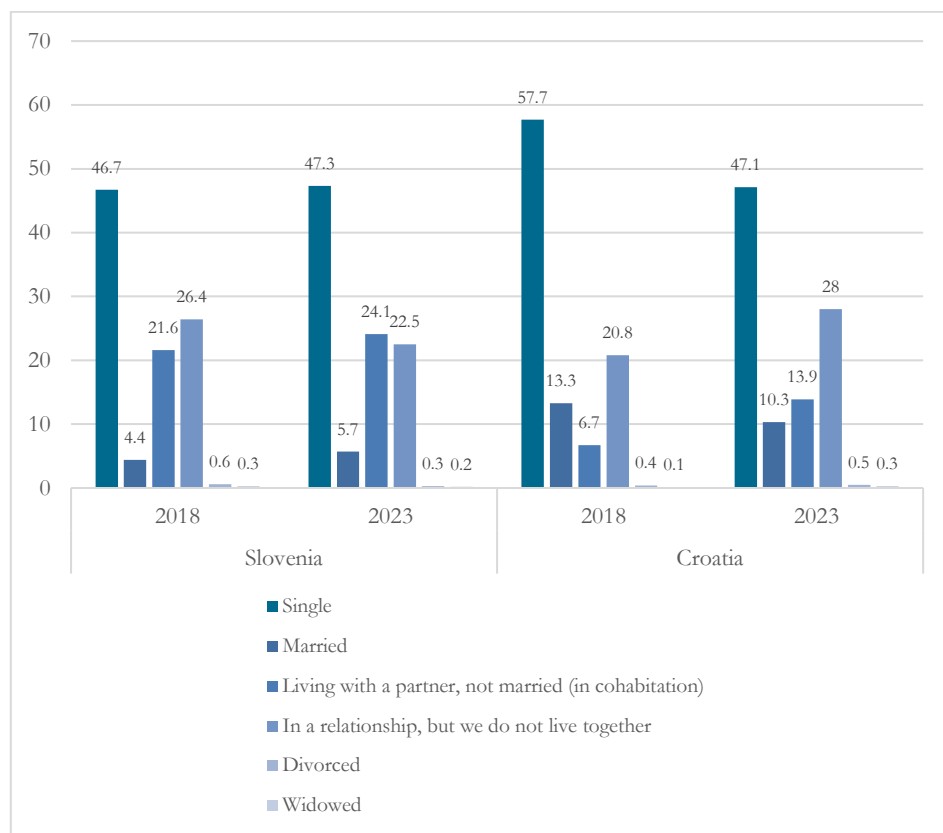


Figure 8.5: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their current partnership status in 2018 and 2023 (%)

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

In Croatia, the situation changed more dramatically. Firstly, the proportion of singles dropped by more than ten percentage points (from 57.7% to 47.1%). Secondly, cohabitation more than doubled (from 6.7% to 13.9%) and the share of non-cohabiting relationships rose (from 20.8% to 28.0%), while marriages declined modestly (from 13.3% to 10.3%). These results show a clear differentiation and diversification of partnerships, with many young Croats moving from singleness toward dating or living together rather than entering marriage.

There are at least two possible interpretations of these results. The pandemic restrictions limited casual socialising, which could encourage established couples to consolidate their households and accelerate the moves into cohabitation, which

could explain the situation in Croatia. At the same time, postponements of weddings and economic uncertainty may have dampened marriage rates in Croatia while only slightly delaying them in Slovenia.

The following example from Slovenia could be used to illustrate these results:

“They closed the place where I worked, and they sent everybody home (because of the lockdown). It was hard for everybody but somehow, I had it easy. I went for long walks with my dog /.../ I was hanging out with my friends, and I also spent a lot of time with my boyfriend, who helped me a lot. This was the main thing in coping with (pandemic induced) stress.”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

“Me and my boyfriend were both sick with Covid, so we couldn’t go out. But this was not a problem - they (delivery service) delivered everything to our apartment, ha, ha...”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

“In terms of health, the worst came after a while, I was separated from my partner, I got used to all that with my friends, I couldn't do my hobby, I do music, it just wasn't possible to do that, just getting used to it all was a little depressing from time to time.”

(Male, university student, Croatia).

The overall picture indicates that COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for relationship commitment among some youth, reshuffling the balance between singleness, cohabitation and marriage, and bringing the two countries closer together in their partnership profiles.

Statistically significant differences in current status among youth in 2023 in Slovenia and Croatia were observed based on gender and age. The decision to cohabit with a partner is more common among women (59.7%) compared to men (40.3%) and increases with age. Similarly, marriage is more prevalent among women (57.9%) than men (42.1%) and increases with age. Among singles, there is a higher proportion of men (62.3 %) than women (37.7 %), and as anticipated, younger respondents are more prevalent.

Linking young adults’ current partnership status to their future family projections provides a fuller picture of how life-course pathways are evolving. Current partnership patterns are directly linked to future expectations. Examining these two

snapshots together reveals not only how the pandemic, economic pressures, and shifting norms have reshaped present relationships, but also how they are recalibrating the aspirations that will guide young people's decisions about commitment, parenthood, and household formation in the years ahead.

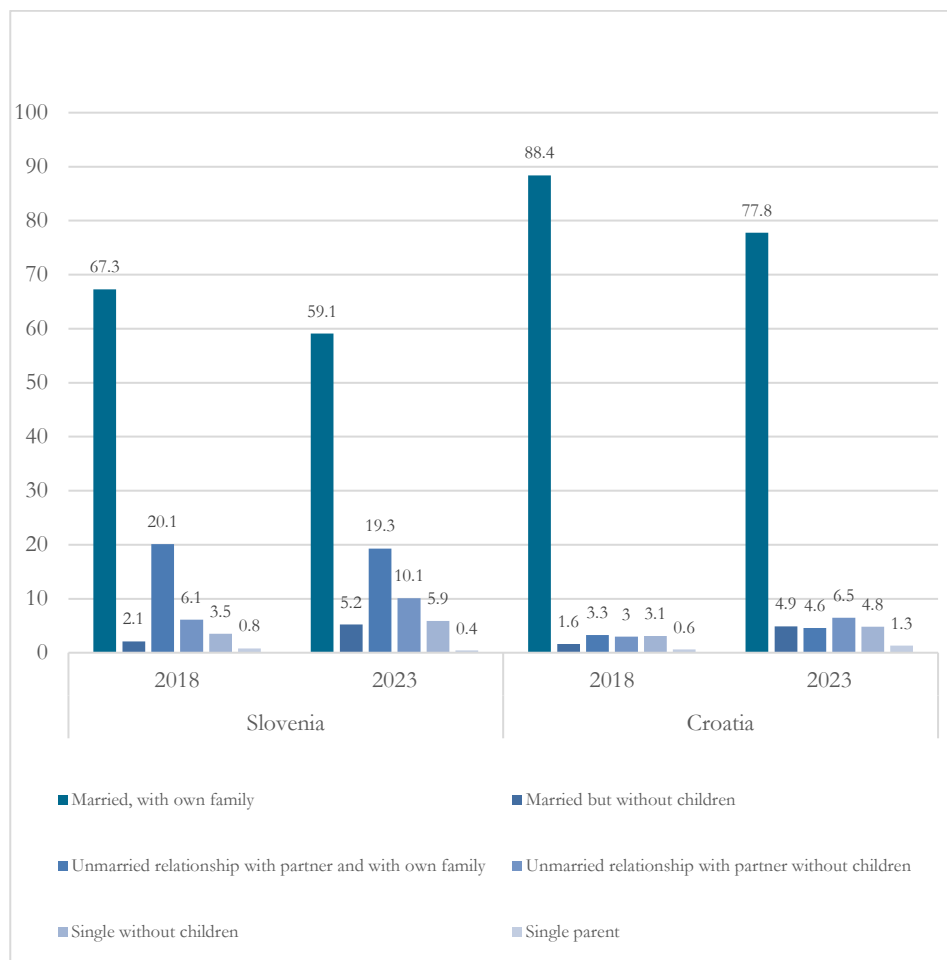


Figure 8.6: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their future projections, 2018 and 2023 (%)

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

Between 2018 and 2023 young adults in both Slovenia and Croatia became notably less certain that their futures would follow the traditional “married with children” pathway. In Slovenia the share of youngsters who expected to be married with their own family fell from roughly two-thirds (67%) in 2018 to just under three-fifths

(59%) in 2023. Over the same time, more flexible life-plans gained ground, evident in the proportion expecting marriage without children rising from about 2% to 5%, and those foreseeing an unmarried relationship without children growing from 6% to 10%. Slight increase is also visible for the remaining “single without children”, while expectations of cohabiting with children remain steady.

Croatia shows a similar pattern. In 2018 nearly nine in ten Croatian respondents (88%) imagined themselves married with children, but by 2023 this had dropped to 78%, while marriage without children rose from 2% to 5%, unmarried partnerships without children from 3% to 7%, and unmarried partnerships with children from 3% to 5%. Ones expecting to stay single without children also increased slightly, while the future with single parenthood remained rare in both years.

These results suggest a clear diversification of family aspirations during a period that encompassed the COVID-19 pandemic, rising housing and living costs, and heightened labour market uncertainty. While marriage with children remains the majority ideal, a growing minority of youth in both countries now envision child-free marriage, long-term cohabitation, or sustained singleness, signalling shifting norms and greater openness to non-traditional life courses.

8.6 Youth and their assessment of the COVID on selected aspects of their social relations

The preceding analyses have traced how COVID-19 reshaped young people’s social worlds, from shifts in family to changes in friendship quality, partnership patterns, and future family aspirations. Taken together, the findings show a common thread:

Prolonged lockdowns, economic uncertainty, and disrupted routines intensified reliance on close family, strained some peer connections, nudged some toward co-habitation, and tempered the once dominant expectation of marrying and having children.

This final section draws these findings together to examine how young adults themselves evaluate the pandemic’s impact on their everyday relationships. By linking current relationship statuses with future projections, and situating them within broader shifts in trust, satisfaction, and engagement, the section highlights

the pandemic's role as both a stress test and a catalyst, exposing vulnerabilities in youth social ties while accelerating new, more flexible pathways into adulthood.

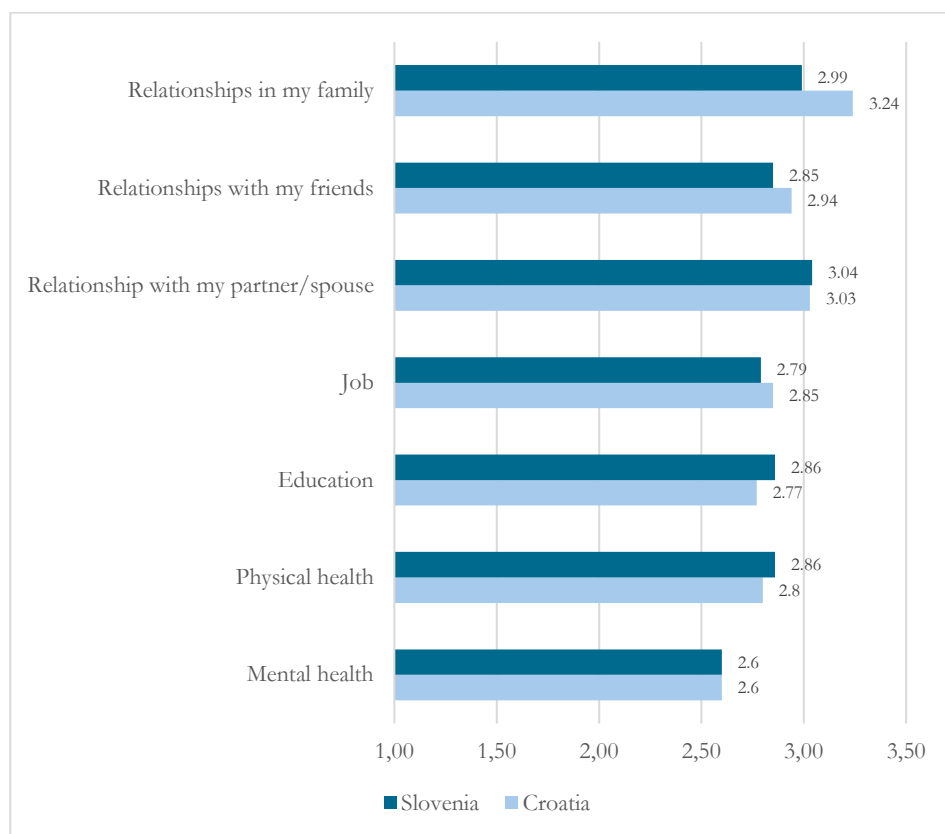


Figure 8.7: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on selected aspects of their life 2023 (M)

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

Depicted in Figure 8.7 are results on a five-point scale, where 3 indicates “no real change,” values below 3 signal a negative impact, and values above 3 a positive one, young people in both countries report that the pandemic affected nearly every aspect of their lives, though not all domains were hit equally:

- Family relationships proved the most resilient. Croatian youth in particular rated this area above the neutral point (3.24), while Slovenian respondents clustered

right at neutrality (2.99). These results echo earlier findings that lockdowns intensified the time spent at home and, for many, tightened family bonds.

- Friendships, jobs and physical health all slipped modestly below the neutral line (scores between 2.79 and 2.94), most likely due to the reduced face-to-face contact, which strained peer networks.
- Education registered a slightly stronger setback, notably among Croatian youth (2.77), most likely reflecting prolonged school closures and uneven digital learning environments.
- Partnerships remained relatively stable in both contexts, suggesting that couples who weathered the crisis, for example by moving in together, could maintain relationship quality despite restrictions.
- Mental health stands out as the clearest casualty, with identical ratings of 2.60 in Slovenia and Croatia, aligning with the broader body of research and our previous findings, emphasising increased anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty during the pandemic.

In other words, the data confirms a pattern already observed:

While family ties often acted as a buffer, the pandemic eroded other social and personal domains and took the heaviest toll on mental well-being of youth. The relative stability of partner relationships and the modest scale of perceived damage to physical health suggest some resilience, yet the uniformly low mental-health scores underline the need for sustained psychosocial support as youth move further into the post-COVID landscape.

Complexity of the situation young people experienced during that time could be illustrated with the following excerpt from the focus group narrative:

“At the beginning (of the lockdown) I found it cool, you could stay at home, no school, sleeping late, no stress. But after a while I noticed something, a tension building up. I was looking for some sort of a closeness to somebody, other human beings, but I could not find it. Right then I experienced intense dissatisfaction and it lasted until we returned to the school, when I was again among school peers. I actually recall, when I stepped on the train full of people for the first time. At that moment I experienced strong anxiety...”

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

“I was waiting at the bus stop, and the bus was full of high school students. Everybody was already at their seats, it was packed. Although the pandemic was officially over, everybody was still wearing masks and it was totally weird and unpleasant. I experienced weird stress... like there is a wall or a barrier between you and other people, you cannot connect to other people. And this was not limited to other people, it happened between me and my friends. After this (lockdown), it is so much harder to approach somebody and start a conversation.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Disaster. So, I don't know, starting from education, [...] I missed two or three exams, there were no lectures, but, for example, the only year that didn't have a graduation ceremony - I was in that year, that was kind of nasty for me. I don't know, here, I think at home too, you couldn't go anywhere, everyone was sick, it just hit us in the family that my husband and I, who live at a different address, had Covid at the same time, so there was no support from the community or anything, except for the general practitioner, but there was no one to offer, for example, "do you need anything?", and you had to be in isolation for those 20 days, so apart from that test, I didn't even leave (op. the apartment).”

(Female, employed, Croatia).

8.7 Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a magnifier and a catalyst for change in the family and social lives of youth in Slovenia and Croatia. While family ties often acted as a protective buffer, the crisis also intensified pre-existing tensions and revealed the limits of familial support in conditions of prolonged stress. Slovenian youth showed a more pronounced decline in family satisfaction and parent-child relationship quality, likely due to stricter lockdowns, greater individualism, and rising youth pessimism. Croatian youth, embedded in stronger familial norms, demonstrated greater resilience, though even there, pockets of strain emerged. Friendships and peer satisfaction also declined, with Slovenian youth again more affected, suggesting the need for renewed attention to youth social integration. Partnerships remained relatively stable, but aspirations for traditional family structures (e.g. marriage with children) have noticeably declined in both countries. Throughout, the dominant influence of mothers and the broader family network remained strong, while mental health emerged as the area most negatively affected by the pandemic. These findings indicate the critical role of family and social

relationships in shaping youth well-being during times of crisis, and the importance of targeted support to reinforce these networks and promote youth resilience.

Based on these conclusions the following recommendations should be adopted at the level of youth policies:

- Investment in family support programmes tailored to youth needs, with particular emphasis in 1) development of interventions that strengthen parent-child communication, and 2) support for low-income or single-parent households, which is essential when reducing strain and inequality induced by future crises.
- Expansion of youth mental health services in family and school settings in both countries along with community-based mental health programmes that include family therapy and peer support components.
- Support in rebuilding of peer relationships and youth social networks not only in schools, but also in extracurricular, youth-led initiatives (e.g. local youth centres) that help restore disrupted friendships and promote social reconnection.
- Adaption of life-course education and counselling to address changing youth aspirations, which include flexible models of partnership, cohabitation, and parenting in educational curricula and public campaigns to support youth navigating new norms around intimacy, family planning, and household formation post-pandemic.

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9. SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This chapter examines the role of formal and informal support structures in shaping the well-being and resilience of youth in Croatia and Slovenia. In both countries, families remain the most important support system, particularly mothers, who are consistently identified as central figures in providing emotional and practical assistance. While peers also play a crucial role, the pandemic disrupted these relationships and reduced opportunities for in-person interaction. Institutional support, such as educational and employment services, remains important but often perceived as inaccessible or poorly adapted to the actual needs of youth. At the same time, a low level of trust in political institutions and the welfare system was observed, particularly in Croatia, which reinforces reliance on familial networks. Digital platforms increasingly serve as alternatives for connection and advice, although they cannot replace interpersonal support. Policy implications stress the need to expand accessible, youth-centred services, including mental health care, career guidance, and community-based initiatives. Strengthening institutional trust and investing in participatory frameworks would help diversify support beyond families and foster more resilient pathways for young people's social integration and life transitions.

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Support structures such as family, peers, educational institutions, healthcare services, religious organisations, youth civil society organisations (CSOs), and public institutions are integral to well-being. Young people rely on a variety of support systems to navigate the complexities of development, with parents typically serving as the primary source of both emotional and financial assistance during early life. Parental support helps foster self-esteem and offers stability, although its quality can be affected by socioeconomic status, mental health, and family dynamics (Luthar & Cushing, 1999; Amato, 2001). Within the family, sibling relationships, while often emotionally supportive and egalitarian, vary in effectiveness depending on the nature of the relationship and family context (Dunn, 2000; Stocker, 1994). Furthermore, peer and friends' support becomes increasingly important in adolescence, offering emotional validation and social integration, though it may fluctuate due to the often-transient nature of friendships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Romantic partners can also provide significant emotional and practical support, though the quality of this support depends heavily on the health of the relationship (Fehr, 1996; Bogat & Suchman, 1989). Furthermore, educational institutions contribute to intellectual and social development, though disparities in resources can limit support effectiveness.

During the pandemic, the general public became increasingly aware that mental health professionals can offer critical interventions for psychological challenges, even to the youth who do not seem to deviate from typical patterns of good well-being. Public institutions are essential to filling gaps in support at the community level, particularly for vulnerable groups, though their impact is often constrained by funding and policy (UNICEF, 2015). Also, CSOs and non-formal platforms provide significant support to young people, as we will see in the next sections. Lastly, religious organisations can provide spiritual and communal support, though inclusivity and cultural alignment influence their effectiveness (Rata, 2020). However, during the pandemic physical distancing measures and closures of institutions deprived young people of the opportunity to receive professional support. The detrimental effect of the pandemic on availability and accessibility of support also reflected on a personal relationships level, within families, friends, romantic partnerships and at the community level.

Several studies have documented the impact of the pandemic on youth well-being, including mental health issues, educational disruptions, and social challenges (Cielo et al., 2021; Eurofound, 2021; Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022; Dewa et al., 2024). Public services, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities have been restructured to support youth well-being. However, a shortage of staff and limitations of access to services have hindered the progress of reforms intended to improve accessibility and responsiveness. These support systems were weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in increased vulnerabilities. Increased societal disruptions, mental health challenges, and socioeconomic pressures were exacerbated by isolation, stress, and uncertainty.

Gottlieb and Bergen (2010) conceptualise social support through a concept of network, which encompasses both the resources people perceive as available and those provided by professional and non-professional sources, including formal support groups and informal supportive relationships. Closely linked to social networks is the concept of social integration, which measures the extent of an individual's involvement in private and public social interactions, reflecting how deeply embedded they are within their communities and social circles, thereby influencing their exposure to potential support. In this sense, Gottlieb and Bergen understand social support as categorised into two main dimensions: functional support, which refers to the diverse types of resources such as emotional, instrumental, informational, compassionate, and esteem support that flow through social ties, emphasising the qualitative nature of support; and structural support, which focuses on the quantitative and relational aspects, specifically the number and pattern of direct and indirect social ties surrounding the individual, thus representing the network's capacity to provide support. Furthermore, evaluations of support involve assessments of support adequacy, whereby individuals judge whether the quantity and quality of received support meet their needs and expectations. The directionality of support is the final dimension proposed by Gottlieb and Bergen, who recognise that support may flow solely from provider to recipient or be reciprocated, fostering ongoing social exchange and support. In the following section on data analysis, we will focus on the forms and frequency of support. In this chapter, we will focus on structural support. Although assessment of support and directionality have been elements of our research, these dimensions will be analysed in some other formats. Directionality will be addressed only through

examination of the foreseen types of parental support and envisaged support from the young person to their parents in the future.

9.1 Perceived support from various sources during and after the pandemic

The degree of support from parents, friends, civil society organisations, and public institutions was measured using items evaluating frequency and perceived adequacy of support. The perceived support structures in our survey were examined with the instruction: "Please mark how much each of the following persons, institutions or organisations helped you in exercising your rights or solving life difficulties in two periods: during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic period." The frequency of support was evaluated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 is never, 2 is rarely, 3 is occasionally, 4 is often, and 5 is very often. For items related to the support of parents, friends, spouse or partner and brothers and sisters, the scale was expanded with the answer "I don't have them, so I can't evaluate". These respondents were excluded from further analysis of the items mentioned. The data analysis involved several statistical techniques to address the research questions: descriptive statistics, t-test and analysis of variance. Descriptive statistics were calculated using three recoded levels to facilitate the graphical representation of the 10 types of support and the five levels of support intensity. On the other hand, cross-tabulations with sociodemographic characteristics were conducted using the original five levels of support in order to capture more nuanced differences in the degree of support. The original question assessing a level of support was as follows: "Please indicate the extent to which each of the listed individuals, institutions, or organisations has supported you in realising your rights or in addressing life challenges during two specific periods: the COVID-19 pandemic and the past month." The first data to be presented encompass the pandemic period in two countries (Figure 9.1.). The data for the post-pandemic period are presented in Figure 9.2.

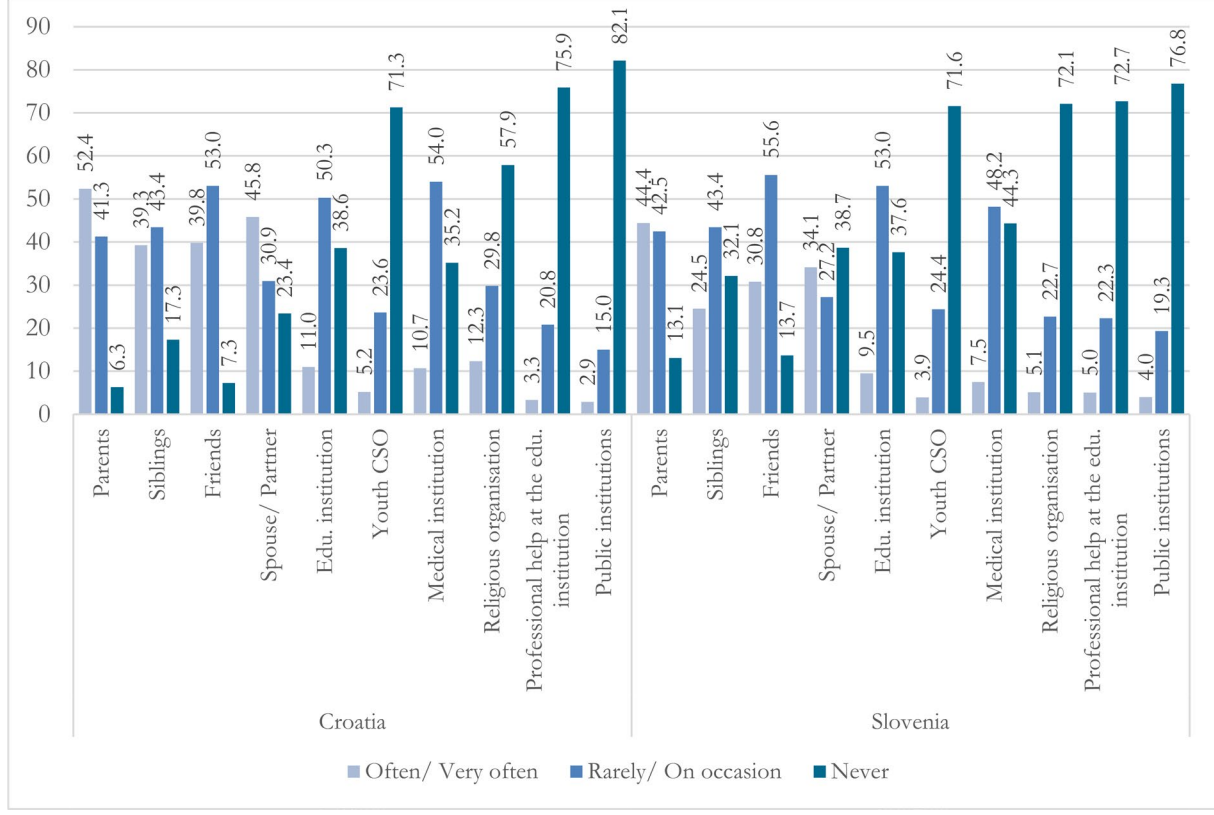


Figure 9.1: Perceived support during the pandemic period in Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In both countries, parents remained a primary source of support throughout the periods. In Croatia, "Often/Very often" responses were slightly higher during the pandemic (52.4%) than post-pandemic (51.8%), indicating stable reliance. Slovenia, however, saw a modest decline from 44.4% to 40.0%, suggesting a small reduction in frequent parental support. Support from siblings and friends followed a consistent pattern. Croatian youth reported relatively stable interactions with siblings ("Often/Very often" 39.3% to 39.1%) and friends (39.8% to 42.2%) post-pandemic. In Slovenia, sibling contact remained low, with a slight decrease (24.5% to 24.0%), while friend interaction showed a slight rise from 30.8% to 33.4%. In both countries, support from partners increased post-pandemic. Croatia's "Often/Very often" category rose from 45.8% to 51.2%, and Slovenia's from 34.1% to 38.3%. This suggests strengthened intimate support relationships following the crisis. Support from educational institutions has reduced since the pandemic. Croatia's frequent support declined from 11.0% to 9.8%, but in Slovenia it remained almost the same (9.5% and 9.0%, respectively). The data suggest a potentially reduced need for or access to support from educational institutions in the post-pandemic period. Support from youth civil society organisations and religious organisations remains low across both countries and periods, although qualitative insights from the previous study (Potočnik, 2023) indicates youth civil society organisations were a more reliable source of support during the pandemic than religious organisations. Slight changes were observed, indicating limited reliance on these sources, particularly in Slovenia, where "Often/Very often" figures were below 7% in both cases. There was also a slight decline in frequent support from medical institutions - in Slovenia from 7.5% to 6.6%, while in Croatia the change was marginal (10.7% to 10.5%). Relatively low professional support in educational institutions persists across periods. In both countries, the "Often/Very often" category stayed below 6%, with a slight increase, in Croatia from 3.3% to 4.2%, and Slovenia from 5.0% to 6.1%. Support from public institutions was reported as the least frequent, with over 75% in both nations stating "Never" across both periods, which contributes to the perception of these institutions as largely inaccessible or ineffective support sources for youth.

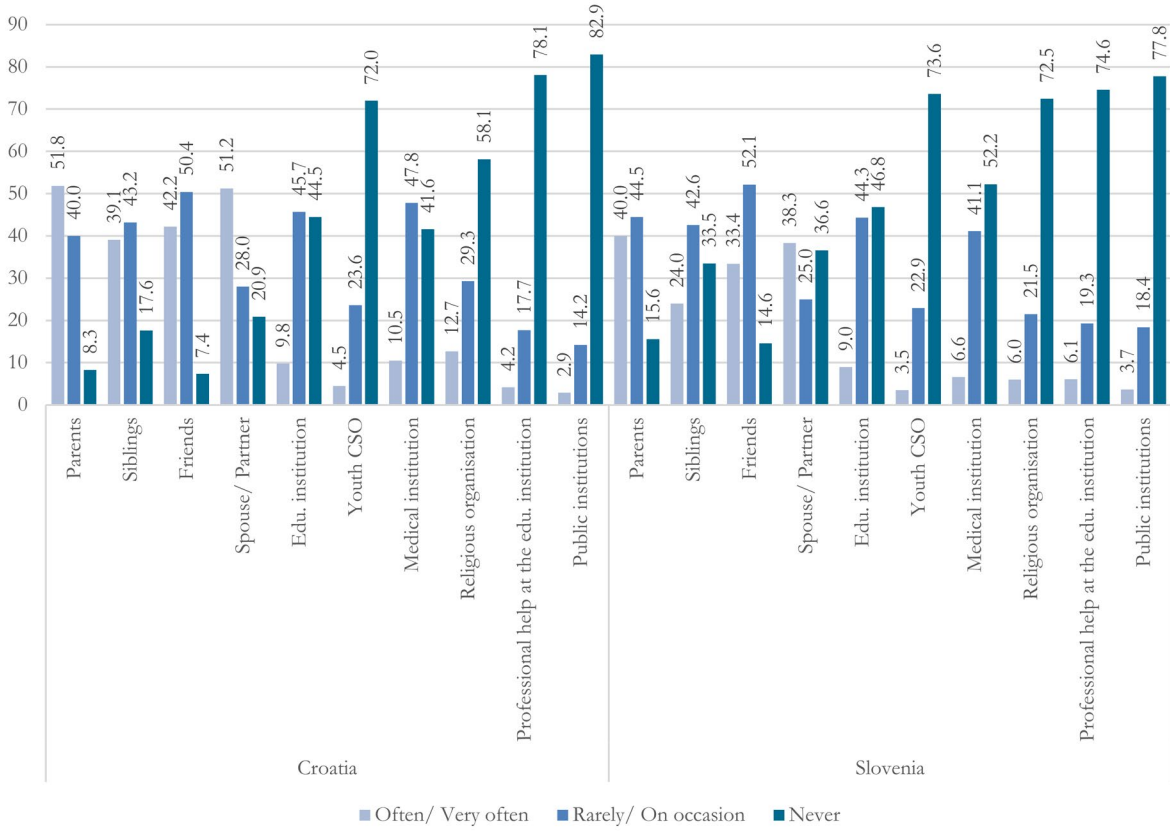


Figure 9.2: Perceived support in the post-pandemic period in Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Parents remained a key source of support during and after the pandemic in both Croatia and Slovenia, though Slovenian youth reported a slight decline in the frequency of parental support in the post-pandemic period. Support from partners increased in both countries, indicating stronger intimate relationships, while reliance on educational and institutional support was consistently low, with a notable perception of limited accessibility. Slovenia experienced a small decrease in the frequency of parental support and marginal changes in support from other sources.

A quote by the focus group respondent nicely illustrates diverse landscape of support in Croatia, and to what extent support from the closer circles and institutions differ.

My most important source of support is my immediate family, and I am fully, and most of all, satisfied with that. Next would be my employer, with whom I am not as satisfied. As for my extended family, I am also not particularly satisfied, as I did not receive full support from them during my studies, I did have financial assistance, but I definitely lacked social support. Then there are associations, which I would rate as average; my assessment would be around a 3. I also receive maternity benefits, which I am likewise dissatisfied with, as the amount is reduced during the second six months and does not equate to a full salary. Lastly, regarding friends, I think my social life could be somewhat better, so I am not entirely satisfied in that area either

(Female, 27, employed, Croatia).

Similarly, in Slovenia a lot of support was provided by family members and friends, but also various institutions.

“I got a lot of support from my friends, mostly regarding the school. I was also fortunate with counselling, particularly because of my female counsellor and one of the professors. They took me and my problem seriously. /.../ they helped me solve my problems, helped me with tutoring. Oh, my aunt also helped me, she studied mathematics and was tutoring me on that subject.”

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

“The most important support for me came from 2 organisations, one of them is my former school. /.../ The organisation is called Society for non-violent communication. /.../ Now (after sessions of counselling at NGO) I am much more positive, very positive. During the pandemic I was sexually abused. After that situation... one of the first persons I confided to was one of my professors and the faculty for social work. I had some health issues before that and she helped me a lot.

During the Covid I was not living at home and I had no real connections to my family. So, they (staff at that NGO) played a crucial role in my life by accepting me...”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

An independent samples t-test was employed to examine differences in perceived support among young people, with sex, age, and socioeconomic status (SES) as independent variables. In Croatia, during the pandemic, young people reported similar levels of support from a partner or spouse, with no statistically significant gender difference, and the support from educational institutions was also comparable between genders. However, men noted significantly higher support from youth civil society organisations ($t=3.356$; $p=.001$; M male=1.63; SD male=1.022; M female=1.45; SD female=0.859); and public institutions ($t=2.070$; $p=.039$; M male=1.37; SD male=0.823; M female=1.28; SD female=0.715).

In Slovenia, female respondents more frequently ($t=-4.120$; $p<.001$) reported on support from parents ($M=3.22$; $SD=1.237$) than male respondents ($M=2.93$; $SD=1.256$). Support from siblings was also rated higher (with $t=-3.743$; $p<.001$) among women ($M=2.64$; $SD=1.343$) compared to men ($M=2.36$; $SD=1.286$). Women felt more supported by friends ($M=3.07$; $SD=1.180$) than males ($M=2.87$; $SD=1.130$), with $t=-3.133$; $p=.002$. A statistically significant gender difference ($t=-8.028$; $p=.002$) was found in perceived support from a partner or spouse, with women reporting significantly more support ($M=3.15$; $SD=1.585$) than men ($M=2.46$; $SD=1.490$). Female respondents again were associated with slightly more support ($M=2.04$; $SD=1.081$) than males ($M=1.90$; $SD=1.056$), with the difference being statistically significant ($t=-2.304$; $p=.021$). Women perceived higher support ($t=-3.155$; $p=.002$.) from health institutions ($M=1.94$; $SD=1.055$) compared to men ($M=1.76$; $SD=1.018$).

Concerning the age differences among the levels of support young people perceived during the pandemic, parental support in Croatia declined with age. Young people aged 16-19 reported the highest support ($M=3.83$; $SD=1.143$), followed by the 20-24 age group ($M=3.65$; $SD=1.150$), and then those aged 25-29 ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.208$). The differences were statistically significant at $F=16.740$; $p=.000$. A similar trend was observed in support from siblings, though less pronounced. The 20-24 group perceived slightly more support ($M=3.18$; $SD=1.315$) than the youngest group

($M=3.14$; $SD=1.312$), while support declined in the 25-29 group ($M=2.92$; $SD=1.288$). The difference was significant at $F=6.646$; $p=.010$. Perceived support from friends peaked in the 20-24 group ($M=3.34$; $SD=1.084$), with slightly lower scores in the 16-19 group ($M=3.31$; $SD=1.132$) and a drop among those aged 25-29 ($M=3.12$; $SD=1.076$), indicating a statistically significant difference ($F=5.106$; $p=.010$). In contrast to familial and peer support, support from a partner or spouse increased with age. The lowest reported support was in the 16-19 group ($M=2.81$; $SD=1.486$), followed by 20-24 ($M=3.11$; $SD=1.460$), and highest in the 25-29 group ($M=3.29$; $SD=1.426$), with statistical significance at $F=5.827$; $p=.010$. Perceived support from educational institutions declined with age: 16-19 ($M=2.29$; $SD=1.094$), 20-24 ($M=2.21$; $SD=1.098$), and 25-29 ($M=1.92$; $SD=1.073$). The difference was statistically significant at $F=3.067$; $p=.047$. On the contrary, support from public institutions increased slightly with age, which can be placed in the context of the increasing variety of needs young people encounter during the later stages of youth, primarily concerning labour market placement and support for young families. The youngest group noted the lowest support ($M=1.25$; $SD=.709$), rising to 1.31 ($SD=.760$) for the 20-24 group, and 1.39 ($SD=.824$) for those aged 25-29 ($F=12.926$; $p=.010$).

Similarly to their Croatian peers, Slovenian youth reported declining parental support with age, with the highest support associated with the youngest cohort 16-19 ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.220$), and with decline for age 20-24 ($M=3.16$; $SD=1.178$), and 25-29 ($M=3.08$; $SD=1.251$). In this case, differences were significant at $F=7.020$; $p=.009$. However, unlike Croatia, support from friends in Slovenia increased with age, with the oldest cohort having the strongest friends' support [16-19 ($M=2.14$; $SD=1.392$), 20-24 ($M=2.53$; $SD=1.474$), and 25-29 ($M=3.11$; $SD=1.478$)], which was marked statistically significant differences at $F=5.827$; $p=.003$. Support from educational institutions, on the other hand, decreased with age [16-19 ($M=2.32$; $SD=.990$); 20-24 ($M=2.12$; $SD=1.074$), and 25-29 ($M=1.93$; $SD=1.028$)], with statistically significant differences at $F=15.731$, $p=.000$, which is a trend opposite to the one observed in Croatia. Support from health institutions was relatively stable across groups ($F=3.757$; $p=.030$), although slightly higher in the 25-29 group ($M=2.03$; $SD=1.047$) compared to 20-24 ($M=1.86$; $SD=.995$). Support from religious organisations also declines with age ($F=4.697$; $p=.007$), with the 16-19 cohort having perceived the strongest support ($M=1.67$; $SD=1.038$), followed by 20-24 ($M=1.53$; $SD=1.014$), and 25-29 cohort ($M=1.45$; $SD=.893$). The availability

or perception of professional help also decreased with age ($F=6.859$; $p=.000$), with the age group 16-19 reporting a somewhat higher degree of perceived help ($M=1.66$; $SD=1.062$) than 20-24 ($M=1.50$; $SD=.953$), and 25-29 age groups ($M=1.40$; $SD=.824$). As in Croatia, support from public institutions slightly increased with age, though levels remained low: 16-19 ($M=1.36$; $SD=.788$), 20-24 ($M=1.40$; $SD=.857$), and 25-29 ($M=1.50$; $SD=.910$), with significant differences at $F=3.255$; $p=.039$.

Concerning associations of the perceived level of support to young people in the pandemic period in Croatia and their socio-economic status, support from schools or universities during the COVID-19 pandemic varies significantly ($F=3.159$; $p=.043$); participants from the lowest SES backgrounds noted the highest perceived support ($M=1.67$; $SD=.628$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.73$; $SD=.641$), and the highest SES ($M=1.80$; $SD=.695$). Regarding support from youth associations, clubs, or youth information centres, statistically significant differences were also observed ($F=6.028$; $p=.002$); participants from the lowest SES are associated with the highest support ($M=1.40$; $SD=.615$), followed by those from the highest SES ($M=1.37$; $SD=.615$), and the middle SES ($M=1.28$; $SD=.516$). In terms of professional support, such as from pedagogues, psychologists, or educational-rehabilitative specialists in schools and universities, significant differences are evident across SES groups in Croatia ($F=6.851$; $p=.001$); participants from the lowest SES noted the highest support ($M=1.34$; $SD=.545$), followed by the highest SES ($M=1.28$; $SD=.544$), and the middle SES ($M=1.22$; $SD=.469$). Finally, concerning support from public institutions, such as social welfare centres or employment agencies, a level of statistical significance was at $F=4.465$; $p=.012$, where the participants from the lowest SES declared the highest support ($M=1.26$; $SD=.527$), followed by the highest SES ($M=1.19$; $SD=.445$), and the middle SES ($M=1.18$; $SD=.438$).

In Slovenia, in regard to support from youth associations, clubs, or info-centres during the pandemic, significant differences are observed ($F=5.136$; $p=.006$); low SES participants reported the highest support ($M=1.40$; $SD=.583$), followed by middle SES ($M=1.30$; $SD=.525$), and high SES ($M=1.28$; $SD=.524$). Professional support from pedagogues, psychologists, or educational-rehabilitation specialists during the pandemic also shows statistically significant variations ($F=5.481$; $p=.004$); low SES participants can be associated with the highest support ($M=1.40$; $SD=.612$), followed by middle SES ($M=1.29$; $SD=.539$), and high SES youth ($M=1.28$;

SD=.546). Support from healthcare institutions in the post-pandemic period also varies significantly ($F=5.502$; $p=.004$); low SES participants reported the highest support ($M=1.62$; $SD=.631$), followed by middle SES ($M=1.53$; $SD=.609$), and high SES ($M=1.46$; $SD=.628$).

Concerning the pandemic period, Croatian youth on average reported higher levels of perceived support. We can say that during the pandemic, parental support was highest among the youngest age group and declined with age in both countries. However, friendship support trends diverged: in Croatia, it declined slightly with age, while in Slovenia, it increased significantly, suggesting a differing role of peer networks. Support from educational institutions decreased with age in both countries, though Slovenian young people noted slightly higher average support than their Croatian peers. Public institutions were a relatively weak source of support in both countries, but support increased marginally with age in both contexts. Slovenian youth reported declining support with age concerning religious organisations and professional help within educational institutions. Socioeconomic status in Croatia pointed out that young people from lower SES backgrounds perceived higher levels of support compared to their peers from higher SES backgrounds. This pattern was evident in perceived support from parents, friends, youth organisations, educational or psychological professionals, and public institutions, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the month preceding the study. These findings suggest that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in shaping young people's support networks across different sources. We can observe higher reliance of low SES youth on public and institutional support, coupled with targeted outreach efforts by schools and service providers towards more vulnerable groups. In contrast, young people from higher SES backgrounds may have depended more on private or family-based resources and had less engagement with a formal support system.

During the pandemic, Croatian youth reported higher overall perceived support. Parental support is the highest among the youngest respondents in both countries and it declines with age; however, friendship support decreased slightly with age in Croatia but increased significantly in Slovenia, while educational institution support declined with age in both, slightly favouring Slovenian youth. Socioeconomic status influenced Croatian youths' perception of support more strongly, with lower SES groups perceiving higher levels of support across multiple sources.

The differences among young people in their assessment of the level of support they received from various sources in the post-pandemic period were also analysed with regard to gender, age, and socioeconomic status. In Croatia, female respondents noted receiving more support from friends after the pandemic ($M=3.39$; $SD=1.072$) compared to male respondents ($M=3.21$; $SD=1.145$), with statistically significant differences at $t=-2.840$; $p=.005$. Women also indicated higher support levels ($t=-2.013$; $p=.044$) from a partner or spouse ($M=3.39$; $SD=1.499$) than men ($M=3.20$; $SD=1.455$). Male respondents reported higher levels ($t=2.074$; $p=.038$) of support from educational institutions ($M=2.09$; $SD=1.095$) than women ($M=1.96$; $SD=1.093$). Men perceived more support from youth CSOs ($M=1.60$; $SD=.988$) compared to women ($M=1.42$; $SD=.817$), with statistically significant differences at $t=3.445$; $p=.001$. Similarly, men indicated higher support ($t=2.904$; $p=.004$) from public institutions ($M=1.37$; $SD=.822$) than women ($M=1.25$; $SD=.670$).

In the post-pandemic period in Croatia, support from parents remained strongest among the youngest group (16-19 years, $M=2.59$; $SD=.587$), but decreased with age, with scores of 2.24 ($SD=.622$) for those aged 20-24 and 2.32 ($SD=.673$) for the 25-29 age group ($F=17.111$, $p=.000$). Compared to the data during the pandemic, levels remained high in the youngest group but dropped more significantly in older cohorts. Perceived support from siblings also declined slightly with age [(16-19 ($M=2.29$; $SD=.706$), 20-24 ($M=2.23$; $SD=.735$), and 25-29 ($M=2.15$; $SD=.715$)], with a significant difference ($F=3.733$; $p=.024$). These values were relatively stable compared to the pandemic period, suggesting continuity in sibling relationships. Support from friends ($F=14.200$; $p=.000$) was perceived as highest among 16-19-year-olds ($M=2.50$; $SD=.566$), and declined steadily across age groups: 20-24 ($M=2.37$; $SD=.612$), and 25-29 ($M=2.22$; $SD=.620$). These values indicate a modest increase in perceived support among the youngest group compared to the insights from the pandemic period. Support from educational institutions declined sharply with age 16-19 ($M=1.84$; $SD=.635$), 20-24 ($M=1.66$; $SD=.638$), and 25-29 ($M=1.51$; $SD=.640$), with significant differences at $F=24.393$; $p=.001$. These figures are slightly lower than during the pandemic, particularly in older age groups, which suggests that institutional support may not have rebounded after the crisis.

The post-pandemic period in Slovenia also brought some changes concerning the support young people were receiving. On average, young women can be associated with significantly more support from siblings than young men ($t=-3.247$; $p=.001$; M

male=2.42; SD male=1.283; M female=2.65; SD female=1.319), friends ($t=-3.757$; $p=.000$; M male=2.83; SD male=1.131; M female=3.07; SD female=1.104), and especially from a partner or spouse ($t=-8.175$; $p=.000$; M male=2.33; SD male=1.412; M female=3.00; SD female=1.528), while support from religious organisations was slightly higher for men ($t=1.983$; $p=.048$; M male=1.59; SD male=1.006; M female=1.48; SD female=0.948).

As in Croatia, parental support in Slovenia declined with age: 16-19 (M=2.38; SD=.687), 20-24 (M=2.22; SD=.693), and 25-29 (M=2.18; SD=.713), with a significant difference at $F=8.671$; $p=.000$. Compared to the pandemic period, these figures represent a continued downward trend, with younger people still perceiving more support. Support from partners ($F=38.959$; $p=.000$) increased substantially with age: 16-19 (M=1.17), 20-24 (M=2.02), and 25-29 (M=2.23). This upward trend continued from the pandemic period, highlighting the growing importance of romantic partners for older youth. Support from educational institutions decreased with age: 16-19 (M=1.85; SD=.653), 20-24 (M=1.61; SD=.645), and 25-29 (M=1.47; SD=.592), with a highly significant difference ($F=14.330$; $p=.000$). These values were slightly lower than those observed during the pandemic, particularly among older respondents. Support from religious organisations also declined slightly with age: 16-19 (M=1.44; SD=.638), 20-24 (M=1.31; SD=.576), and 25-29 (M=1.29; SD=.551), with significance of $F=7.588$; $p=.001$. This corresponds to the patterns observed during the pandemic. Access to or perception of professional help ($F=7.588$; $p=.001$) followed a similar pattern: 16-19 (M=1.40; SD=.652), 20-24 (M=1.32; SD=.584), and 25-29 (M=1.25; SD=.522). These results are consistent with those recorded during the pandemic.

Concerning association with socio-economic status in the post-pandemic period, support from parents varies significantly in Croatia ($F=4.161$; $p=.016$); participants from high SES backgrounds reported the highest perceived support (M=2.51; SD=.635), followed by those from middle SES (M=2.46; SD=.615), and low SES (M=2.37; SD=.675). Regarding support from friends, a statistically significant difference was also observed ($F=6.386$; $p=.002$); participants from high SES backgrounds can be associated with the highest support (M=2.41; SD=.593), followed by those from middle SES (M=2.38; SD=.593), and low SES (M=2.26; SD=.641). In terms of support from youth associations, clubs, or youth information centres, the reported support differed significantly across SES groups ($F=4.865$;

$p=.008$); participants from low SES backgrounds noted the highest support ($M=1.38$; $DS=.594$), followed by those from high SES ($M=1.35$; $SD=.576$), and middle SES ($M=1.27$; $SD=.514$). Similarly, concerning professional assistance at schools, from the pedagogues, psychologists, or educational-rehabilitation specialists, participants from low SES backgrounds can be associated with the highest support ($M=1.33$; $SD=.574$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.23$; $SD=.502$) and high SES ($M=1.23$; $SD=.484$), with $F=4.986$; $p=.007$. Finally, with regard to support from public institutions, such as social welfare centres or employment offices, statistically significant differences were also noted ($F=8.785$; $p=.000$); participants from low SES backgrounds reported the highest support ($M=1.28$; $SD=.545$), followed by those from high SES ($M=1.17$; $SD=.446$), and middle SES ($M=1.16$; $SD=.406$).

In regard to socio-economic status, support from siblings in the post-pandemic period varies significantly in Slovenia ($F=3.021$; $p=.049$); participants from high SES backgrounds noted the highest perceived support ($M=2.00$; $SD=.754$), followed by those from low SES ($M=1.92$; $SD=.732$), and middle SES ($M=1.86$; $SD=.760$). Support from youth associations, clubs, or youth information centres also varies significantly ($F=4.285$; $p=.014$); participants from low SES backgrounds can be associated with the highest support ($M=1.36$; $SD=.571$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.28$; $SD=.519$), and high SES ($M=1.25$; $SD=.480$). In relation to health institutions, participants from low SES backgrounds reported the highest support ($M=1.62$; $SD=.667$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.5$; $SD=.5943$), and high SES ($M=1.46$; $SD=.587$), with $F=5.502$; $p=.004$. Similarly, support from public institutions is also associated with statistically significant differences ($F=3.346$; $p=.036$); participants from low SES backgrounds reported the highest support ($M=1.32$; $SD=.553$), followed by those from high SES ($M=1.24$; $SD=.507$), and middle SES ($M=1.23$; $SD=.478$).

In conclusion, in both countries, a significant decline in parental support with age continued to persist in the post-pandemic period. However, Croatian youth consistently reported higher levels of support from parents than Slovenian youth, both during and after the pandemic. In Croatia, friend-based support was the highest post-pandemic among younger people and declined with age. In Slovenia, the trend was similar post-pandemic, although during the pandemic, older age groups were associated with higher average peer support, indicating a shift. Data for Croatia post-

pandemic on partner/spouse support were not provided, but during the pandemic, support increased with age. In Slovenia, partner/spouse support significantly increased post-pandemic and was the highest among those aged 25-29, suggesting a continued rise in its importance among older youth. In both countries, support from educational institutions consistently decreased with age and further declined post-pandemic. Croatian youth noted slightly higher support than their Slovenian peers, especially in the 16-19 age group. Slovenia continued to report relatively low and decreasing levels of support from religious organisations and educational professionals, while this rate in Croatia showed stability.

Socio-economic status appears to shape young people's perceptions of support received from various individuals and institutions in the post-pandemic period in both countries. Participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds often reported higher reliance on institutional forms of support, while those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tended to perceive stronger support from family and friends. These findings highlight the importance of considering socio-economic inequalities when developing policies and services aimed at supporting young people's well-being.

9.2 Expectations about parental help among young people in Croatia and Slovenia

According to Dey and Morris (1999), parents play a critical role in supporting young adults, especially in southern European societies such as Croatia and Slovenia, where the family remains the primary socialisation agent through time. Parents' support has consistently shaped young people's transition into adulthood, regardless of the differences in family policies across Europe. In their study, Oliveira et al. (2014) contend that both financial assistance and autonomy promote young people's psychological well-being, as well as their ability to cope with personal and professional challenges. In a similar study, Wiedemann et al. (2025) investigated resilience factors affecting youth mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, citing the importance of reliable family support systems before and during the crisis. It is consistent with the findings of Pui Yung Chyu and Chen (2024), who identify perceived social support as a significant mediator between stress and mental illness. Moreover, Wolfert and Quenzel (2019) note that young people and their parents have generally positive relationships, with most believing that family interactions are important for the development of resilience.

Expected support from parents and the support that young people anticipate providing to their parents were measured using a three-point scale, recoded from the original five-point scale. A question addressing foreseen help from parents was formulated as follows: “Do you expect your parents to support you in the future?”, with data presented by Figure 9.3.

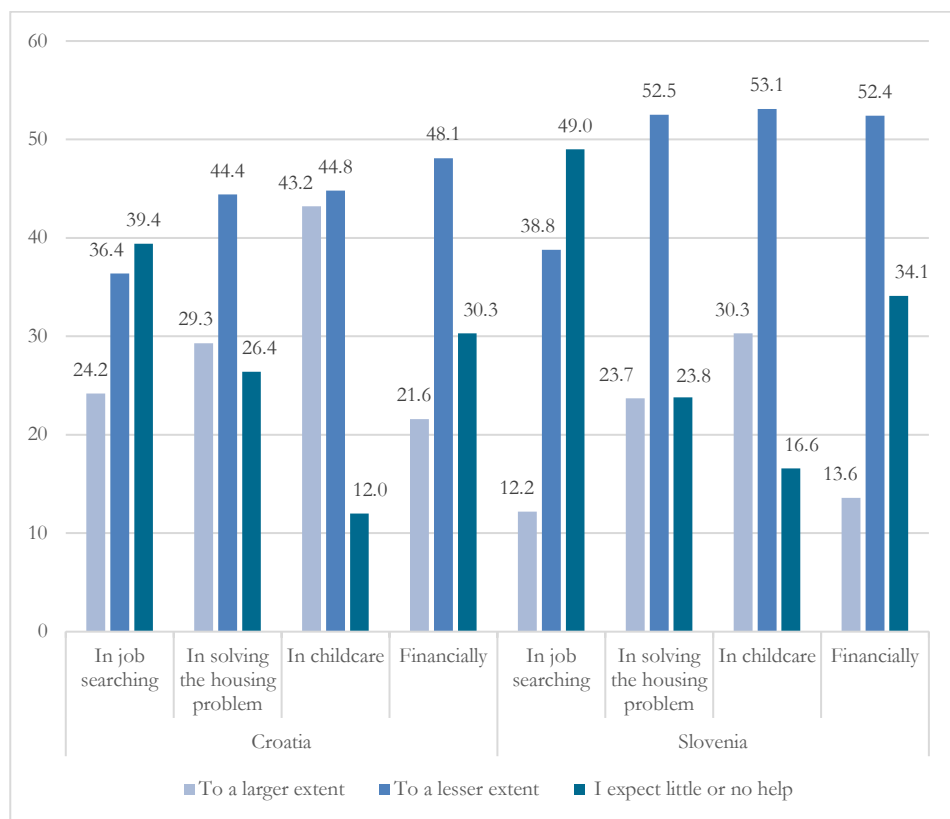


Figure 9.3. Expected parental help (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In Croatia, young people’s expectations of future parental support vary significantly across different domains of adult life. The strongest expectation is in the area of childcare, where 43.2% of respondents anticipate substantial support from their parents. This suggests that intergenerational involvement in family life, particularly in caring for young children, remains a culturally and socially embedded practice. On the other end of the spectrum, support in job searching is the least expected, with

39.4% of youth indicating they expect little or no help in this domain. This may reflect a perception that job-related support requires specialised resources or independence that parents may be unable or unwilling to provide. Financial support and help with housing fall in between, with moderate levels of expected support, indicating that while parents are seen as important fallback figures, expectations of direct material assistance are more cautious or pragmatic. This state of youth in Croatia can be illustrated by the next quotation:

Similarly, I provide the most emotional support, within my means. I am still not employed, and I wasn't at the time either [during the pandemic], so in financial terms, I am not really able to offer support.

(Female, university student, Croatia).

In Slovenia, expectations of parental support show a similar domain-specific pattern, though with some significant differences compared to Croatia. The highest expectation is also in the domain of childcare, where 30.3% of youth expect a high degree of help, and a further 53.1% anticipate at least some support. This indicates a continued reliance on parents for practical and emotional support in raising children. Conversely, job searching emerges as the domain with the lowest expected parental involvement, with nearly half of the respondents (49.0%) expecting little or no help. These findings suggest that Slovenian youth perceive job acquisition as a predominantly individual or institutional responsibility. Expectations of financial and housing support lie between these extremes, with relatively fewer youth expecting substantial assistance. We can conclude that the Slovenian youth appear to express slightly more autonomy in career and financial matters, while still relying on their parents for family-related support.

“Of course I got the most of support from my parents, but I also helped them. I was helping my mom and we worked together (in a family-owned business), she worked before noon and I worked in the afternoon and vice versa. We managed that quite good and it was great for all of us (family members), we all supported each other. However, we had no real contact, no real interaction and I missed that a lot.”

(Male, university student, Slovenia)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in expectations of future parental support across four domains: job seeking, housing, childcare, and financial help. Expectations of parental support in job seeking among

young Croats significantly differed by gender, with men ($M=1.93$; $SD=.790$) reporting higher expectations than women ($M=1.76$; $SD=.767$), $t=3.698$; $p=.001$. Similarly, expectations of parental support in resolving housing issues were higher among men ($M=2.11$; $SD=.728$) than women ($M=1.94$; $SD=.754$), with statistical significance at $t=4.023$; $p=.000$. With regard to childcare support ($t=2.512$; $p=.012$), men ($M=2.36$; $SD=.672$) are also associated with higher expectations than women ($M=2.26$; $SD=.675$). Expectations of financial support (e.g., money, gifts) were also more frequently reported on by young men ($M=1.98$; $SD=.714$) compared to young women ($M=1.84$; $SD=.710$), with $t=3.258$; $p=.001$. In Slovenia, gender was associated with statistically significant differences ($t=3.748$; $p=.000$) among young people in regard to resolving of housing issues and help with taking care of children. In this regard, more young men ($M=2.07$; $SD=.684$) more frequently expect help from their parents than young women ($M=1.92$; $SD=.688$). Future assistance with childcare was also foreseen by significantly ($t=2.465$; $p=.014$) more young men ($M=2.18$; $SD=.683$) than women ($M=2.09$; $SD=.655$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess whether expectations of future parental support varied across three generational cohorts (16-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years) in Croatia. The results revealed a consistent age-related decline in anticipated parental assistance across all examined domains. In relation to support when seeking employment, mean scores decreased with age: 16-19 ($M=2.08$; $SD=.745$), 20-24 ($M=1.88$; $SD=.804$), and 25-29 ($M=1.65$; $SD=.736$), with the difference being statistically significant ($F=31.378$; $p=.000$). A similar downward trend was observed for housing support, with mean expectations of 2.25, 2.05, and 1.86 and SD of .711, .719 and .753 respectively ($F=27.437$; $p=.000$). Expectations of help with childcare also declined modestly across cohorts: 16-19 ($M=2.41$; $SD=.624$), 20-24 ($M=2.30$; $SD=.678$), and 25-29 ($M=2.25$; $SD=.699$), with statistical significance at $F=5.024$; $p=.007$. Financial support expectations followed the same trajectory: 16-19 ($M=2.07$; $SD=.690$), 20-24 ($M=1.92$; $SD=.716$), and 25-29 ($M=1.80$; $SD=.713$), showing a significant difference at $F=13.112$; $p=.000$. We can notice that the youngest participants consistently expressed higher expected support across employment, housing, childcare, and finances, with expectations steadily diminishing among older cohorts. This pattern likely reflects a developmental shift towards higher independence and perceived self-reliance with higher age.

In Slovenia, a one-way ANOVA also revealed statistically significant differences in expectations of parental support across age cohorts (16-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years), with younger participants consistently anticipating more assistance. For support in seeking employment ($F=61.541$; $p=.000$), mean scores declined with age: 16-19 ($M=1.95$; $SD=.719$), 20-24 ($M=1.61$; $SD=.631$), and 25-29 ($M=1.43$; $SD=.643$). A similar trend was observed in expectations for housing support, with means of 2.17, 2.01, and 1.87, respectively, and with SD values of .649, .661 and .717 respectively ($F=19.410$; $p=.000$). Anticipated help with childcare ($F=3.838$; $p=.022$) also showed a modest age-related decline: 16-19 ($M=2.21$; $SD=.669$), 20-24 ($M=2.15$; $SD=.637$), and 25-29 ($M=2.08$; $SD=.698$). Expectations of financial or gift-related support followed a similar distribution 16-19 ($M=1.95$; $SD=.647$), 20-24 ($M=1.81$; $SD=.637$), and 25-29 ($M=1.68$; $SD=.666$), with statistically significant difference at $F=17.545$; $p=.000$. These results suggest a clear generational shift, with older youth perceiving less likelihood of future parental support, potentially reflecting increasing autonomy or evolving family expectations with age.

The data demonstrate a consistent pattern: younger respondents expect significantly more parental support across all life domains. Expectations tend to decline with age, which suggests a growing sense of independence or reduced reliance on parents as individuals move from adolescence into full adulthood.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether expectations of future parental support in is associated with the SES. Expectations of parental support in job searching vary significantly in Croatia ($F=4.597$; $p=.010$); participants from high SES backgrounds reported the highest expected support ($M=1.96$; $SD=.768$), followed by those from low SES ($M=1.88$; $SD=.803$), and middle SES ($M=1.78$; $SD=.770$). Expectations of parental support in resolving housing issues also show statistically significant variation ($F=6.235$; $p=.002$); participants from high SES backgrounds are associated with the highest support ($M=2.13$; $SD=.739$), followed by middle SES ($M=2.06$; $SD=.726$), and low SES ($M=1.93$; $SD=.766$).

Concerning SES, the anticipated level of parental assistance in labour market placement differs in Slovenia ($F=9.372$; $p=.000$); participants from high SES backgrounds noted the highest expected support ($M=1.82$; $SD=.705$), followed by low SES ($M=1.61$; $SD=.703$), and middle SES ($M=1.59$; $SD=.670$). Expectations of

parental support in resolving housing issues also show statistically significant variations ($F=9.735$; $p=.000$); participants from high SES backgrounds reported the highest expected support ($M=2.17$; $SD=.634$), followed by middle SES ($M=1.99$; $SD=.687$), and low SES ($M=1.92$; $SD=.708$). The expectations of parental support in childcare also differ among young people in Slovenia in regard to their SES; participants from high SES backgrounds reported the highest expected support ($M=2.30$; $SD=.649$), followed by middle SES ($M=2.15$; $SD=.644$), and low SES ($M=2.02$; $SD=.710$), with $F=12.397$; $p=.000$.

In both Croatia and Slovenia, young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds expect higher parental support, particularly in areas such as job searching and housing. However, while Croatian youth show significant SES-based differences primarily in employment and housing-related expectations, Slovenian youth display a broader pattern, with SES influencing expectations across employment, housing, and childcare. This suggests that socioeconomic status plays a more pervasive role in shaping anticipated parental support in Slovenia compared to Croatia.

9.3 Anticipated intergenerational support towards the parents in Croatia and Slovenia

Intergenerational support, particularly the assistance provided by younger generations to their ageing parents, has become an increasingly significant area of study in the context of shifting demographic patterns, welfare state transformations, and evolving familial norms. As societies struggle with the needs of ageing populations and changing intergenerational patterns of support, the role of young people in supporting their parents is gaining renewed attention. This support can take various forms, including emotional, practical, and financial assistance, and is often embedded in broader expectations around reciprocal familial obligations and social solidarity. Such engagement is not only shaped by structural factors such as economic security and institutional care provisions, but is also informed by socially constructed norms about desirable roles that young people are expected to adopt within the family and community. These roles are closely tied to the development and mobilisation of social capital, which can be defined as the networks, trust, and mutual obligations that facilitate cooperation and support across generations (Bourdieu, 1986). In this context, the willingness and ability of young people to provide care and assistance to their parents can be seen not merely as a private family

matter but as a reflection of their embeddedness in social structures and cultural frameworks that valorise interdependence, responsibility, and civic participation. The Figure 9.4. presents the data on anticipated forms of intergenerational support among young people in Croatia and Slovenia.

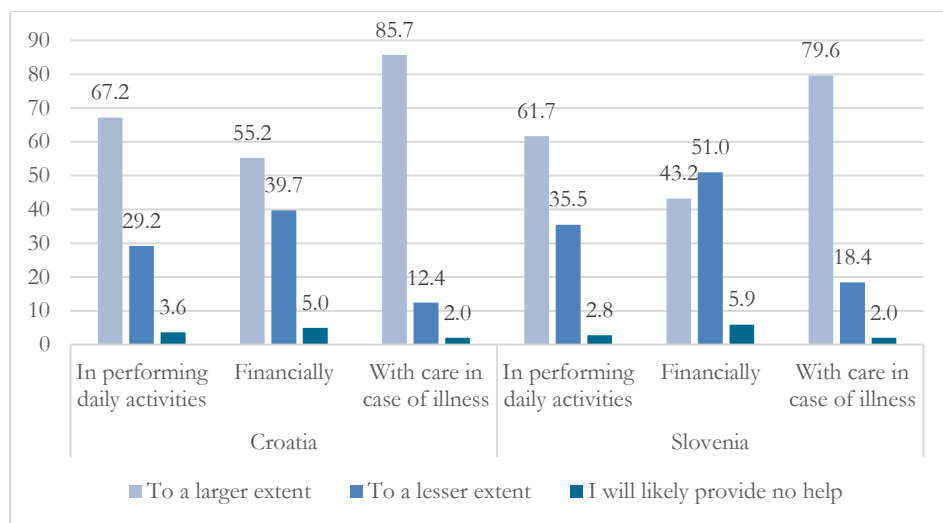


Figure 9.4: To what extent do you expect to provide support to your parents in the future?
(%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In Croatia, young people demonstrate a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility, particularly in relation to caregiving. The highest anticipated support is in providing care in case of illness, with a striking 85.7% of respondents indicating they would offer this support to a larger extent. This highlights a deep cultural norm around filial obligation in times of parental vulnerability. Similarly, assistance with daily activities is widely anticipated, with 67.2% of youth stating they expect to provide substantial support in this area, reflecting preparedness to engage in ongoing, practical caregiving roles. By contrast, financial support emerges as the domain with the most limited anticipated contribution, with 5.0% of respondents indicating they likely will not provide any financial help. While still a minority, this figure marks the highest level of anticipated non-involvement across domains, possibly reflecting economic uncertainty among youth or perceived limitations in their future earning capacity.

Slovenian youth also express a strong commitment to supporting their parents, especially when it comes to health-related needs. The most widely anticipated form of support is care in case of illness, with 79.6% of respondents stating they would provide such help to a larger extent. This stresses out an ethic of care within family structures. Support with daily activities is also frequently expected, with 61.7% of youth indicating a willingness to help extensively, pointing to a sustained readiness to assist in everyday caregiving. In contrast, financial support is the area with the highest level of expected non-involvement, with 5.9% of respondents reporting that they likely will not provide any. Although this figure is modest, it suggests that, as in Croatia, financial capacity may be a limiting factor in young people's projections of future support, or that economic support is seen as less central than physical or emotional caregiving.

Young people in both countries demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility across generations, especially regarding caring for their parents, with the most commonly expected form of support being care during illness, reported by 85.7% of Croatian and 79.6% of Slovenian participants.

With regards to the differences among young people in both countries, an independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between male and female participants in their expected level of caregiving to parents in the event of illness in Croatia ($t=-2.67$; $p=.008$). Young women ($M=2.87$; $SD=.38$) are associated with higher expected involvement than young men ($M=2.81$; $SD=.45$). This finding suggests that women, on average, more frequently anticipate a caregiving role for ageing or ill parents compared to men.

Concerning socio-economic status (SES), expectations of providing care to parents in case of illness vary significantly in Croatia ($F=9.160$; $p=.000$); participants from high SES backgrounds reported the highest potential support ($M=2.90$; $SD=.376$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=2.86$; $SD=.380$), and low SES ($M=2.77$; $SD=.483$). In Slovenia, concerning the socio-economic status, expectations of providing care to parents in case of illness demonstrate that participants from high SES backgrounds foresee the highest potential support to their parents ($M=2.87$; $SD=.376$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=2.78$; $SD=.459$), and low SES ($M=2.72$; $SD=.504$), with $F=7.212$; $p=.001$. The data suggest that in both Croatia and Slovenia, participants from higher SES backgrounds more frequently reported

willingness or expectation to provide care for their parents in the future, potentially reflecting differences in perceived resources, cultural expectations, or familial obligations.

In both Croatia and Slovenia, youth from higher socio-economic backgrounds reported higher expectations of providing care for their parents in the event of illness. This trend was more pronounced in Croatia, indicating a slightly stronger link between socio-economic status and anticipated caregiving.

9.4 Conclusions and recommendations

The most consistent and frequent sources of support across the two observed time periods in both Croatia and Slovenia were parents, friends, and partners. Institutional and organisational support, particularly from public and religious institutions, remains low. Croatian youth generally reported higher support frequencies than Slovenian youth, especially from personal networks. Post-pandemic data indicate slight shifts but overall continuity in support patterns. This suggests that while the pandemic may have stressed existing systems, it did not substantially alter the hierarchy of support sources for youth in these countries.

The comparative analysis of Croatia and Slovenia revealed statistically significant socio-economic disparities in young people's perceived support networks. In Croatia, lower SES youth consistently reported higher levels of support across parental, peer, and institutional domains, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the preceding month, which suggests a stronger reliance on and responsiveness of support systems among disadvantaged groups. In Slovenia, higher SES youth more frequently received support, particularly from formal and institutional sources such as youth associations, healthcare, and professional services. These differing patterns point out the complex interplay between socioeconomic background and perceived support, highlighting differences in national contexts in the distribution and accessibility of care, with important implications for social equity and crisis response mechanisms.

In the concluding remarks, we can say that the data indicate cross-national variation in expected parental help and help envisaged to be provided to the parents. Due to the prevalence of familial or collectivist cultural norms, more youth expect

considerable support from their parents. This is especially pronounced in types of support related to emotional and financial assistance. Moreover, the type of expected support differs. Emotional and practical support tend to be more frequently anticipated than financial aid, especially in contexts where young people are expected to attain early economic independence. These patterns reflect both cultural norms and structural conditions, such as economic stability, housing policies, and intergenerational household arrangements.

In both Croatia and Slovenia, young people exhibit a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility, particularly in relation to caregiving for parents, with the most widely anticipated support being care in the event of illness. This reflects internalised cultural norms of care within family structures. Substantial support with daily activities is also anticipated in both countries, indicating a preparedness among youth to engage in practical caregiving roles. However, financial support is the domain with the highest level of anticipated non-involvement in both countries, with 5.0% of Croatian and 5.9% of Slovenian respondents stating they are unlikely to offer such help. These findings suggest that while emotional and physical caregiving are prioritised, financial contributions may be constrained by economic insecurity or perceived as secondary within prevailing family support expectations. In this regard, it is necessary to design and implement meaningful recommendations that strengthen the family support system, particularly for vulnerable families and young individuals. These recommendations should primarily encompass the reform of the public institutional support system, including the social welfare system, as well as institutions in the fields of health, education, and youth social inclusion. We have formulated the overarching recommendations as follows:

- Public institutions should prioritise comprehensive reform of social welfare services to ensure accessibility and responsiveness to the diverse needs of young people, particularly those from vulnerable and lower socio-economic backgrounds. This includes integrating health, education, and social care services to provide holistic support that complements familial and peer networks, thereby reducing over-reliance on informal support. For example, building an integrated “first door” for youth-oriented services, where a single online and walk-in gateway would enable young people to apply once for social assistance, mental-health counselling, study bursaries or housing subsidies.

- Given the observed socio-economic disparities, where lower SES youth in Croatia rely more heavily on support systems and higher SES youth in Slovenia access more formal services, policy frameworks must address barriers to institutional support. This includes targeted funding, outreach, and culturally sensitive approaches to ensure equitable distribution of resources across different socio-economic groups.
- Recognising the central role of parents, friends, and partners as primary support sources, interventions should aim to strengthen family capacities, particularly for vulnerable families. Public institutions and CSOs should develop programmes that provide emotional, practical, and financial guidance to families, enhancing their ability to support young people effectively within prevailing cultural norms.
- Local authorities should foster partnerships with youth CSOs to expand outreach and engagement, especially targeting disadvantaged groups who may lack access to formal support. CSOs can play a critical role in bridging gaps by offering tailored programmes that promote social inclusion, mental health support, and empowerment, thus reinforcing institutional efforts at the community level.
- Given the reluctance or inability of many young people to provide financial assistance to parents, economic policies and social programmes should aim to reduce youth economic insecurity. Combined with suggestion number 3, a programme for reduction of economic precarity should be developed to unblock intergenerational solidarity.

At the end of the recommendations, we should refer to a quote from one of the focus group participants who said:

“I believe there should be significantly greater involvement of young people in politics, as this represents a major issue in Croatia. Currently, educational policy is shaped by individuals who completed their education over 45 years ago, leading to a disconnect between contemporary realities and their perceptions of relevance. This disparity results in substantial investment in projects that ultimately fail to take root. For example, the "School for Life" reform is widely regarded by both teachers and others as the most expensive educational project to date, yet it has yielded no meaningful results. One of the core problems is the lack of genuine integration of young people into key decision-making bodies. While such bodies nominally exist, they tend to be marginalised, tasked with minor or symbolic issues rather than contributing to the development and adoption of policies that meaningfully impact the lives of young

people. This disconnect poses a serious and persistent problem, particularly in the Croatian context.”

(Male, secondary school student, Croatia).

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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.

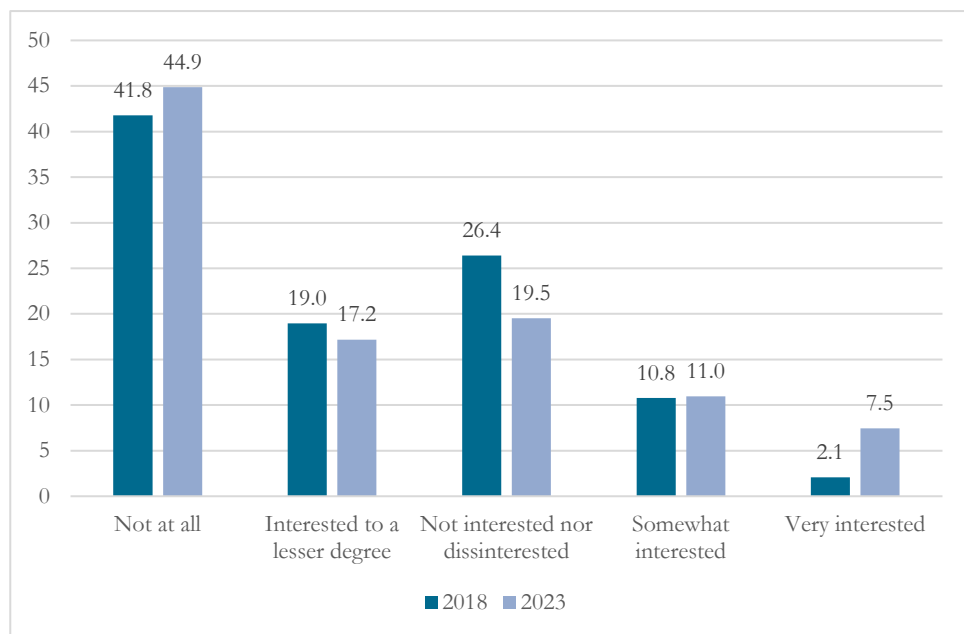


Figure 10.1: Interest of Croatian youth in political eve, 2018 and 2023 (%)

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:

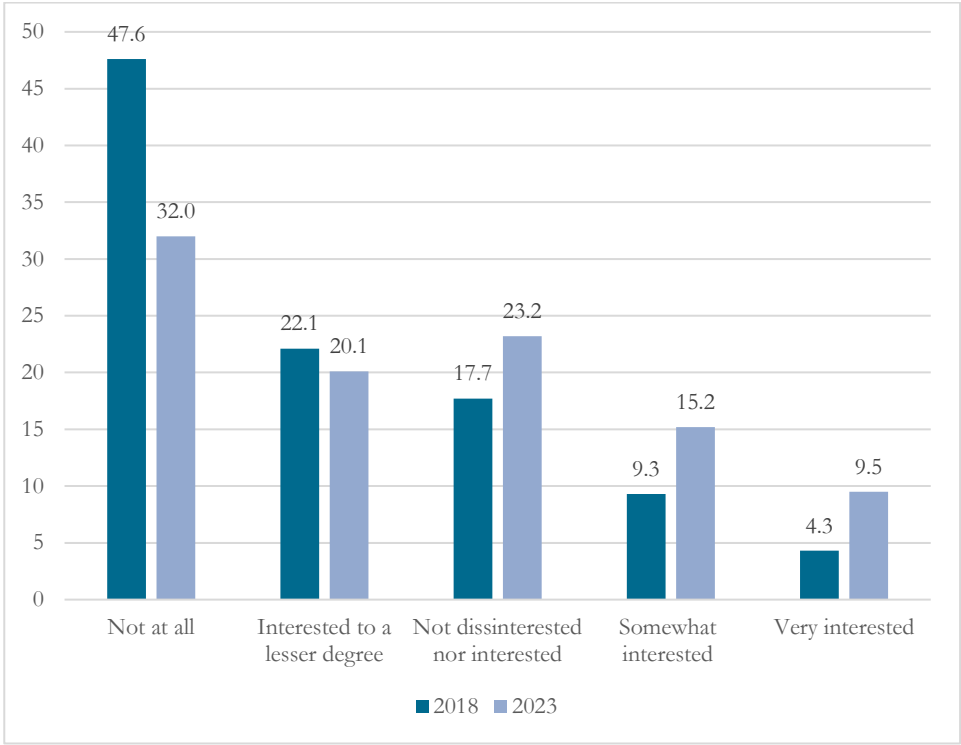


Figure 10.2: Interest in political situation in Slovenia, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

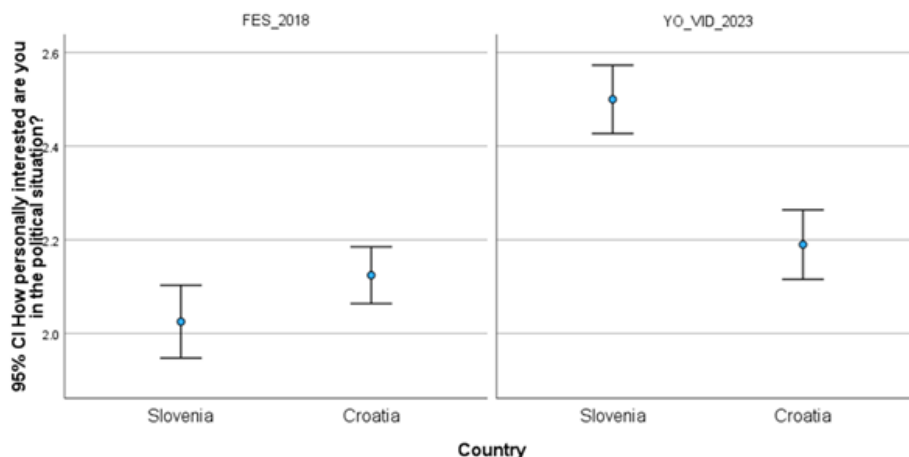


Figure 10.3: Interest in political situation in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

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.

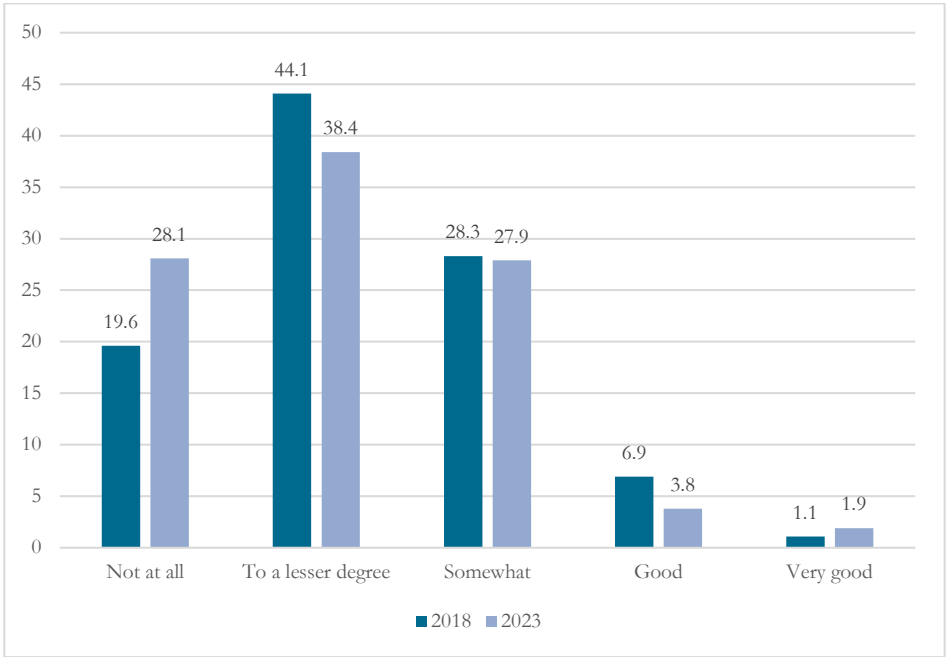


Figure 10.4: Representation of youth in politics in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

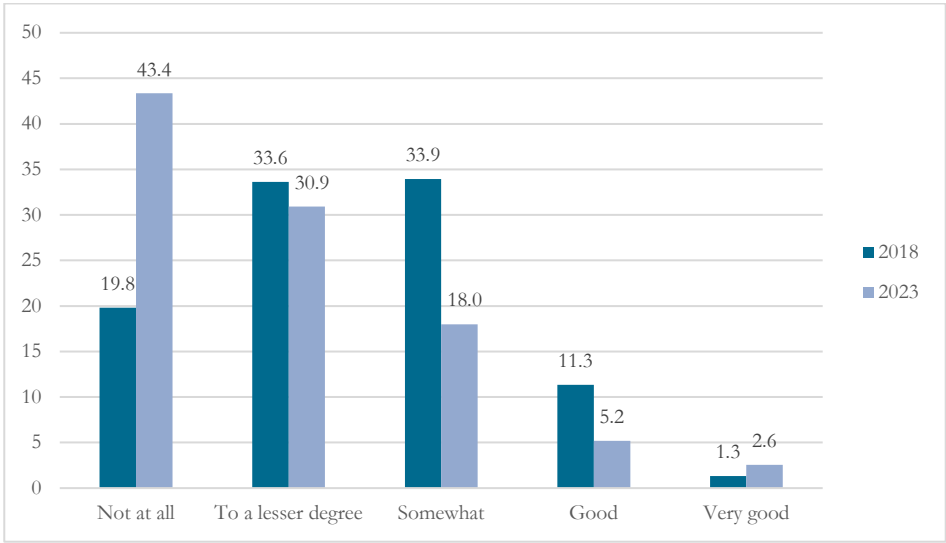


Figure 10.5: Representation of youth in politics in Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019, YO-VID22, 2023

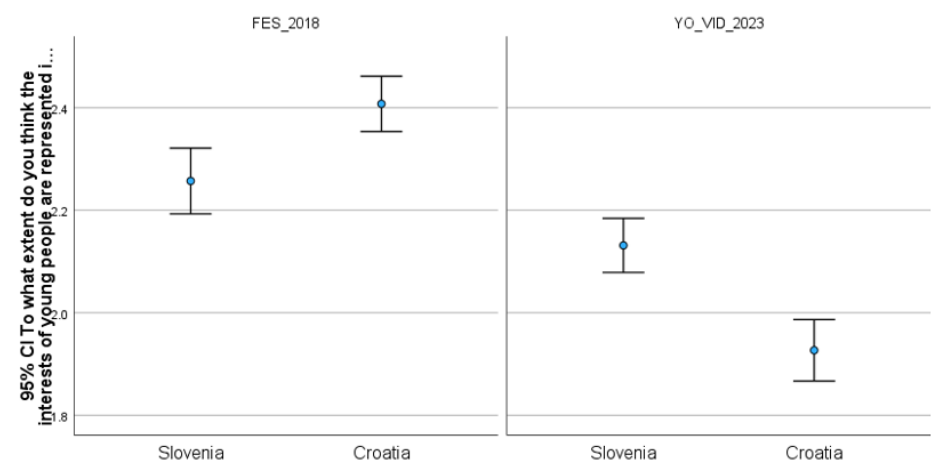


Figure 10.6: Representation of youth in politics in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

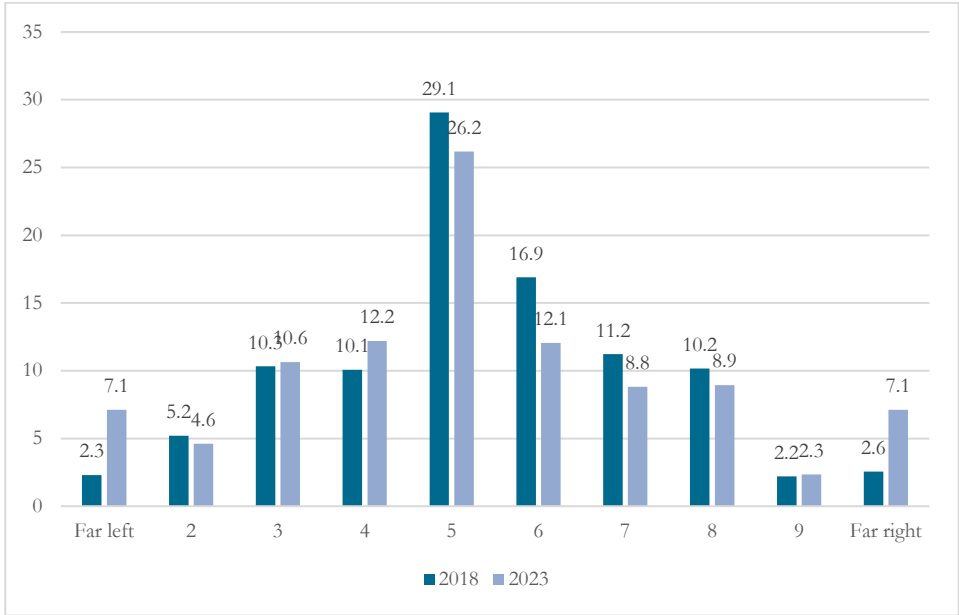


Figure 10.7: Ideological self-positioning of Croatian youth 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

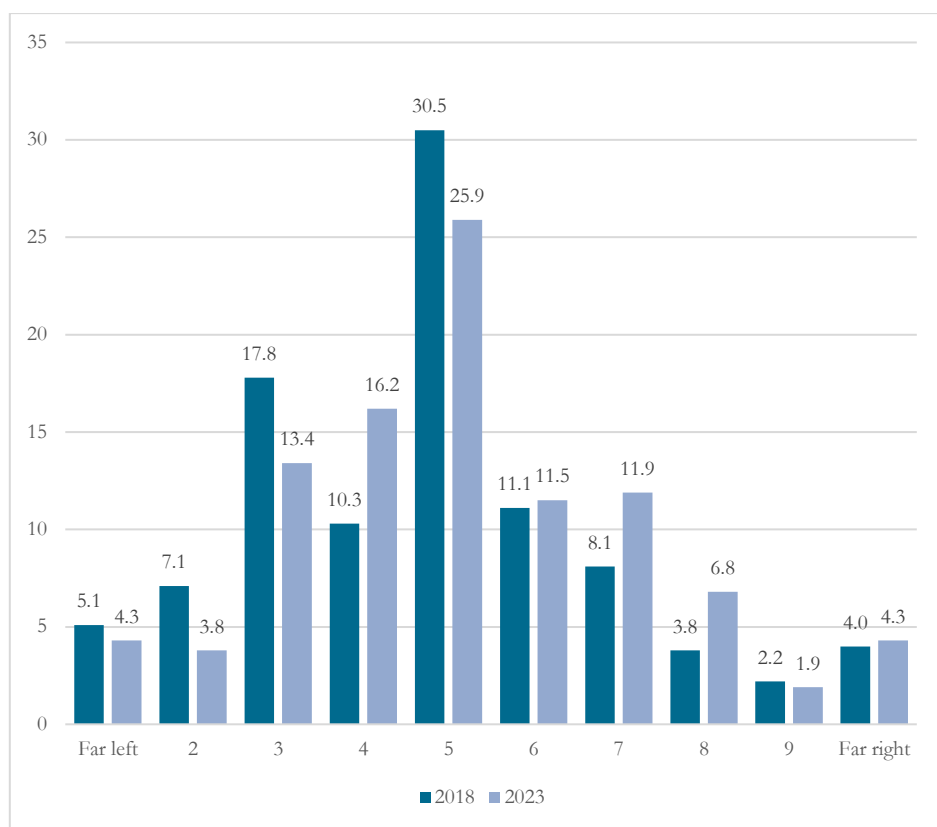


Figure 10.8: Self-positioning of Slovenian youth according to their political beliefs 2018 and 2023 (%)

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.

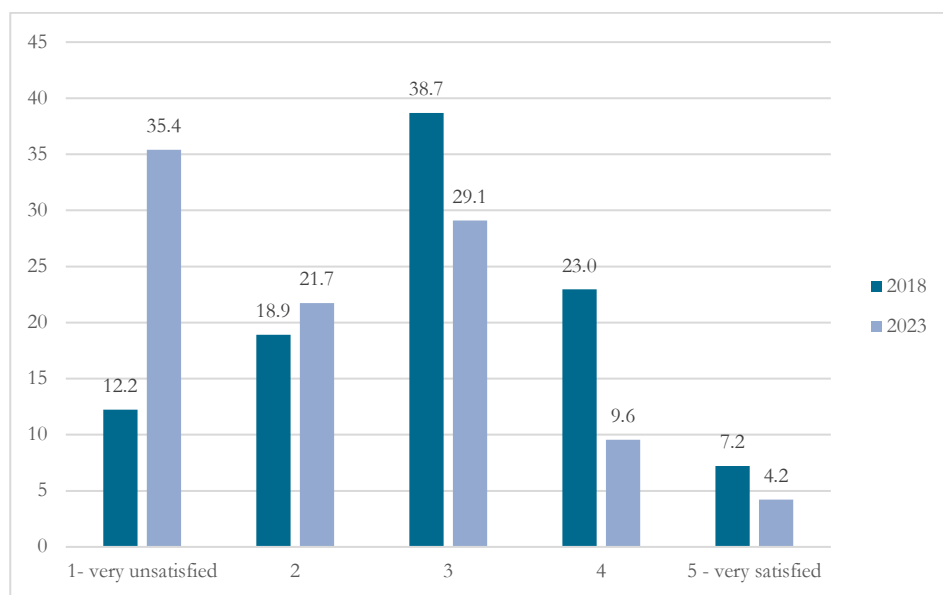


Figure 10.9: Satisfaction with the state of democracy in Croatia (%), 2018 and 2023

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.

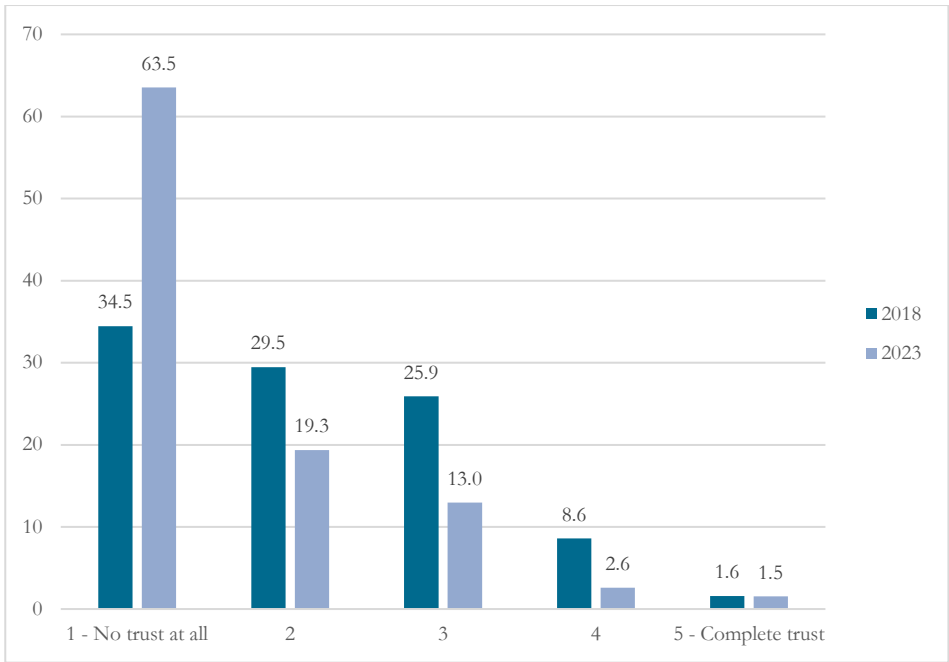


Figure 10.10: Trust in Croatian Parliament, 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

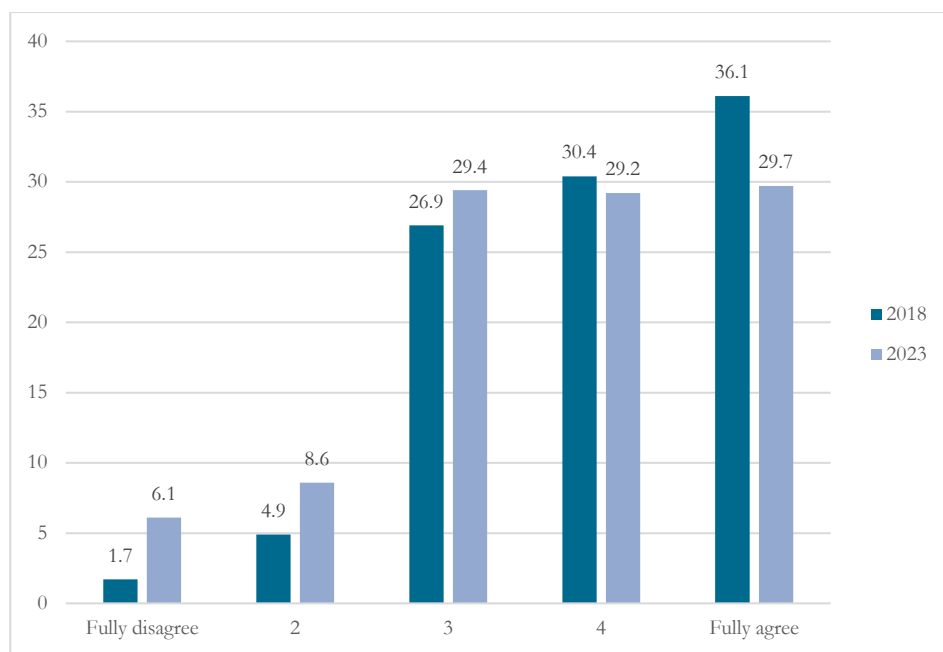


Figure 10.11: Prodemocratic attitude in Croatia 2018 and 2023 (%)

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 ($p=0.085$).

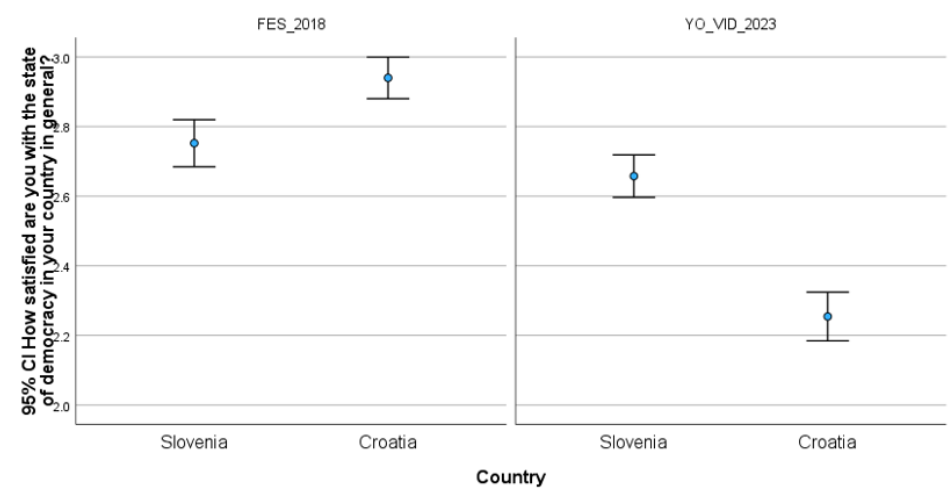


Figure 10.12: Satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

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 ($t(2005) = -10.148$; $p < .001$):

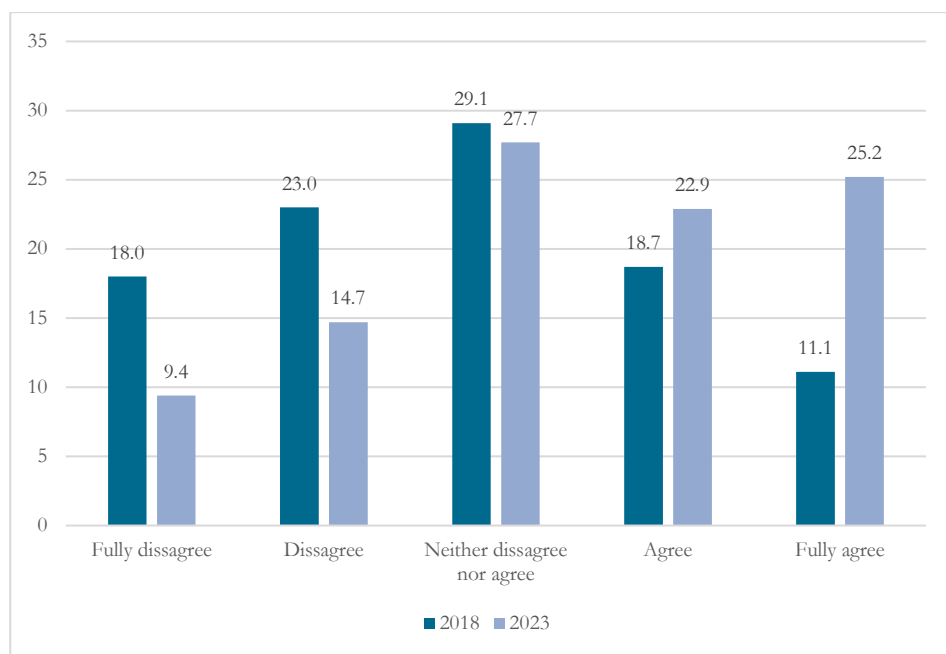


Figure 10.13. Perceptions of strong leadership in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)

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 ($t(2382) = -4.561; p < .001$):

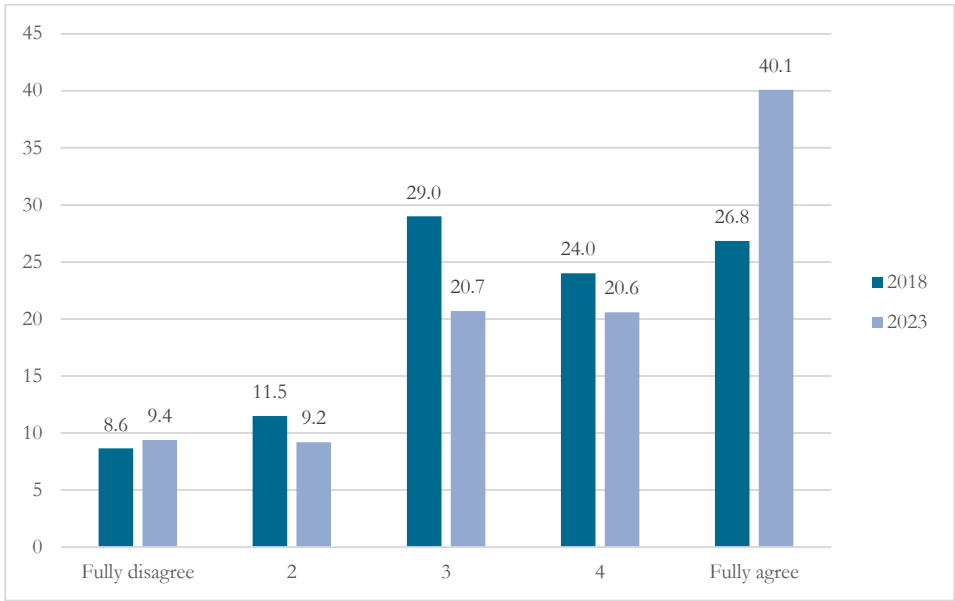


Figure 10.14: Croatian youth's support for political authoritarianism 2018 and 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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 ($t(1857.553) = 6.377$; $p < .001$):

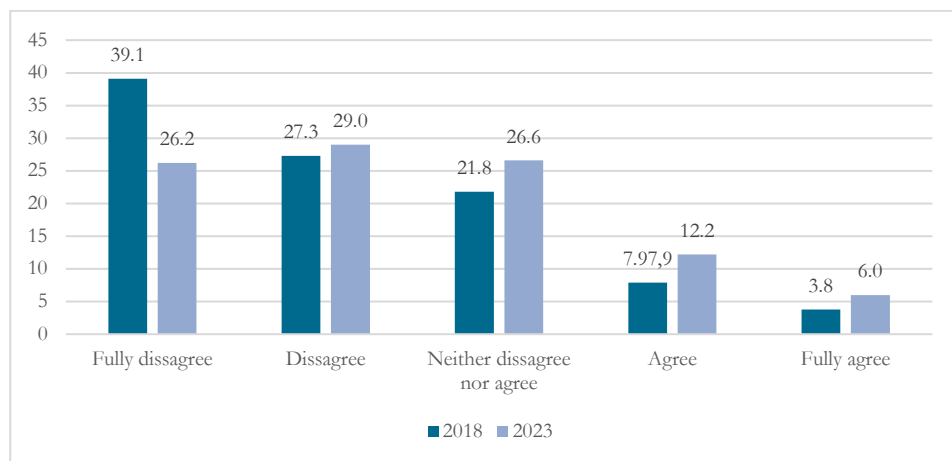


Figure 10.15: Perceptions of a strong leadership in Slovenia 2018 and 2023 (%)

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:

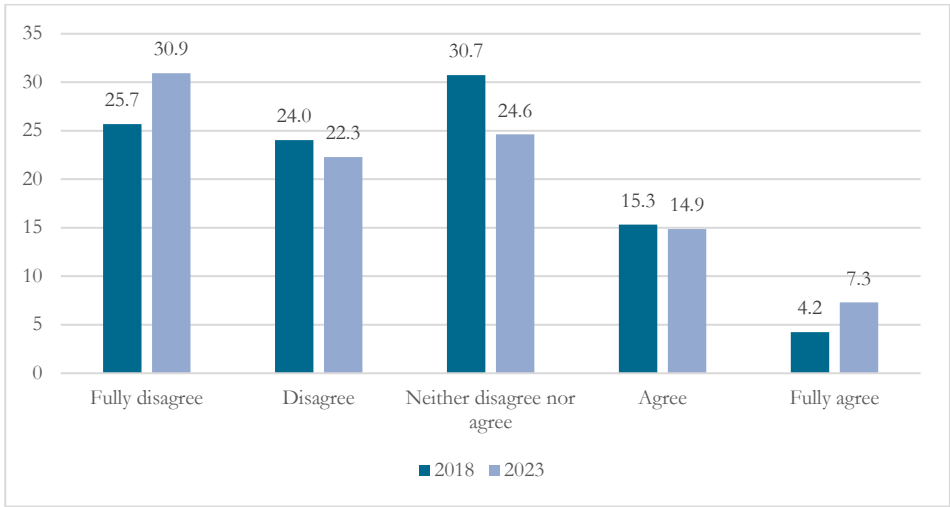


Figure 10.16: Self-assessment of political knowledge among Croatian youth, 2018 and 2023 (%)

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).

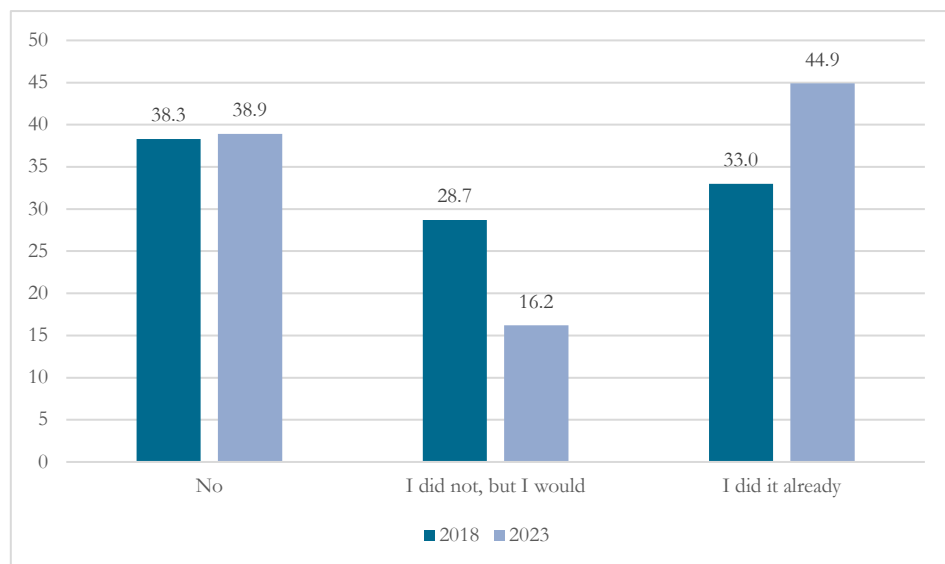


Figure 10.17: Conventional political participation – petition 2018 and 2023 (%)

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 ($t(2008) = 4.295$; $p < .001$):

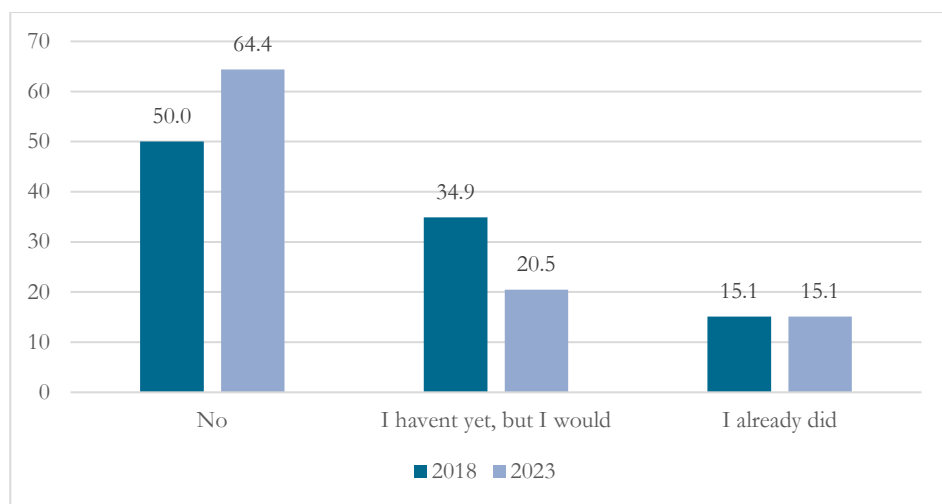


Figure 10.18. Participation in demonstrations 2018 and 2023 (%)

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 ($t(1860.110) = -2.436$; $p = .015$).

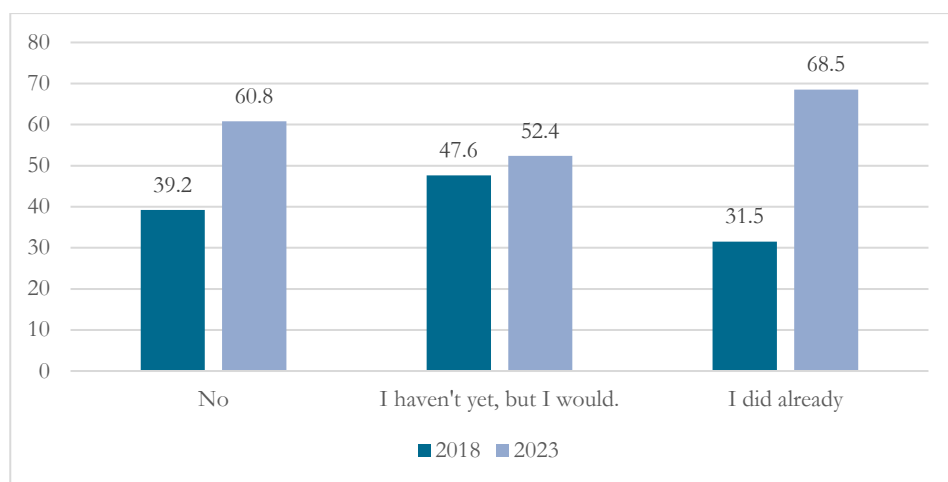


Figure 10.19: Participation in demonstrations 2018 and 2023 (%)

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 ($t(1753.780) = 10.825; p < .001$):

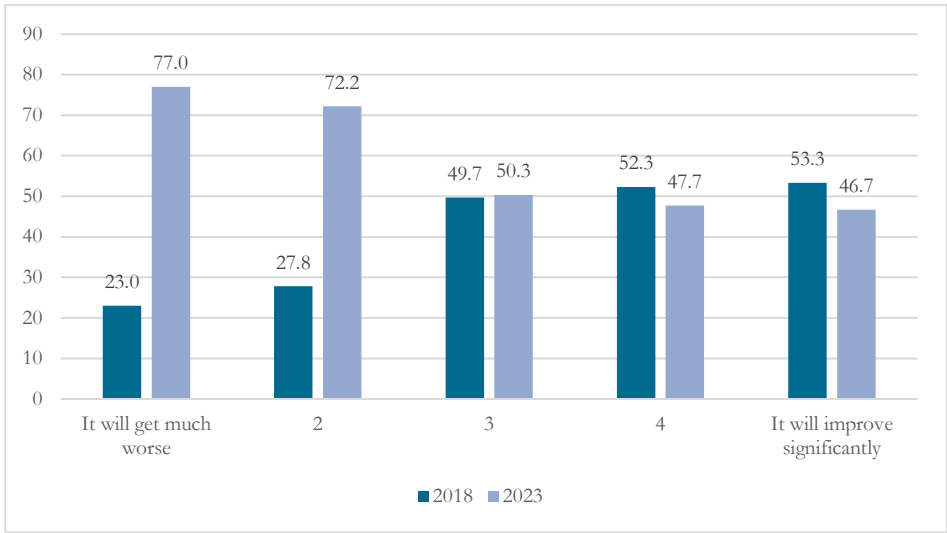


Figure 10.20: Perception of economic future, 2023 (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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.

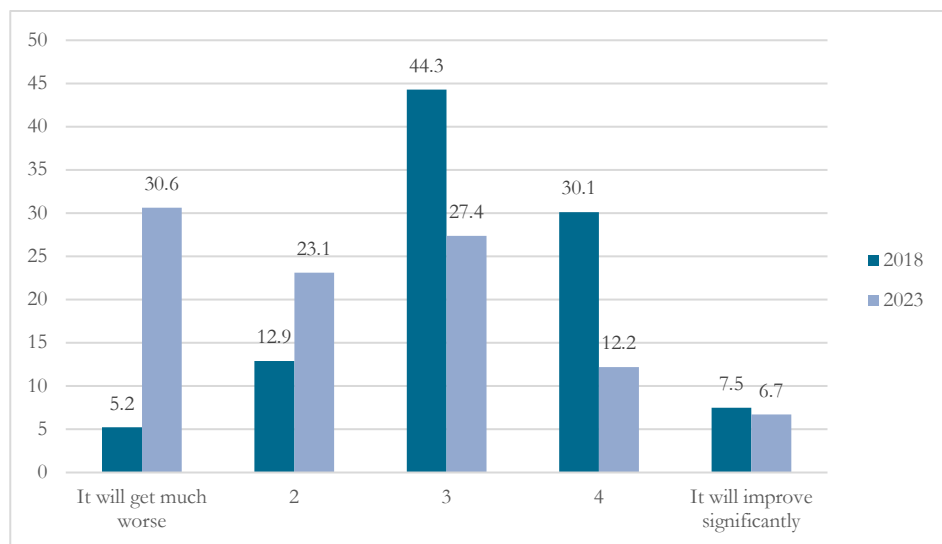


Figure 10.21: Expectations about the future economic situation in Croatia over the next 10 years 2018 and 2023 (%)

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).

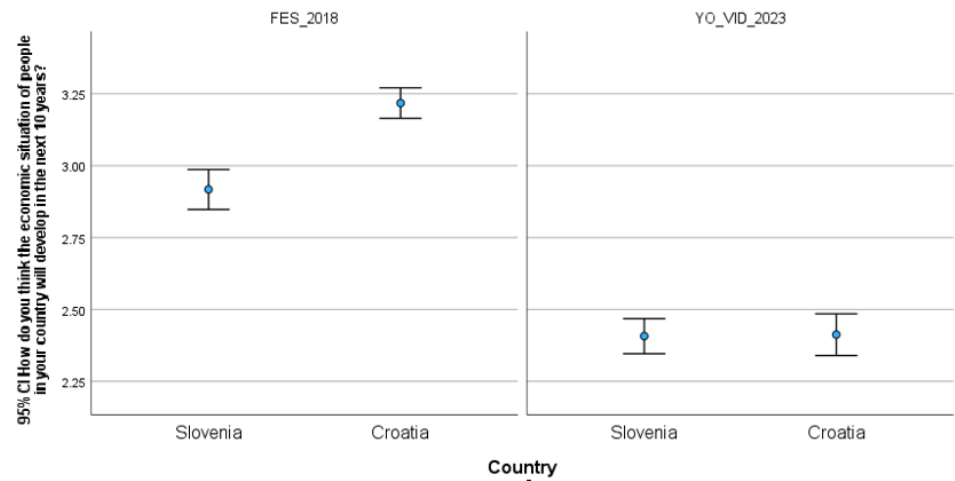


Figure 10.22: Perceptions of the future economic situation in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (mean scores)

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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11. YOUNG PEOPLE'S ONLINE ENGAGEMENT DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The chapter investigates youth digital engagement in Croatia and Slovenia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on internet use, social media, and online behaviour. Findings indicate that messaging applications are the most common activity, while content creation is limited. Slovenian youth report higher rates of intensive use, whereas Croatian respondents engage more in moderate daily use. Gender and socio-economic disparities are pronounced, particularly in Croatia, where young men dominate in gaming and creative content creation, and lower-SES youth display higher levels of emotional distress from negative online experiences. Across both countries, young people prefer in-person interaction, though young people in Croatia are more open to online socialising. In general, women report greater emotional distress from negative online experiences, with Slovenian women showing the highest levels of passive use.

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The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted young people's well-being, altering their daily routines, social interactions, and familial dynamics (Ellis et al., 2020). This period of upheaval introduced widespread stress, uncertainty, and social isolation, particularly during critical developmental transitions involving education, employment, and social integration (Xiaochen et al., 2021; Gruber et al., 2021). Although digital technologies enabled continued communication and engagement, their overuse contributed to problematic internet behaviours associated with negative psychological outcomes, including sleep disturbances, reduced physical activity, and increased screen dependency (Fernandes et al., 2020; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2021). Furthermore, the shift to online interactions has increased exposure to cyberbullying, misinformation, and maladaptive digital habits, blurring the distinction between online and offline activities and potentially intensifying feelings of isolation and stress. This change is illustrated by a quotation from a focus group conducted in Croatia:

“As for the greatest social support, everything took place via Zoom, including socialising with friends, and that was the biggest source of support for me. Friends. Regarding university, I agree with my colleague; it was only important to them that the teaching was delivered. No one asked how things were for us on the other side. Whether we had a laptop, whether we had internet access, mobile phones, or anything through which we could participate. I know that, for me, the signal and internet connection were very weak, everything kept lagging, I didn't even hear half of it, and it was the same with exams, just stress, nothing else.”

(Female, employed, Croatia).

The use of social media among young people in Croatia and Slovenia carries complex individual and social implications, as evidenced by recent scientific research (Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Gvozdanović et al., 2024; Naterer et al., 2019; Lavrič, 2024). As individuals, young people often experience a paradoxical relationship with social media: while these platforms facilitate connections and foster emotional bonds with peers, they can also contribute to feelings of alienation and loneliness. There is evidence from studies conducted in Croatia that adolescents frequently engage in risky online behaviours, such as interacting with strangers and maintaining multiple social media profiles, which may pose psychological and safety risks to them (Flander et al., 2020). Furthermore, the preference for online socialising over face-to-face interactions has been linked to a weaker sense of belonging to the local community, as young people who predominantly form and maintain relationships

online tend to feel less connected to their immediate social environment (Žanić et al., 2023). A sense of isolation may arise from this detachment from traditional social support networks and community involvement. In addition, the proliferation of virtual friendships, which often far outnumber real-life friendships, indicates a shift in how social capital is constructed and maintained, which may impact the quality and depth of social relationships. Accordingly, while social media provides significant opportunities for communication and identity exploration, it also poses challenges related to mental health, privacy, and social integration. Consequently, ongoing education for young people, parents, and professionals about safe and balanced social media use is critical to mitigate adverse effects and foster healthier digital environments in both countries.

According to Hussong et al. (2021), it is evident that the most prominently observed social change among youth during the pandemic was the marked increase in the use of virtual platforms for social engagement. Social media emerged as a central resource for maintaining and fostering social relationships, thereby assisting some adolescents in coping with heightened feelings of uncertainty, health-related anxiety, and loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021). Wray-Lake et al. (2020) observed that adolescents experiencing low levels of familial support were particularly inclined to seek social connection through these digital platforms. Furthermore, some young people were able to regulate negative emotions and regain a sense of agency by engaging in information-seeking behaviours and participating in meaningful online conversations (Ellis et al., 2020). For instance, a study conducted by Magis-Weinberg et al. (2021) found that adolescents experienced more positive interactions online during the pandemic, suggesting that such interactions may serve to mitigate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. It has also been found that the exchange of memes, humorous videos, and interactive games functions as a form of humour coping, alleviating psychological distress and enhancing overall emotional well-being (Cauberghe et al., 2021).

Moreover, based on the data literature review performed by Draženović et al. (2023), during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media use was found to have predominantly negative effects on the mental health of adolescents and students. The majority of studies reviewed reported adverse outcomes, particularly heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress associated with increased or problematic social media use. Only a small number of studies identified potentially

beneficial effects, such as providing emotional support and fostering a sense of connection for individuals experiencing social isolation due to social distancing measures. As this review is limited to the early stages of the pandemic, conclusions regarding the long-term mental health implications of social media use among these populations remain speculative.

The literature review by Marciano et al. (2022) examined qualitative and quantitative studies on the relationship between (addictive) screen media use and adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight that digital media use did not uniformly exert negative effects on adolescents' well-being. It has been found that certain forms of social media engagement, such as one-to-one or one-to-few communication through platforms such as VoIP applications, alleviate loneliness more effectively than the generalised, broadcast-style engagement on social media. It has also been found that stress relief is more likely to occur among adolescents who engage in reciprocal online disclosures within close friendships as opposed to wider, impersonal interactions. Positive online experiences, such as receiving affirmative feedback and engaging with humorous content, contributed to enhanced social connectedness and increased happiness. These findings suggest that digital media served as a valuable coping mechanism for regulating negative emotions stemming from the pandemic's uncertainties and disruptions.

While digital platforms have been instrumental in maintaining social connections, they have also introduced a number of risks, with some young people relying excessively on social media as a way to cope with their anxiety and depression (Ramsey et al., 2022). However, Twenge and Joiner (2020) suggest a distinction between adaptive and maladaptive digital use, noting that moderate, meaningful engagement can boost psychological well-being and foster social interaction. It has been shown that the nature of the impact of digital media was often mediated by familial contexts, such as supportive family environments and a high level of digital literacy, which led to healthier technology use compared to households dealing with economic or emotional hardships.

Cingel et al. (2022) elaborate on concerns from parents, educators, and policymakers regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual schooling on young people, which have been substantiated by evidence indicating declines in academic engagement, increased media consumption, and deteriorating mental health. Pre-

existing trends in adolescent anxiety and depression intensified, with academic uncertainty contributing further to psychological distress. Although social media provided some adolescents with a means of emotional regulation and social connection during physical isolation, its overuse, especially in fully virtual learning contexts, was associated with problematic internet behaviours. The study by Fruehwirth et al. (2024) finds that a one-hour increase in social media use is associated with a six-percentage point rise in the likelihood of experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety, which represents increases of approximately 25% and 30%, respectively, compared to pre-pandemic levels. The study highlights the protective role of pre-pandemic resilience and social support, noting that adverse effects were to a significant extent experienced by students who reported being socially isolated before the pandemic. Concretely, students with stronger social connections and friend support increased their social media use early in the pandemic, yet experienced fewer negative outcomes, which suggests a more adaptive use of these platforms.

In line with the digital divide paradigm, mere access to technology does not guarantee equitable digital participation (van Dijk, 2020). Young individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds frequently encountered barriers such as poor internet connectivity, limited device availability, and insufficient parental guidance, impeding their educational and social engagement (OECD, 2021). Even among those with access to technology, disparities in digital literacy influence the effectiveness of technology use. These inequalities, influenced by broader socioeconomic factors, contributed to divergent experiences of isolation, academic success, and mental health. Therefore, it is necessary to understand digital engagement within a framework that enables a recognition that the experiences of young people online are deeply shaped by their socioeconomic background. It is illustrated by the following quotation:

“Some managed better, and for some it was certainly much worse. For example, I don’t know, it’s hard for me to recall a specific situation, but I had good internet for connecting to, um, classes, and now those who didn’t have computers or the like, I think it was much, much harder for them.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia).

11.1 Online activities

Young people today spend a significant portion of their daily time on the internet, primarily for activities unrelated to education or work. This includes socialising through various platforms, streaming videos, playing games, and exploring content that interests them. The internet has become a central part of their social lives and entertainment, often serving as a primary means of connection and engagement with the world around them outside of formal responsibilities. Figure 11.1. presents the data on how much time young people in Croatia and Slovenia spend daily on the internet.

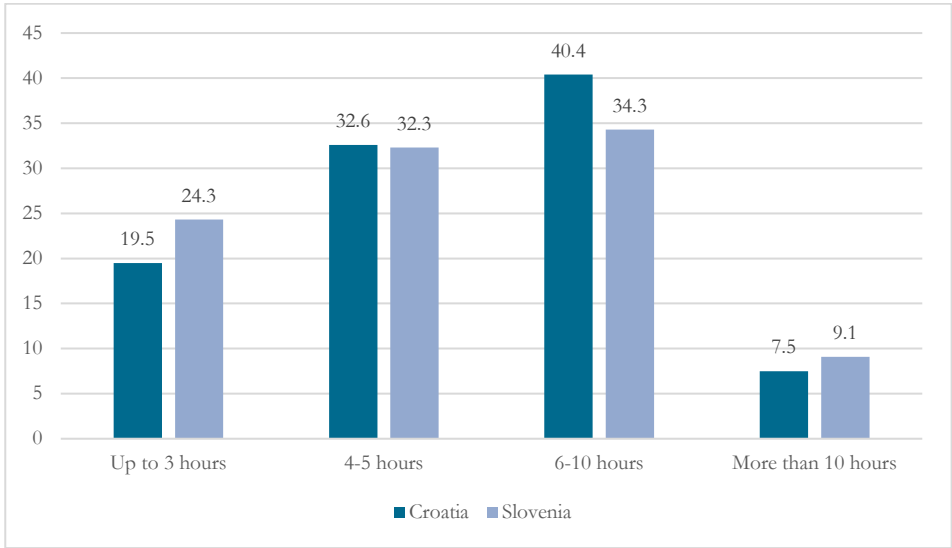


Figure 11.1: Time spent on the internet for purposes not related to school, university, or work (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

A somewhat higher proportion of young Slovenian respondents (24.3%) reported limited usage compared to their Croatian peers (19.5%). On the other hand, in the 6-10 hours bracket, Croatian respondents lead slightly, with 40.4% engaging at this level, compared to 34.3% in Slovenia. At the same time, the 4-5 hours category shows almost the same numbers for the two countries. A slightly higher proportion of Slovenian participants (9.1%) reported spending more than 10 hours per day

online compared to 7.5% in Croatia, which may reflect a small group of high-intensity users in Slovenia. Data for young people in Croatia do not indicate statistically significant age-related differences in regard to screen time, while in Slovenia screen time increases with age. The 16-19 group reports the lowest average usage (5.48 hours), which rises to 5.75 in the 20-24 group and peaks at 6.40 in the 25-29 group, with $F=8.556$; $p=001$ while the values of SD are 2.452, 3.155 and 3.175, respectively.

The internet is widely used for communication and social networking, allowing individuals to connect with friends, family, and communities around the world. Social media platforms play a central role in maintaining relationships and sharing experiences. Additionally, both individual and multiplayer gaming are popular activities, providing entertainment as well as opportunities for social interaction and collaboration. Figure 11.2. depicts certain purposes of the internet use among young people in Croatia and Slovenia.

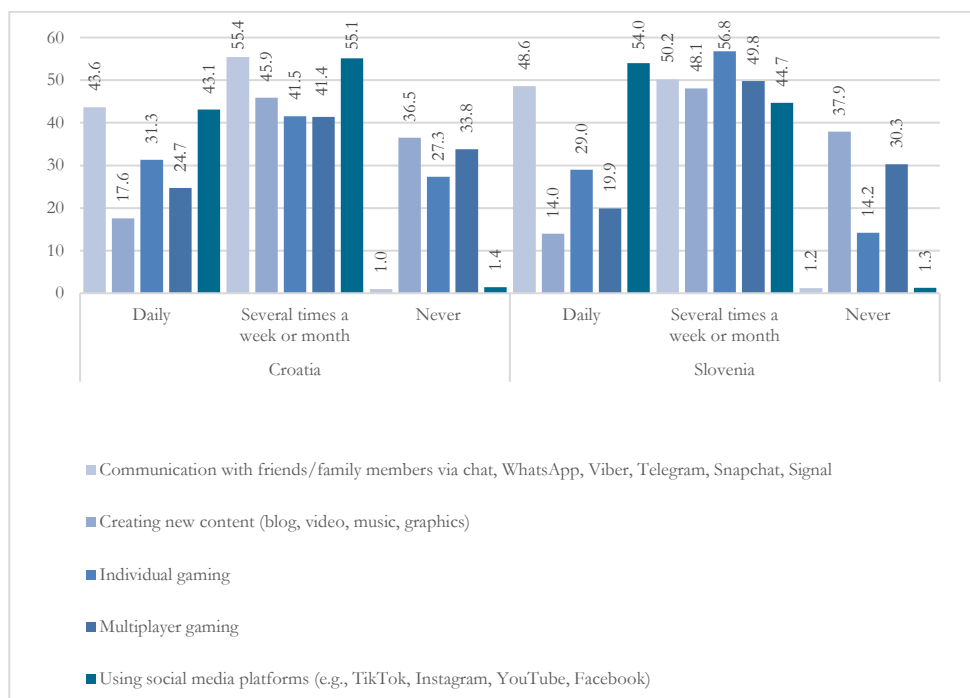


Figure 11.2: Purposes of the internet use (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Communication with friends and family via applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Snapchat is the most frequently performed activity in both countries. A slightly higher proportion of Slovenian respondents (48.6%) engage in this daily compared to Croats (43.6%), although the overall participation rate is high in both. Almost all respondents in both countries use these platforms at least occasionally, with less than 2% reporting they never do. In terms of creating new content (e.g., blogs, videos, music, or graphics), participation is significantly lower. Only 17.6% of Croatian youth report daily engagement in content creation, slightly more than 14.0% in Slovenia. More than one third of respondents in both countries report never engaging in such activities. Individual gaming is also almost at the same share in both countries. However, a significant difference emerges in the proportion of youth who never play such games: 27.3% in Croatia versus only 14.2% in Slovenia. For multiplayer gaming, Croatia also shows slightly higher daily participation (24.7%) than Slovenia (19.9%). However, somewhat more Slovenians (49.8%) than Croats (41.4%) report playing multiplayer games at least occasionally, while almost the same percentage of young people in Slovenia report never engaging in this activity (30.3%) compared to Croatia (33.8%). In Croatia, 43.1% of individuals report using social media on a daily basis. A slightly larger proportion, 55.1%, engage with these platforms several times a week or month, while a negligible 1.4% indicate that they never use social media. By contrast, in Slovenia, daily usage is slightly higher, with 54.0% of respondents accessing social media platforms every day. Meanwhile, 44.7% use social media several times a week or month, and only 1.3% never use these platforms.

Communication with friends and family via applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Snapchat is the most frequently performed digital activity among youth in both Croatia and Slovenia, with slightly higher daily engagement reported in Slovenia compared to Croatia.

The analysis revealed several significant gender differences in patterns of internet use and online experiences among adolescents in Croatia, while in Slovenia the differences are not so prominent. Young men reported significantly ($t=3.159$; $p=.002$) more frequent use of the internet for creative content creation, such as blogs, videos, music, and graphics ($M=1.88$; $SD=.716$), compared to their female peers ($M=1.75$; $SD=.701$). This trend continued with gaming activities, where men engaged in individual gaming significantly ($t=14.127$; $p=.000$) more often ($M=2.32$;

SD=.680) than women (M=1.74; SD=.737). Similarly, men reported more frequent ($t=15.567$; $p=.000$) participation in multiplayer gaming (M=2.21; SD=.702) than women (M=1.59; SD=.684). The findings for Slovenia also reveal statistically significant gender differences in digital engagement and online experiences among adolescents. Young women reported significantly less frequent use of the internet for creating new content such as blogs, videos, music, or graphics (M=1.71; SD=.675) than their male peers (M=1.80; SD=.683), with $t=2.400$; $p=.017$. This trend extended to gaming activities ($t(1273)=7.662$; $p=.000$), where women engaged in individual gaming significantly less frequently (M=2.01; SD=.653) than men (M=2.28; SD=.599). Similarly, women reported significantly ($t=12.996$; $p=.000$) lower participation in multiplayer gaming (M=1.64; SD=.656) than their male peers (M=2.12; SD=.660).

Concerning the age cohort differences, in Croatia the frequency of individual gaming exhibits a decline with increasing age. Respondents aged 16-19 report the highest mean engagement (M=2.20; SD=.739), followed by those aged 20-24 (M=2.03; SD=.759), and 25-29 (M=1.93; SD=.769). This suggests that younger individuals in Croatia tend to engage more frequently in individual gaming ($F=11.832$; $p=.000$). A comparable trend is evident in Slovenia. The 16-19 age group records the most frequent engagement (M=2.28; SD=.627), with a subsequent decline among the 20-24 (M=2.11; SD=.612) and 25-29 (M=2.09; SD=.663) groups, with statistical significance at $F=9.892$; $p=.000$.

Engagement in multiplayer gaming also declines with age in Croatia. The youngest group (16-19) reports the most frequent activities (M=2.08; SD=.716), followed by the 20-24 (M=1.87; SD=.747) and 25-29 (M=1.83; SD=.785) groups ($F=10.869$; $p=.000$). A similar pattern is observed in Slovenia. The 16-19 group noted the highest engagement (M=2.11; SD=.694), with subsequent decreases among the 20-24 (M=1.84; SD=.656) and 25-29 (M=1.80; SD=.717) age groups ($F=21.440$; $p=.000$).

In Croatia, there is no age difference concerning the frequency of communication with friends/family via messaging apps, while in Slovenia it decreases slightly with age. The youngest group are most likely to engage in frequent communication via messaging apps (M=2.54; SD=.508), followed by 20-24 (M=2.51; SD=.522) and 25-29 (M=2.45; SD=.535), with $F=4.963$; $p=.007$.

Concerning the socio-economic status, there are no statistically significant differences in the frequency of individual and multiplayer gaming in Croatia, while it varies significantly in Slovenia ($F=7.004$; $p=.001$); participants from low SES backgrounds reported the most frequent engagement in individual gaming ($M=2.24$; $SD=.652$), followed by those from high SES ($M=2.17$; $SD=.6636$), and middle SES ($M=2.09$; $SD=.629$). Similarly, multiplayer gaming frequency also differed significantly across SES groups ($F=4.309$; $p=.014$). Individuals with low SES reported the most frequent usage ($M=1.97$; $SD=.729$), followed by those from high SES ($M=1.94$; $SD=.657$) and middle SES ($M=1.84$; $SD=.695$).

In Croatia, the frequency of communication with friends or family through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram varies significantly ($F=12.846$; $p=.000$) in regard to socio-economic status, while such differences were not noted in Slovenia. Participants from low SES backgrounds in Croatia reported the lowest frequency ($M=2.37$; $SD=.521$), followed by those from middle ($M=2.45$; $SD=.510$) and high SES group ($M=2.48$; $SD=.506$).

Engagement in content creation also differed significantly across SES groups in Croatia, while the differences for Slovenia were not noted. Young people from low SES backgrounds in Croatia reported the highest frequency of creating new content ($M=1.88$; $SD=.716$), compared to those from middle SES ($M=1.77$; $SD=.686$) and high SES backgrounds ($M=1.79$; $SD=.755$), with $F=3.035$; $p=.048$, which suggests that lower SES participants are more actively involved in generating new media content.

The use of social media platforms exhibited a statistically significant variation across SES groups only in Croatia. Respondents from low SES backgrounds had a mean usage of 2.36, those from middle SES reported a slightly higher mean of 2.47, and high SES participants followed closely with a mean of 2.44 ($F=12.074$; $p=.000$).

In Croatia, engagement in content creation varies significantly across socio-economic status (SES) groups, with young people from low SES backgrounds reporting the highest frequency of generating new media content. Additionally, social media usage also differs significantly by SES in Croatia, where middle SES respondents exhibit the most frequent usage, followed closely by high and low SES groups.

11.2 Self-expression in an online world

Young people often have varied preferences when it comes to spending time with friends, with some enjoying face-to-face interactions more, while others feel more comfortable connecting online. In-person meetings offer direct social experiences and a sense of closeness, whereas online interactions provide convenience and the ability to stay connected across distances. Many young people appreciate a balance of both, using online platforms to complement their real-life friendships. The state of young people in Croatia and Slovenia is shown by Figure 11.3.

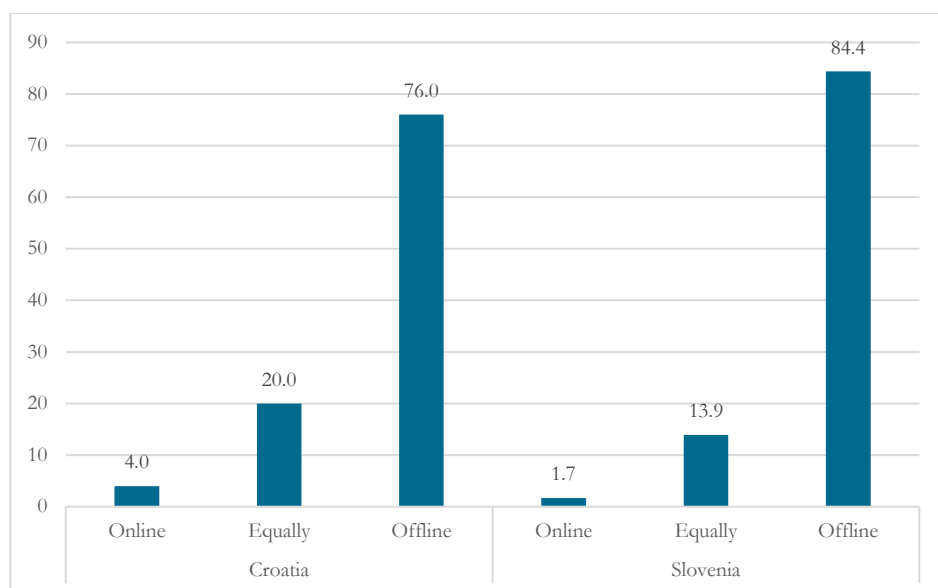


Figure 11.3: Young people who enjoy spending time with friends more in person or online (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

A significant majority of young people in both countries prefer offline (in-person) interactions, although the percentages are higher in Slovenia (84.4%) compared to Croatia (76.0%). Contrarily, Croatian respondents are slightly more likely to favour online interactions, with 4.0% indicating a preference for spending time with friends online, compared to only 1.7% in Slovenia. At the same time, a higher proportion of Croatian youth reports enjoying both equally, in comparison to their Slovenian peers.

In terms of social preferences in regard to sociodemographic characteristics, young men in Croatia showed a somewhat stronger inclination ($t=3.934$) towards in-person socialising ($M=1.34$; $SD=.565$) in comparison to women ($M=1.22$; $SD=.486$); $p=.000$. Men also reported greater ease in expressing themselves online as opposed to face-to-face ($M=1.83$; $SD=.795$), than young women ($M=1.71$; $SD=.757$), with $t=2.693$; $p=.007$. In terms of social preferences, young women in Slovenia expressed a slightly higher ($t=4.237$; $p=.000$) inclination towards in-person interaction ($M=1.12$; $SD=.373$) compared to men ($M=1.22$; $SD=.456$).

We did not establish statistically significant differences of socialising preferences among young people in Croatia in regard to their age. However, in Slovenia the mean values decrease slightly with age; 16-19 ($M=1.20$; $SD=.469$), 20-24 ($M=1.20$; $SD=.451$), and 25-29 ($M=1.13$; $SD=.352$), indicating as small but statistically significant ($F=3.344$, $p=.036$).

SES showed to be related to the statistically significant differences. In Croatia, the enjoyment of in-person versus online social interaction ($F=3.437$; $p=.032$) varies in a way that respondents from low SES backgrounds reported the highest average score ($M=1.33$; $SD=.584$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.26$; $SD=.516$) and high SES ($M=1.23$; $SD=.458$). At the same time, preference for socialising with friends in person or online in Slovenia varies in a way that the highest frequency of online interactions can be associated with the low SES youth ($M=1.24$; $SD=.486$), then middle SES ($M=1.15$; $SD=.403$), and high SES young people ($M=1.11$; $SD=.333$), with statistically significant differences at $F=8.357$; $p=.000$.

Young people engage with the internet in different ways, with some actively posting, commenting, and interacting, while others use it more passively by simply viewing content. Many feel that their presence and influence online can be significant, yet experiences vary widely. While the internet offers connection and support, it can also expose young people to unpleasant experiences such as cyberbullying, social exclusion, and pressure to conform, which can cause distress and negatively affect their mental well-being. Some variations among young people in Croatia and Slovenia are presented in Figure 11.4.

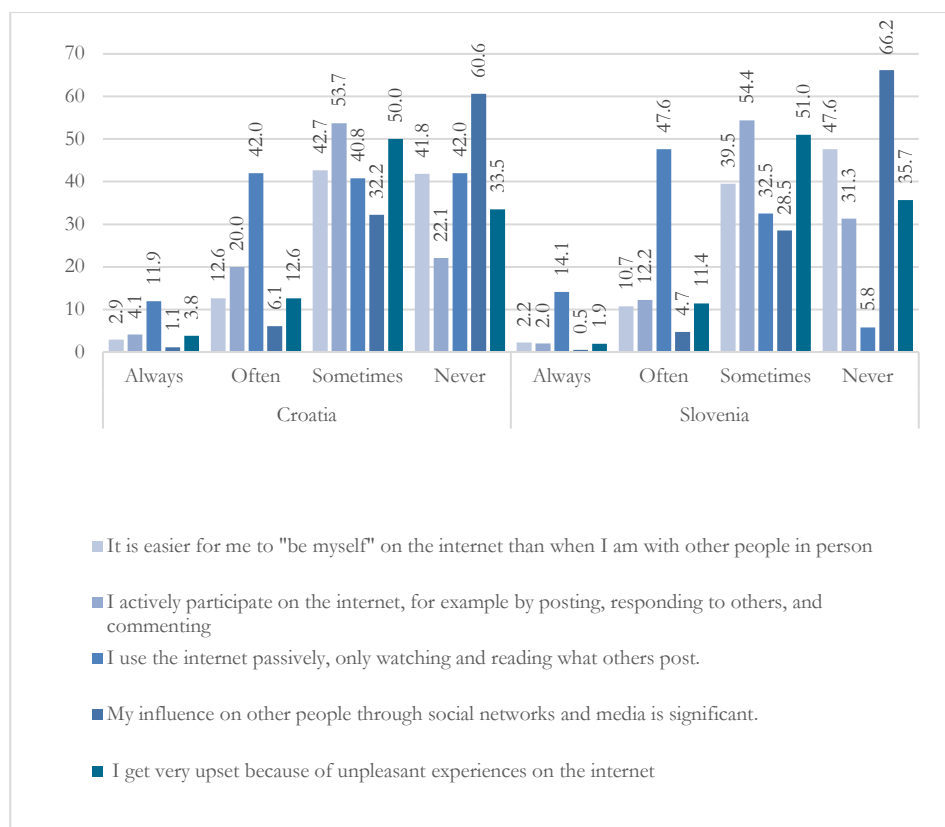


Figure 11.4: Some aspects of the internet use among young people in Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Regarding the feeling of being authentic, Croatian youth are slightly more inclined to report that they can "be themselves" online in comparison to the youth in Slovenia. At the same time, higher proportion of Slovenian respondents (47.6%) report never feeling this way, compared to 41.8% in Croatia. In terms of active participation, Croatian respondents report higher levels overall, with 24.1% stating they actively post or engage (always or often), versus 14.2% of youth in Slovenia. Furthermore, Slovenian youth are more likely to say they never participate actively (31.3%) than their Croatian peers (22.1%), indicating a more reserved or observational approach to online engagement. Passive internet use is more common in Slovenia, where 61.7% of youth report doing so often or always, compared to 53.9% in Croatia. However, among those who never engage passively, 42.0% of

Croatian youth report never doing so, compared to only 5.8% in Slovenia, which suggests more mixed habits in Croatia and a stronger trend toward passive consumption in Slovenia. When asked about their influence on others through social media, the majority in both countries do not perceive themselves as influential. Finally, in response to negative experiences on the internet, roughly similar proportions of youth in both countries report sometimes feeling very upset.

With regard to online behaviours, young women in Croatia reported somewhat higher ($t=-4.205$) levels of passive internet use with ($t=-1.990$; $p=.047$), including reading or viewing others' content ($M=2.64$; $SD=.768$), than men ($M=2.57$; $SD=.760$). In Slovenia, young women also reported higher levels of passive internet use, such as viewing and reading others' posts without engaging ($M=2.80$; $SD=.763$), compared to men ($M=2.61$; $SD=.784$); $p=.000$. Additionally, women perceived their social media influence to be significantly lower ($M=1.35$; $SD=.596$) than that of men ($M=1.43$; $SD=.607$), with $t=2.276$; $p=.023$.

In terms of perceived online impact ($t=2.793$; $p=.005$), young men in Croatia considered their influence on social media to be more significant ($M=1.54$; $SD=.697$) compared to that of women ($M=1.42$; $SD=.619$). Regarding emotional responses, young women reported higher levels ($t=-5.370$) of distress from negative online experiences ($M=2.00$; $SD=.758$) than their male peers ($M=1.74$; $SD=.767$); $p=.000$. Likewise, in relation to emotional well-being, young women in Slovenia reported significantly higher levels ($t=-5.455$; $p=.000$) of distress resulting from unpleasant online experiences ($M=1.91$; $SD=.719$) when compared to men ($M=1.69$; $SD=.692$). These findings suggest there are significant gender differences in digital behaviour that can be linked to the differing emotional impacts associated with online engagement.

In Croatia, statistically significant differences ($F=6.290$; $p=.002$) emerged in self-perception across socio-economic status groups; respondents from low SES backgrounds were more likely to agree that it is easier to "be oneself" online ($M=1.87$; $SD=.807$), compared to those from middle SES ($M=1.73$; $SD=.771$) and high SES backgrounds ($M=1.67$; $SD=.728$). Similar results were noted for youth in Slovenia ($F=3.423$; $p=.033$), where respondents from low SES backgrounds are more likely to feel well in the online settings ($M=1.75$; $SD=.794$), followed by those from middle SES ($M=1.66$; $SD=.739$) and high SES ($M=1.59$; $SD=.716$).

A component that indicates lowered subjective well-being, emotional distress due to negative online experiences, varies significantly regarding the SES in both countries. Participants from the low SES group in Croatia reported the highest levels of emotional distress ($M=2.01$; $SD=.810$), followed by those from the middle SES group ($M=1.82$; $SD=.754$), and the high SES group ($M=1.72$; $SD=.710$), with differences significant at $F=12.857$; $p=.000$. Similarly, respondents from the low SES group in Slovenia were more likely to experience emotional distress in the online settings ($M=1.88$; $SD=.778$), followed by those from the middle SES group ($M=1.78$; $SD=.681$), and the high SES group ($M=1.70$; $SD=.670$), with $F=4.949$; $p=.007$). These data indicate a higher vulnerability to negative online experiences among individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which calls for tailored-made policy measures aimed at supporting young people in their navigation in an online reality.

The component that suggests active or passive usage of the internet among young people showed statistically significant differences in regard to SES only among young Slovenians. Active participation online, such as posting, replying, or commenting, indicates that young people from the low SES group reported the highest level of active engagement ($M=1.93$; $SD=.750$), followed by those from high SES ($M=1.83$; $SD=.685$), and middle SES ($M=1.81$; $SD=.677$). This difference was statistically significant ($F=3.879$; $p=.021$), suggesting a modest influence of SES on active online behaviours. Passive internet use, defined as primarily viewing and reading others' posts without direct interaction, also varied across SES groups. Individuals from the middle SES group in Slovenia reported the highest levels of passive use ($M=2.77$; $SD=.742$), followed by those from low SES ($M=2.64$; $SD=.807$), and high SES ($M=2.59$; $SD=.826$), with statistical significance at $F=5.590$; $p=.004$, which indicates slightly higher passive consumption among middle SES respondents. Perceived influence on others through social media platforms also demonstrated statistically significant differences in regard to SES ($F=6.711$; $p=.001$). Respondents from low SES backgrounds noted the highest perceived influence ($M=1.49$; $SD=.674$), compared to high SES ($M=1.39$; $SD=.586$), and middle SES ($M=1.35$; $SD=.562$).

Croatian youth are more likely than Slovenian youth to feel comfortable being themselves online and to engage actively on social media, while Slovenian youth tend to be more reserved and passive in their online behaviours. Gender differences reveal that young women generally exhibit higher passive internet use and experience higher emotional distress from negative online encounters than young men in both countries.

11.3 The issue of cyberbullying, problematic use of the internet and social media and the impact of COVID-19

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed youth social interaction, creating new spaces for communication and relationship development. While digital technologies offer numerous benefits, they have also given rise to cyberbullying, intentional and repeated harm inflicted through electronic means (Tokunaga, 2010). This phenomenon has emerged as a significant concern affecting adolescent well-being globally, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic that has dramatically altered the social landscape, particularly affecting youth and young adults' daily lives, including digital media use patterns among young people.

As indicated by various research, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced youth's internet and social media usage, with research indicating that young individuals generally increased their utilisation of social media platforms and streaming services during periods of lockdown (Fernandes et al., 2020; Tuck & Thompson, 2021). This increased utilisation had both positive and negative effects on subjective well-being. While digital platforms provided crucial means for maintaining social connections during physical isolation (Cauberghe et al., 2021), increased reliance on the internet and social media has also raised concerns about problematic use patterns. For instance, individuals who scored high on gaming addiction, compulsive internet use, and social media use reported higher levels of depression, loneliness, escapism, poor sleep quality, pandemic-related anxiety (Fernandes et al., 2020), lower self-esteem, and increased incidence of eating disorders (Ramsey et al., 2023).

The increased use of the internet and social media also exposed youth to potential risks, such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and comparison with unrealistic online portrayals. Namely, research indicates that higher internet and digital technology

usage increases adolescents' likelihood of experiencing online victimisation, particularly cyberbullying (Choi et al., 2019). As Bailin and colleagues (2014) explained, the rise of the internet and social media has made it easier for students to bully their peers, with adolescents representing the majority of cyberbullying victims (Meter & Bauman, 2015). Lastly, during the pandemic, the boundaries between adaptive and maladaptive social media use became increasingly blurred, as digital platforms served both as essential communication tools and potential sources of psychological distress (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Twenge et al., 2018).

Researchers have conceptualised cyberbullying as an extension of traditional bullying that occurs through digital platforms. Smith et al. (2008) define cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (p. 376). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is characterised by several unique features: potential anonymity of perpetrators, ability to reach a wide audience, permanence of digital content, reduced supervision in digital spaces, and difficulty escaping the harassment (Kowalski et al., 2014). These characteristics may intensify the impact of cyberbullying compared to traditional forms of bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including sending offensive, rude, or insulting messages, posting derogatory information about someone online, pretending to be someone else online to damage their reputation, sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information, deliberately excluding someone from online groups, repeated harassment and threats causing fear for safety, sharing embarrassing or manipulated images/videos (Willard, 2007). Social media platforms represent the most common venues for cyberbullying incidents, followed by messaging applications, online gaming environments, and email services (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Recent research has identified emerging platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Discord as significant spaces where cyberbullying occurs (Anderson, 2018; Vogels, 2021).

Figure 11.5. presents the incidence of different negative experiences related to internet use in the past month among youth in Slovenia and Croatia.

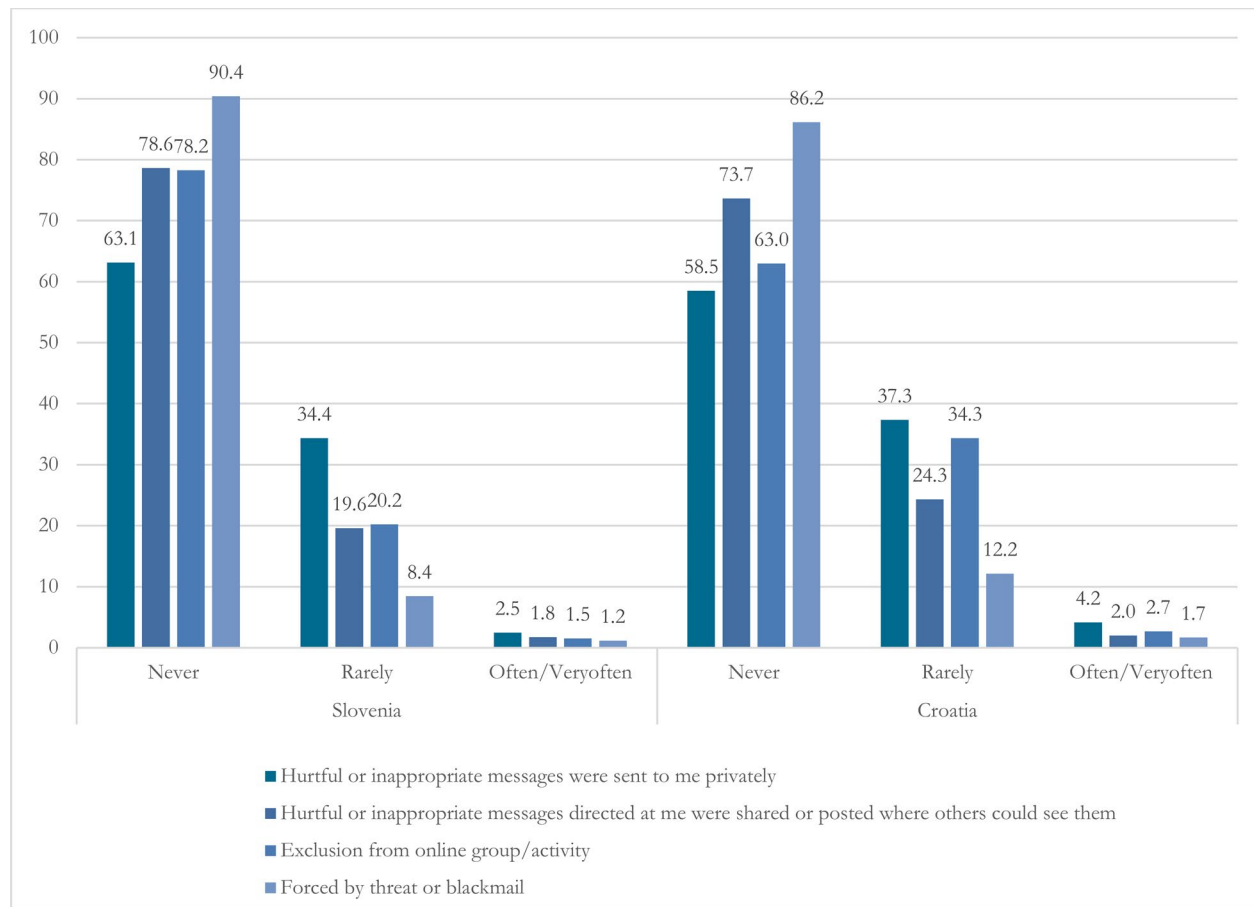


Figure 11.5: Prevalence of various forms of cyberbullying among youth in Slovenia and Croatia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

As can be seen from Figure 11.1, the prevalence of cyberbullying is highly dependent on the specific form of the cyberbullying act. The most frequent form experienced by youth, both in Slovenia and Croatia, was “Hurtful or inappropriate messages were sent to me privately”, but all experiences were significantly more common among young Croats ($p < 0.01$; see Table 11.1.).

Table 11.1: Mean differences for being exposed to cyberbullying, Croatia vs. Slovenia

Item	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval
Private harmful or inappropriate messages	2.826	2462.178	.005	.063	.022	.019 - .107
Public harmful or inappropriate messages	2.745	2463.051	.006	.052	.019	.015 - .090
Excluded from online group/activity	8.169	2383.308	.000	.164	.020	.125 - .204
Forced to do something due to threats or blackmail	3.127	2440.824	.002	.047	.015	.018 - .077

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Further analysis revealed that experiencing cyberbullying acts was significantly associated with screen time (Croatia: $0.07 < r < 0.11$; $p < 0.05$; Slovenia: $0.07 < r < 0.11$; 0.05), thus corroborating results from other studies who had found that greater internet use is associated with increased cyberbullying risk (e.g., Gámez-Guadix et al., 2016).

Furthermore, results indicated that being exposed to cyberbullying was not consistently associated with either age or gender. Specifically, while in Slovenia being older meant experiencing less cyberbullying ($p < 0.05$), in Croatia there was no relationship. Just the opposite was the case in relation to gender - while in Slovenia there was no association between exposure to cyberbullying and gender, a significant negative association was found in Croatia, indicating that young males are more often victims of cyberbullying acts. The strongest association ($r = -0.13$; $p < 0.001$) was found between being young male in Croatia and “Forced to do something due to threats or blackmail”. Results from our study thus support a general conclusion that when it comes to gender and cyberbullying, the results are mixed. Specifically,

while some studies suggesting girls are more likely to be victims (Kowalski et al., 2019), others found no significant gender differences (Barlett & Coyne, 2014). Lastly, since we used the sample of youth, aged 16 +, it is possible that our data do not capture the age effect found in other studies, since cyberbullying typically peaks during early adolescence (12-15 years) (Tokunaga, 2010). The psychological impact of cyberbullying victimisation is well-established, with meta-analyses by Kowalski et al. (2014) and Fisher et al. (2016) demonstrating significant links to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and somatic symptoms, while longitudinal studies indicate these effects can persist for years (Rose and Tynes, 2015; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013). Additionally, cyberbullying adversely affects educational outcomes and social functioning, being associated with poorer academic performance, school avoidance, social isolation, reduced social competence, and increased social anxiety, as shown by Kowalski et al. (2019), Gardella et al. (2017), and Wright (2017).

The occurrence of cyberbullying significantly varies depending on the specific type of incident. The most common form faced by youth in both Slovenia and Croatia was receiving hurtful or inappropriate messages privately, yet all forms of cyberbullying were notably more prevalent among young Croats.

11.4 Problematic use of the internet and social media and the impact of COVID-19

Problematic internet use (PIU), sometimes referred to as internet addiction, is characterised by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviours regarding internet use that lead to impairment or distress (Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010). Similarly, problematic social media use (PSMU) involves excessive engagement with social media platforms that interferes with daily functioning and well-being (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014). One commonly accepted definition describes PSMU as “unhealthy excessive social media use behaviours characterised by a lack of control over behaviour and persistent behaviour despite adverse life consequences” (Lv & Wang, 2022). This characterisation aligns with findings from Raudsepp (2019), who delineated problematic social media usage not just by the quantity of time spent online but through a range of behaviours, including excessive concern about social media interactions and an overwhelming drive to engage (see also Finserås et al., 2023). Such behaviours can inhibit participation in other vital

activities, such as studies, interpersonal relationships, and essential aspects of mental well-being (Raudsepp & Kais, 2019; Shannon et al., 2024).

Figure 11.6. indicates the ability of youth in Slovenia and Croatia to exercise control over their internet use.

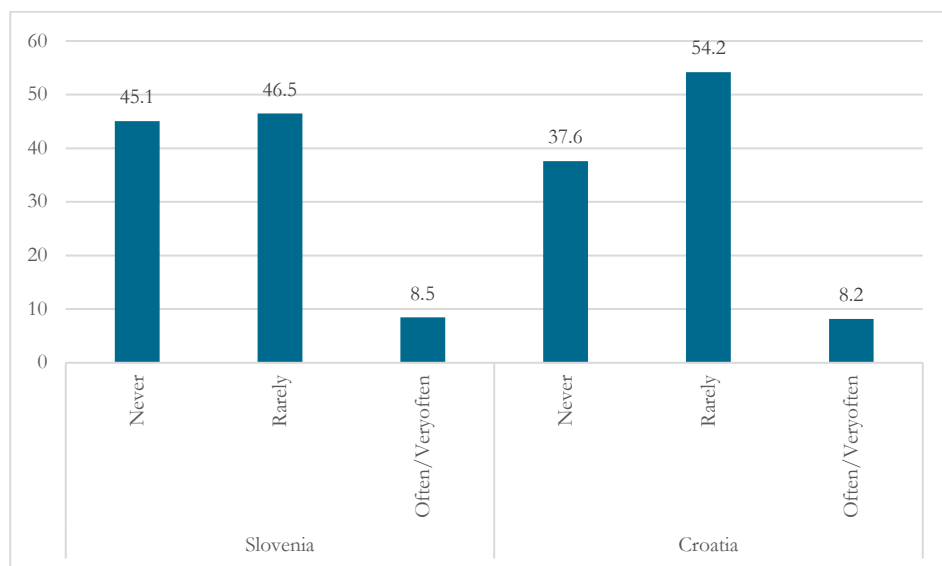


Figure 11.6: The ability of youth in Slovenia and Croatia to control their use of the internet (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The results show that less than a half of youth reported having no issues in exercising control over their internet use, suggesting that more than a half of youth in Slovenia and Croatia is manifesting at least some sort of internet addiction. This lack of control is especially worrying in Croatia where only 38% experience no problem in controlling internet use. Expectedly, not being able to exercise control over one's use of internet was significantly associated with screen-time ($p < 0.05$), but also with being a young woman ($p < 0.05$), being of a younger age in Slovenia, and residing in lower SES household. It was also significantly associated with parent-child conflict. Specifically, when youth was asked what best described their relationship with their parents, those who had internet control issues tended to describe this relationship as being full of conflicts and strain ($p < 0.01$).

Relatedly, 45% of youth in Slovenia and 62% Croatia reported that they have experienced a situation where they failed to perform their school/family/work obligations due to time spent on-line, which, as indicated, is another maladaptive pattern of excess/problematic internet and social media use. Similar percentages were obtained when asked about experiencing fights with their parents and friends due to their on-line time. Specifically, 40.4% of young Slovenians and 48.5 % of young Croats experienced some sort of conflict with their parents or friends because of their time on the internet (Figure 11.7).

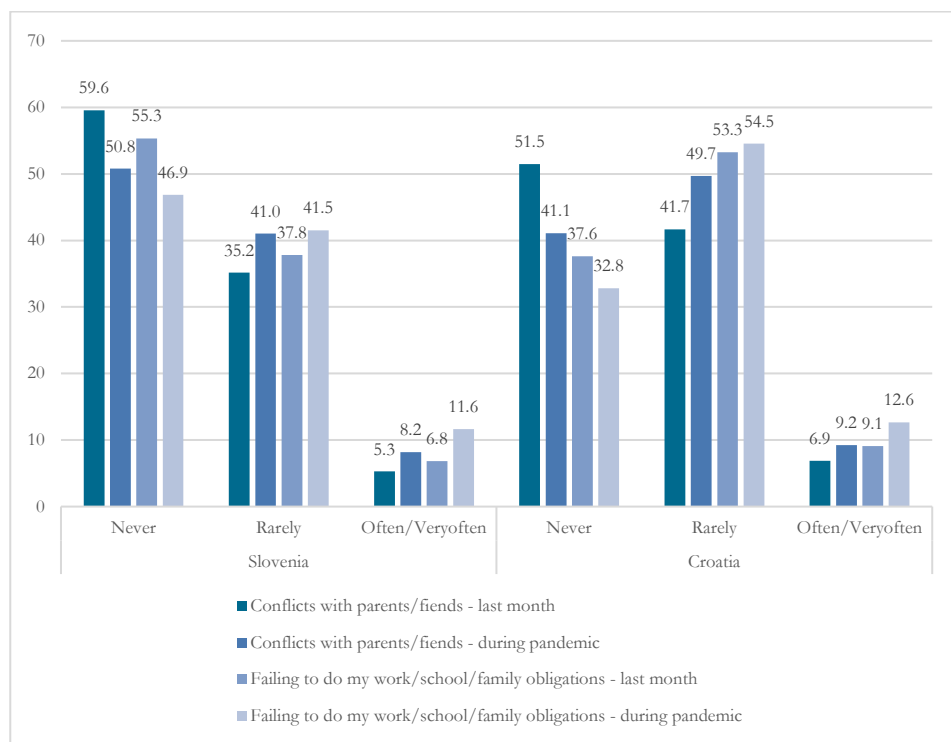


Figure 11.7: The impact of on-line time on social conflicts and obligations, last month vs COVID-19 pandemic, by country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

These maladaptive patterns, measured at two time points (during the last month/during the pandemic), were significantly associated with screen time ($p < 0.05$), young age ($p < 0.001$) and being from a lower SES household. Being a woman was not associated with this set of indicators of PISMU in Slovenia, while

in Croatia being male increased these patterns, suggesting that young females have bigger issues with control, but that these issues do not translate into more maladaptive behaviour patterns.

The results in Figure 11.7 also show that the situations used to indicate problematic internet and social media use (PISMU) were more common during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is further demonstrated by Figure 11.8., which shows another aspect of PISMU - escapist use of internet and social media.

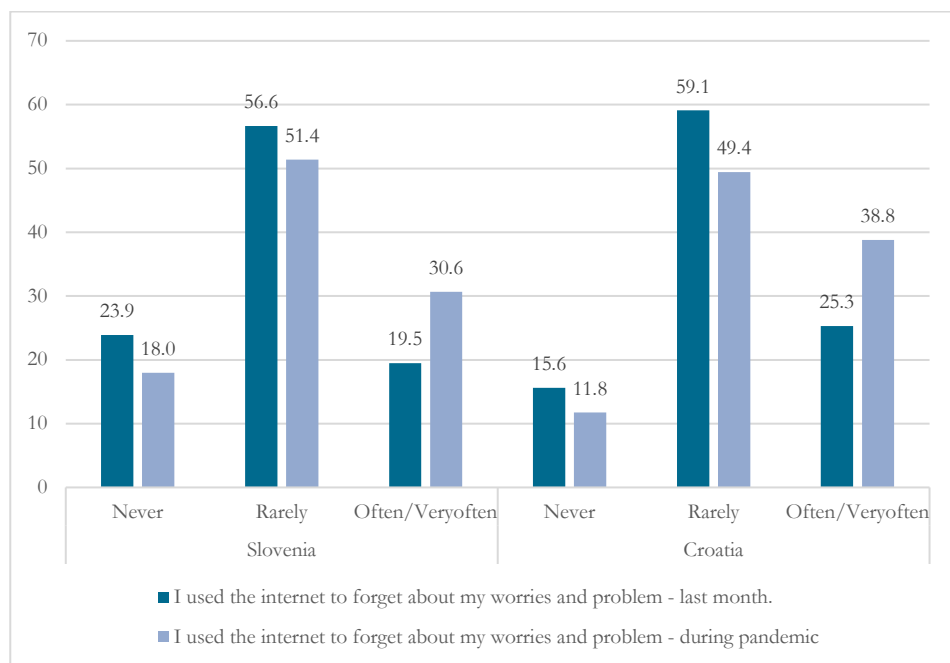


Figure 11.8: Escapist use of internet and social media - last month and during the pandemic, by country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Taken together, these results suggested that increased reliance on the internet and social media, which was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, increases the problem of losing control (addiction), of conflictual interactions with youth parents/friends, of youth's daily functioning and of escapism. This is supported by research, which has consistently documented increases in both internet use and problematic internet behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic

review and meta-analysis by Sun et al. (2021) reported a pooled prevalence of internet addiction during the COVID-19 pandemic of 39.8%, markedly higher than pre-pandemic estimates of 5-15% (Kuss et al., 2014), with notable heterogeneity across populations and regions. Specifically, social media use increased substantially, with Zhao and Zhou (2021) documenting an average daily rise of 1-2 hours during lockdowns, and problematic use escalating by 43% among young adults (Siste et al., 2020). Large-scale studies corroborate these trends, showing increases in internet addiction among Chinese (Dong et al., 2020) and Taiwanese adolescents (Chen et al., 2021), alongside significant rises in social media use and problematic behaviours in Canadian youth (Ellis et al., 2020; Zhao & Zhou, 2021). Age-specific patterns emerged, with younger adolescents showing greater increases in problematic gaming and older adolescents in social media use (Drouin et al., 2020). Educational context also influenced the outcomes, as remote learning was associated with a 57% higher likelihood of excessive screen time (López-Bueno et al., 2021). Longitudinal data indicated persistence of elevated problematic use beyond lockdowns, with levels remaining 21.7% above baseline 18 months later (Teng et al., 2021), suggesting enduring shifts in digital engagement among youth.

These trends of greater reliance on the internet and social media (and related use) were also clearly detected in our study. For example, if young Slovenians spent on average 4.6 hours per day on the internet in 2018, this has increased to 5.9 hours in 2023. The increase was even greater in Croatia - from 3.5 hours per day to 6.1 hours. Relatedly, both in Slovenia and Croatia, only around one fifth of youth reported no change in the internet and social media use (ISMU) during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., four fifths reported increased in ISMU) and only 4% of young Slovenians and 3% of young Croats reported that the internet and social media were not important to them during the pandemic.

Last, but not the least, Fernández-de-Las-Peñas et al. (2021) reported that socioeconomic status moderated the relationship between pandemic stressors and problematic technology use, with disadvantaged youth showing greater vulnerability to developing maladaptive patterns. The role of SES was also manifested in our study - all three measures of PISMU during the pandemic (having experienced fights, forgoing obligation, escapism) were significantly associated with lower SES, both in Slovenia and Croatia ($p < 0.05$).

Half of the youth in Croatia and Slovenia are manifesting some type of internet or social media addiction.

11.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed young people's daily lives, intensifying reliance on digital technologies for education, social interaction, and leisure. Research indicates a marked increase in the internet and social media use, with problematic engagement posing significant risks to psychological well-being, social development, academic performance, and family dynamics. The interplay between pandemic-related stressors and digital behaviour was complex and bidirectional, as excessive online activity both alleviated and exacerbated mental health difficulties. While digital platforms served as crucial tools during isolation, risk factors such as pre-existing vulnerabilities, parental influences, and educational disruption heightened susceptibility to harmful use. Conversely, protective influences like digital literacy and parental guidance mitigated these effects. Intervention strategies demonstrated varied success, underscoring the need for sustained, evidence-based approaches. As digital habits formed during the pandemic may persist, distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive use is vital for fostering youth digital well-being in a post-pandemic world.

The comparative analysis of digital engagement among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, based on the YO-VID22 survey, reveals broadly similar patterns of usage, with nuanced differences shaped by age, gender, and socio-economic status. In both countries, communication via messaging applications is the most common activity, while content creation remains comparatively limited. Slovenian youth report slightly higher rates of limited use and high-intensity screen time, whereas Croatian respondents show greater daily engagement in moderate use categories. Social media usage is widespread in both contexts, though daily interaction is somewhat more frequent among Slovenians. Gaming patterns are also largely similar, with minor variations in frequency and type of engagement.

Statistically significant differences emerge in relation to demographic factors. In Slovenia, screen time increases with age, whereas in Croatia it remains consistent across age groups. Gaming and content creation decline with age in both countries,

while gender differences in digital activity are more pronounced in Croatia, where young men are significantly more engaged than women, particularly in gaming and creative content. Socio-economic status plays a more influential role in Croatia, where it is linked to variations in communication, content creation, and social media use. In contrast, Slovenia shows fewer SES-related disparities, although lower SES youth demonstrate slightly higher gaming engagement.

Young people in both Slovenia and Croatia demonstrate a strong preference for in-person social interaction, although this tendency is more pronounced among Slovenians. Croatian respondents, by contrast, are slightly more open to online socialising or show a more balanced preference for both modes of communication. Gender plays a role in shaping these preferences, with Croatian men more inclined toward in-person interaction than women, and men across both countries expressing greater comfort with online self-expression. In Slovenia, young women show a stronger preference for in-person socialising than their male counterparts. Age does not significantly affect these preferences in Croatia, but in Slovenia, older respondents show a slight decrease in preference for in-person engagement. Socio-economic status (SES) also influences social preferences in both countries, with lower SES youth tending to favour face-to-face interaction more than those from higher SES backgrounds.

The needs of youth and the inadequacy of support for young people who engaged more actively with the online world, particularly during the period of limited social contact imposed by the pandemic, is reflected in the following quotation from the focus group:

I just wanted to add something; my sister was in her final year of secondary school at the time, and I remember how angry and upset she was. Those final three months of school were suddenly happening through a screen. At that point, there wasn't even Zoom or anything similar. They didn't know whether they would have a prom, what would happen with final exams, none of it. I remember she was under a lot of stress because nothing was clear. The school, in my opinion, didn't offer any real support, they weren't accommodated at all. There was no guidance or preparation; the students had to manage everything on their own, including preparations for final exams. I believe the situation was particularly difficult for final-year students.

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

Patterns of online behaviour further distinguish the two countries, particularly in levels of active and passive engagement. Croatian youth are more likely to actively participate in online spaces, such as by posting or commenting, whereas their Slovenian peers are more often passive observers. This trend is especially evident among Slovenian women, who report the highest levels of passive internet use. In both countries, women generally perceive themselves as less influential on social media than men, and also report experiencing greater emotional distress from negative online encounters. These emotional impacts appear more acute among young women, reflecting a gendered dimension in how online environments are experienced. Despite these challenges, most young people in both countries do not see themselves as influential on social platforms, suggesting a modest perception of digital agency among the broader youth population.

Socio-economic background plays a significant role in shaping self-perception and emotional well-being in online contexts. Young people from lower SES groups in both countries are more likely to report that they can "be themselves" online, yet they also experience higher levels of emotional distress from negative online experiences. These findings highlight a complex relationship between digital comfort and vulnerability among more disadvantaged groups. In Slovenia, SES is also linked to differences in levels of active and passive online use, with lower SES youth engaging more actively and middle SES youth showing the highest passive use. Additionally, perceived influence on social media varies with SES, as lower SES individuals report slightly higher self-perceived impact.

As the concern over problematic internet use among youth escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of intervention strategies emerged, many of which demonstrated promising outcomes. Digital literacy and education programmes tailored to remote delivery, such as the school-based digital citizenship initiative by Throuvala et al. (2021), achieved significant reductions in problematic social media behaviour. Effectiveness was enhanced when these programmes focused on skill development rather than restriction (Chen et al., 2021). Family-based strategies proved similarly beneficial; Tang et al. (2021) found structured family media plans, which typically include rules about screen time, content restrictions, and designated media-free times, were linked to lower levels of problematic use, even under lockdown conditions, while parent training programmes improved mediation capabilities (Caubergh et al., 2021). These findings support policy

recommendations advocating for parental empowerment workshops and stronger home-school collaboration in managing digital engagement (Lakhdar et al., 2022). In the educational context, structured schedules, screen breaks, and offline tasks were associated with reduced problematic internet use (López-Bueno et al., 2021), and teacher training emerged as a preventive measure (Chen et al., 2021).

Psychological and peer-based interventions were also adapted effectively for pandemic conditions. Online cognitive-behavioural therapy significantly reduced problematic internet symptoms (Yang et al., 2022), and mindfulness-based programmes mitigated both excessive social media use and associated anxiety (Teng et al., 2021). Peer mentoring approaches, as assessed by Throuvala et al. (2021), leveraged adolescents' social dynamics to achieve behavioural improvements, aligning with findings on the strong influence of peer norms (Orben et al., 2020). Technological tools, including screen time management apps and platform-integrated features, also yielded measurable reductions in problematic use (Li et al., 2021; Throuvala et al., 2021). Notably, the most successful interventions adopted balanced approaches, prioritising meaningful engagement over mere reduction, and addressing youth needs for connection and support during isolation (Orben et al., 2020). This multifaceted, nuanced strategy reflects a growing recognition of both the risks and essential roles of digital technologies in young people's lives.

Following the results and the secondary sources analysis, we proposed the following set of recommendations:

- Measures to promote balanced digital engagement should be initiated, given the age, gender, and socio-economic disparities in digital engagement. Tailored strategies should be developed to encourage more inclusive and balanced use of digital technologies. In Croatia, initiatives should focus on increasing digital confidence and participation among young women, particularly in areas such as content creation and gaming, where gender gaps are most pronounced. Similarly, efforts in Slovenia could aim to support young people from lower SES backgrounds in developing digital skills while promoting healthier digital habits among high-use groups.
- Correlation of gender and SES with the emotional distress linked to online experiences call for enhanced online safety education and accessible mental health support. Policymakers and educators should prioritise interventions that

equip young women and low SES youth with tools for managing negative online interactions and building resilience. Social media platforms and youth organisations could also be encouraged to create supportive online spaces where all young people feel empowered and safe to engage authentically.

- Addressing cyberbullying and problematic internet use among adolescents requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, technology, family support, and policy interventions. Develop and Implement Comprehensive Prevention Strategies. School programmes that focus on developing students' digital skills and promoting responsible online behaviour have shown greater effectiveness than those that rely solely on restricting access. These initiatives should be designed to function both in traditional classroom settings and through remote learning platforms to ensure resilience during periods of disruption.
- Policy measures should aim to empower youth, especially passive users and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to enhance youth perception of themselves as active contributors in the digital world. This includes promoting media literacy, encouraging responsible content creation, and raising awareness of the social impact of online behaviour. Bridging the gap between passive consumption and active, meaningful engagement can help build a more equitable and participatory digital culture among young people.
- Youth agency and inclusive policy design should be enhanced in order to achieve youth empowerment so they are able to take an active role in shaping online culture, which is essential for fostering respectful and inclusive digital spaces. Prevention efforts should include opportunities for youth to co-create and lead initiatives that promote positive online behaviour, recognising them as key contributors to solutions rather than merely subjects of concern.
- Parental involvement and parents-school cooperation should be enhanced through structured media education plans that establish clear rules, technology-free times, and open communication, which has proven effective in supporting more meaningful internet use. Training and resources for parents can improve their ability to guide online behaviour, and stronger collaboration between schools and families can create a unified framework for digital well-being.
- Psychosocial support and peer engagement at the school level should be fostered, with psychological support tailored to youth, such as mindfulness techniques. Additionally, peer mentoring models that encourage older students

to guide younger ones can positively influence behaviour, especially in areas like social media use, where peer dynamics are especially influential.

- Continuous research and responsive policy making should be encouraged in order to create flexible and data-informed policies that could ensure responsiveness to new challenges and grounded in the latest evidence on adolescent development and digital behaviour.

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12. YOUTH IN A BROADER SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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This chapter analyses shifts in social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes among youth in Croatia and Slovenia, and their implications for well-being and social cohesion. Generalised trust remains modest, with Slovenia seeing a decline during COVID-19, followed by a recovery by 2023. Croatian youth show higher trust, but with gender disparities. Interpersonal trust in family and friends remains high, yet between 2018 and 2023, declines occurred in both countries, particularly in Croatia, where trust in neighbours, classmates, and extended family dropped. The patterns of religiosity among Croatian and Slovenian youth differ notably. Slovenian youth maintain low and stable levels of religious belief and practice, while Croatian youth show increasing polarisation between firm believers and secular non-believers, with declining church attendance. Religiosity offered little protective effect on psychological well-being during the pandemic, except for a modest benefit of personal belief in Slovenia. Both countries show declining altruism and support for redistribution, signalling erosion of solidaristic norms. Policy implications stress strengthening peer networks, gender-responsive support, civic education, and measures to reduce inequality and rebuild social cohesion.

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Youth in Slovenia and Croatia today come of age within a complex socio-cultural landscape where social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes collectively shape their developmental trajectories. As adolescents and young adults forge identities and encounter heightened mental-health vulnerabilities (Simpson, 2007), the quality of interpersonal bonds and broader societal trust becomes especially consequential.

Following Putnam's (2000) typology, "thick" (or particularised) trust fosters bonding social capital and is rooted in frequent, stable interactions among family, friends, and close networks. On the other hand, "thin" (or generalised) trust toward strangers underpins bridging social capital and wider solidarity (Offe, 1999; Stolle, 2002; Newton, 2004; Uslaner & Badescu, 2004). Uslaner (2016) further clarifies that particularised trust is shaped by past experiences and concerns specific individuals or groups, but it is a generalised or moralistic trust that underlies tolerance, solidarity, and prosocial behaviour. In both pre-pandemic Slovenia and Croatia, young people exhibit high levels of thick trust but comparatively low levels of thin trust, reflecting their orientation toward private, familial spheres that often compensate for uneven public resources (Ilišin, 2007; Ilišin et al., 2013; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Naterer et al., 2019; Lavrič and Deželan, 2021). Yet these strong family ties alone cannot fully insulate youth from the social and economic disruptions still unfolding in the wake of COVID-19 (Kye & Hwang, 2020).

At the same time, religiosity offers young people a coping framework and sense of purpose that can mitigate stress and uncertainty (Koenig, 2023). Pro-social attitudes such as egalitarianism and altruism further strengthen community cohesion and collective efficacy (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Croatian youth, for example, demonstrate pronounced social awareness and a strong orientation toward social justice, even as they rely on familial networks for daily support (Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2017). In Slovenia, too, patterns of trust and religiosity intersect with emerging pro-social orientations to either buffer or exacerbate youth well-being under crisis conditions.

By examining how particularised (thick) trust, generalised (thin) or moralistic trust, personal religiosity, and altruistic values interact during this pivotal developmental stage, this chapter illuminates the pathways through which young people in Slovenia and Croatia navigate uncertainty, and how bolstering of bridging social capital and

personal meaning can prepare them for future challenges (Jewett et al., 2021; Pitas & Ehmer, 2020).

12.1 Social trust

Social trust has been proven as crucial for fostering both interpersonal relationships and subjective well-being (Simpson, 2007). A considerable volume of research has examined the impact of trust on various dimensions of subjective well-being and mental health, identifying numerous moderators and mediators that influence this relationship. Trust is also widely acknowledged as a beneficial factor specifically for the well-being of young people, with familial trust being especially strongly correlated with their well-being, psychosocial functioning, and mental health (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022).

12.2.1 Generalised social trust

Our initial analysis focuses on generalised social trust, which reflects an individual's belief that most people are trustworthy. This type of trust is typically assessed using the survey question: "*Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*". Generalised trust is notable for its stability and independence from specific individual or group traits, making it abstract and rooted in broader societal norms and institutions rather than personal experiences. Associations between generalised trust and positive outcomes such as happiness, life satisfaction, subjective health have been established (e.g. Adediji et al., 2023; Helliwell & Wang, 2010). Research focusing on young people has found that general trust is positively associated with psychosocial adjustment (Betts et al., 2017; Rotenberg et al., 2021), and overall mental well-being (Haugstvedt, 2023).

Since generalised social trust has been measured among Slovenian youth in some previous surveys, we utilised data from the Slovenian national studies Youth 2010 (Lavrič et al., 2011) and Youth 2020 (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021), where the same question was posed to similar samples of Slovenian youth. Analysis of mean values on a scale from 1 to 10 shows a significant decrease in trust from 2010 ($M=4.17$; $SD=2.17$) to 2020 ($M=3.72$; $SD=2.22$). The 2020 survey, conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of school closures, likely influenced this drop in trust. By 2023, however, the level of generalised trust had not only

rebounded but exceeded the 2010 levels ($M=4.36$; $SD=2.41$). For Croatia, we were not able to make direct comparisons with the surveys from the past. As to the situation in 2023, generalised social trust is slightly higher than in Slovenia ($M=4.38$; $SD=2.56$).

It should be emphasised that these averages still point to a relatively low generalised trust. As shown in Figure 12.1, only around two percent of respondents opted for the extremely high trust in people, while substantially more than one fifth opted for the other extreme.

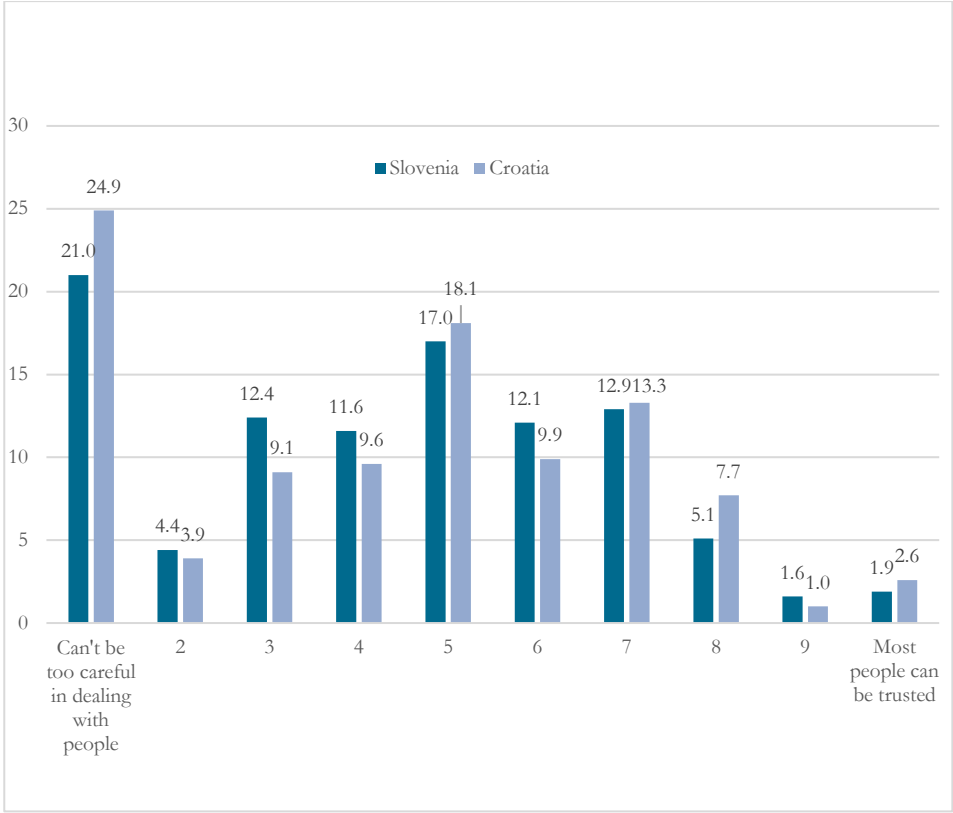


Figure 12.1. Generalised social distrust, by country and year of survey (%)
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The observed decline during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia aligns with the observation of an expert interviewed in Slovenia:

“Covid accelerated hardships, many hardships increased, but then quickly declined. The impact of Covid was therefore short-lived ... After the end of the epidemic, most things returned to normal.”

(Child psychiatry specialist, Slovenia)

More specifically, another expert from Slovenia pointed out that school closures were the most problematic factor, especially for the most vulnerable:

“... if you're involved in school, you can somehow manage things; but when everything moved online, the most vulnerable lost that support.”

(Expert from education sector, Slovenia)

One of our young participants in the focus groups stated the following:

“We (young people) got the feeling that this is not good, not healthy... we need a social state. Our formal state, if they want our trust, should push for the truth, particularly pressuring the journalists. The state should control the flow and publishing of information, what is true and what fake, how many people got infected and how many died... I don't know who should regulate this, but it should be done so we can trust our media again, so we could trust our leaders again.”

(Female, university student, Slovenia)

The notion of a temporary decline in generalised social trust is also supported by studies showing that heightened uncertainty, restricted social interaction, and the strain of public health measures can erode trust in others (Kye & Hwang, 2020). Such declines are especially consequential given the established link between social trust and psychological well-being (Helliwell & Wang, 2010). When trust levels fall, individuals may experience increased stress, lower perceived social support, and a heightened sense of vulnerability; factors that can negatively influence mental health (Han et al., 2021).

Generalised social trust is modest among youth in both Slovenia and Croatia. In Slovenia, it fell sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic but recovered by 2023, returning to pre-pandemic levels.

The analysis further uncovered a clear gender divide: in both countries young men show higher generalised social trust than young women, and the gap is especially pronounced in Croatia.

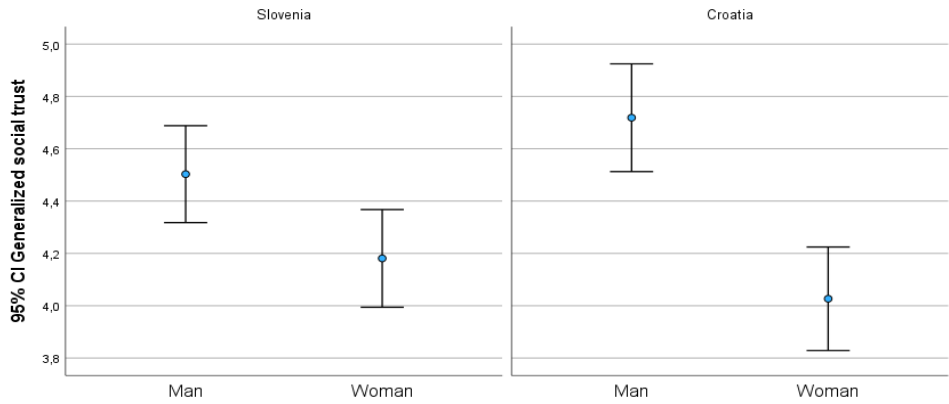


Figure 12.2. Generalised social trust by gender, 2023 (mean scores)
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Croatian man sits near 4.7 on the trust scale, whereas women cluster just above 4.0, a difference roughly twice the Slovenian spread. This gender gap might be related to deeper structural and psychological issues from pre-pandemic times. As one Slovenian public-health specialist noted, girls entered the pandemic with “*higher baseline anxiety and greater caregiving burdens*” and therefore “*felt the loss of peer support more acutely than boys*”.

Across Slovenia and Croatia, young women report significantly less generalised social trust than their male peers, with the deficit most pronounced among Croatian youth.

This pattern is consistent with scholarship linking women’s lower trust to heightened perceptions of vulnerability. Large-scale cross-national analyses show that women systematically score lower on generalised trust even after controlling for socio-economic factors, a gap strongly mediated by fear of crime and personal safety concerns (Jackson, 2009; Wiepking, Bekkers, & Charity, 2021). Put simply, girls tend to start from a lower baseline of social trust, and Croatia’s social climate amplifies that gap more than Slovenia’s.

12.2.2 Particularised interpersonal trust

Next, we analysed trends in terms of trust in different social groups or institutions that are important to young people and their well-being. In contrast to the generalised social trust, we are thus focusing on particularised trust, which pertains to relationships with individuals in a young person's immediate environment, such as family members or peers with whom one shares a direct personal connection. Research indicates that low interpersonal trust during adolescence is associated with lower peer acceptance and greater aggression, social nonengagement, peer rejection, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (e.g. Betts et al., 2017). The presence of trusted relationships, on the other hand, can even serve as a protective factor against the onset of mental illness (Grzegorzewska & Farnicka, 2016). For young individuals, particularly trust in family members is crucial for fostering healthy attachments, essential for their psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being (Fett et al., 2016; Grzegorzewska & Farnicka, 2016).

As shown in Figure 12.3. particularised trust follows a clear hierarchy for youth in both countries: it is highest for immediate family, followed by friends, extended family, classmates, and neighbours. Between 2018 and 2023, however, particularised trust slipped in almost all directions, with the declines consistently sharper in Croatia. The most dramatic shift is among Croatian youth's trust in neighbours, which fell by almost a full point (3.23 → 2.26). Trust in classmates and extended family also dropped more steeply in Croatia, erasing the advantage it once held and leaving both countries at roughly the same mid-scale level. Slovenia shows a gentler pattern: trust in friends and immediate family remains very high, and trust in neighbours even edges up slightly. Overall, the data suggest that the pandemic and related social disruptions eroded social trust among youth and did so more strongly in Croatia.

Several segments from focus groups could be used for illustration:

“Now, after the pandemic I trust mostly my friends... and my mom, she always supports me and I support her. I trust these people (friends and family members), because I feel safe with them, they never lie to me, and they would never want for something bad to happen to me.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

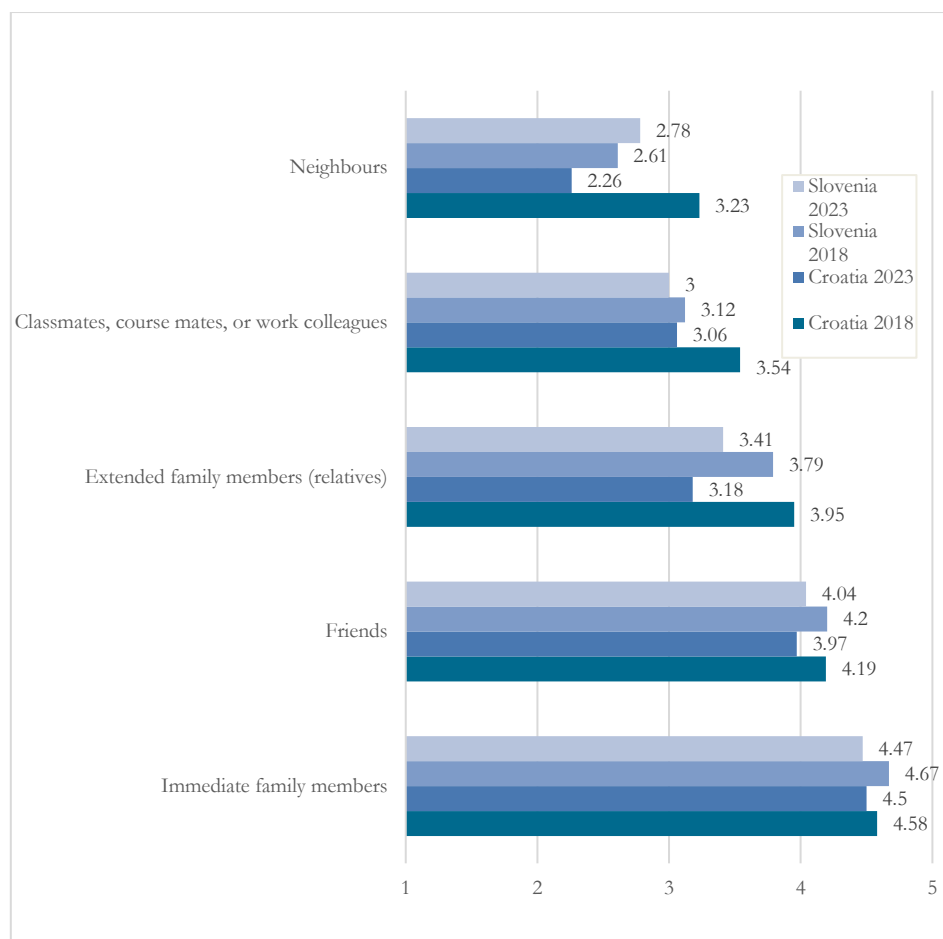


Figure 12.3: Young people's particularised trust in different social groups, by country and year of survey (mean scores)

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

Between 2018 and 2023 interpersonal trust among youth deteriorated, with Croatia experiencing the sharpest setbacks - particularly with regards to trust in neighbours, classmates, colleagues and extended family.

Given that the largest declines, particularly in Croatia, were observed in relationships characterised by weaker ties, such as those with classmates, colleagues and neighbours, it may be inferred that this reflects a broader trend of weakening social

connectedness rather than only a short-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar trends were also observed by an interviewed expert from Croatia stressing also the uneven effects of pandemic:

“What emerges from this research is the accumulation of negative experiences ... reduced social interaction and increased cyber-bullying, especially among those who felt the pandemic affected them most.”

(Expert from a public-health institution, Croatia)

Additional analyses further show that the decline in trust in both immediate and extended family members was sharper for women than men, mirroring the widening gender gap observed in generalised social trust.

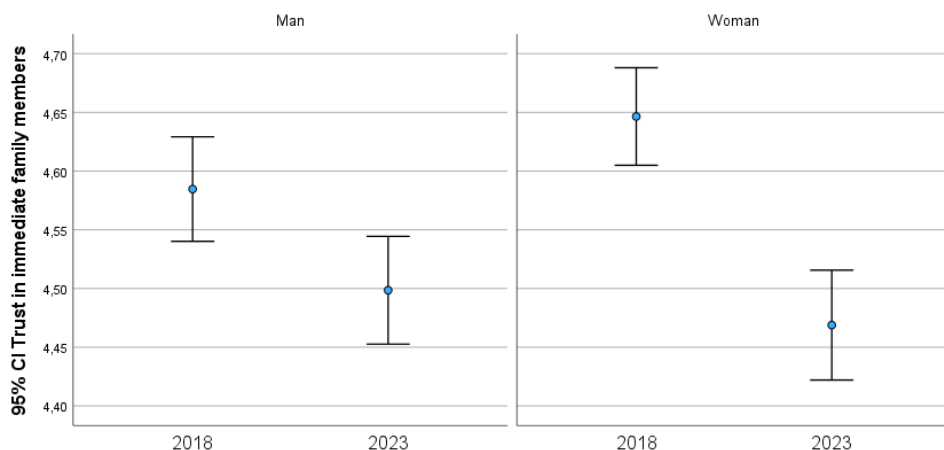


Figure 12.4: Trust in immediate family members (mean scores), by gender and year of survey, pooled sample from both countries

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

In 2018 girls actually trusted their immediate family slightly more than boys did; by 2023 their ratings had dropped enough to leave them fractionally below their male peers. The same gendered slide appears for trust in extended relatives, and it surfaces in both Slovenia and Croatia, suggesting a systemic rather than country-specific shift, perhaps linked to the heavier emotional and caregiving burdens adolescent girls carried during the pandemic. Figure 12.4 depicts this pattern for trust in immediate family in the pooled sample; parallel graphs for extended family tell the same story.

These results suggest the pandemic's disproportionate toll on women's social trust and psychological well-being.

12.2 Religiosity

Religiosity has consistently been associated with better psychological well-being, as illustrated by a range of comprehensive reviews (e.g. Lucchetti et al., 2021) and meta-analyses (e.g. Hoogeveen et al., 2023). In particular, established patterns of religious coping have been shown to mitigate distress during the transition to adulthood (Eliassen et al., 2005).

In many respects, religiosity mirrors social trust by shaping the social support processes that occur within close relationships (Merino, 2014). Studies indicate that religious participation enhances access to social support, thus fostering greater well-being. It also promotes community activities, the practice of forgiveness, and the formation of social capital beneficial to both individuals and broader communities (Koenig, 2023). It is therefore not very surprising that a recent study (Rutar et al., 2025) reports that higher religiosity can buffer the negative psychological impact of low social trust, suggesting that faith may serve as an emotional substitute when social trust is lacking.

Turning to Slovenian youth, empirical evidence shows that religion sits at the secular end of the Central-European spectrum. Repeated surveys place Slovenia's youth well below their regional peers in both church attendance and self-identification (Flere & Klanjšek 2007; Toš 1999; Lavrič 2013), and cohort data reveal a steady downward slope (Lavrič & Boroja 2014). The most recent wave deepens the picture: only 52% now call themselves Roman Catholic, yet a modest rise in the personal importance of God between 2013 and 2018 suggests "believing without belonging" rather than outright unbelief (Lavrič 2019). In short, institutional religion is losing its grip, while individualised, privatised forms of faith persist.

Croatian youth present a contrasting picture. Institutional ties remain strong; 88% claim a Catholic affiliation and just 7% report no denominational link. However, affiliation does not always translate into personal piety.

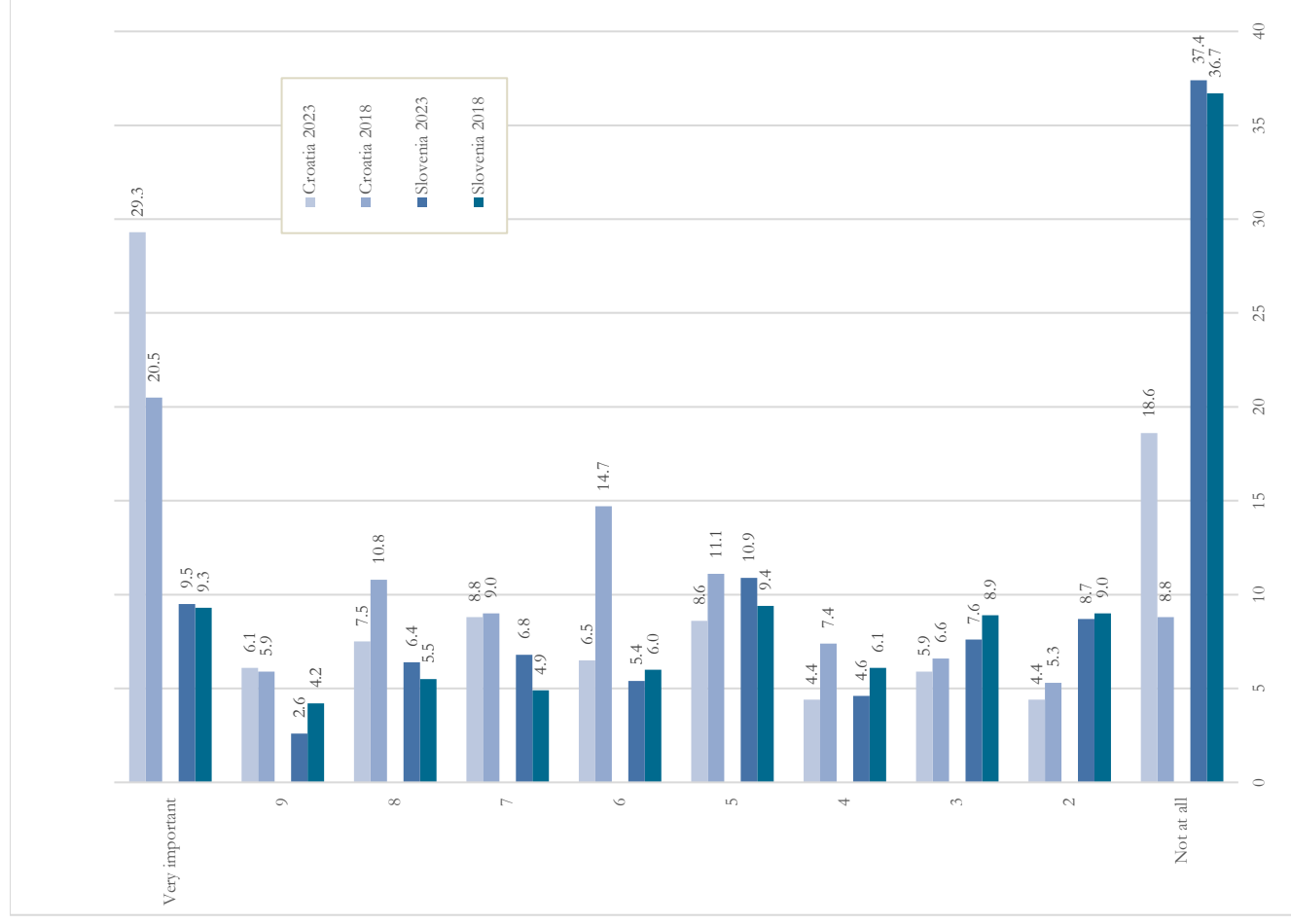


Figure 12.5. Importance of God in young people's lives, by country and year of survey (%)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

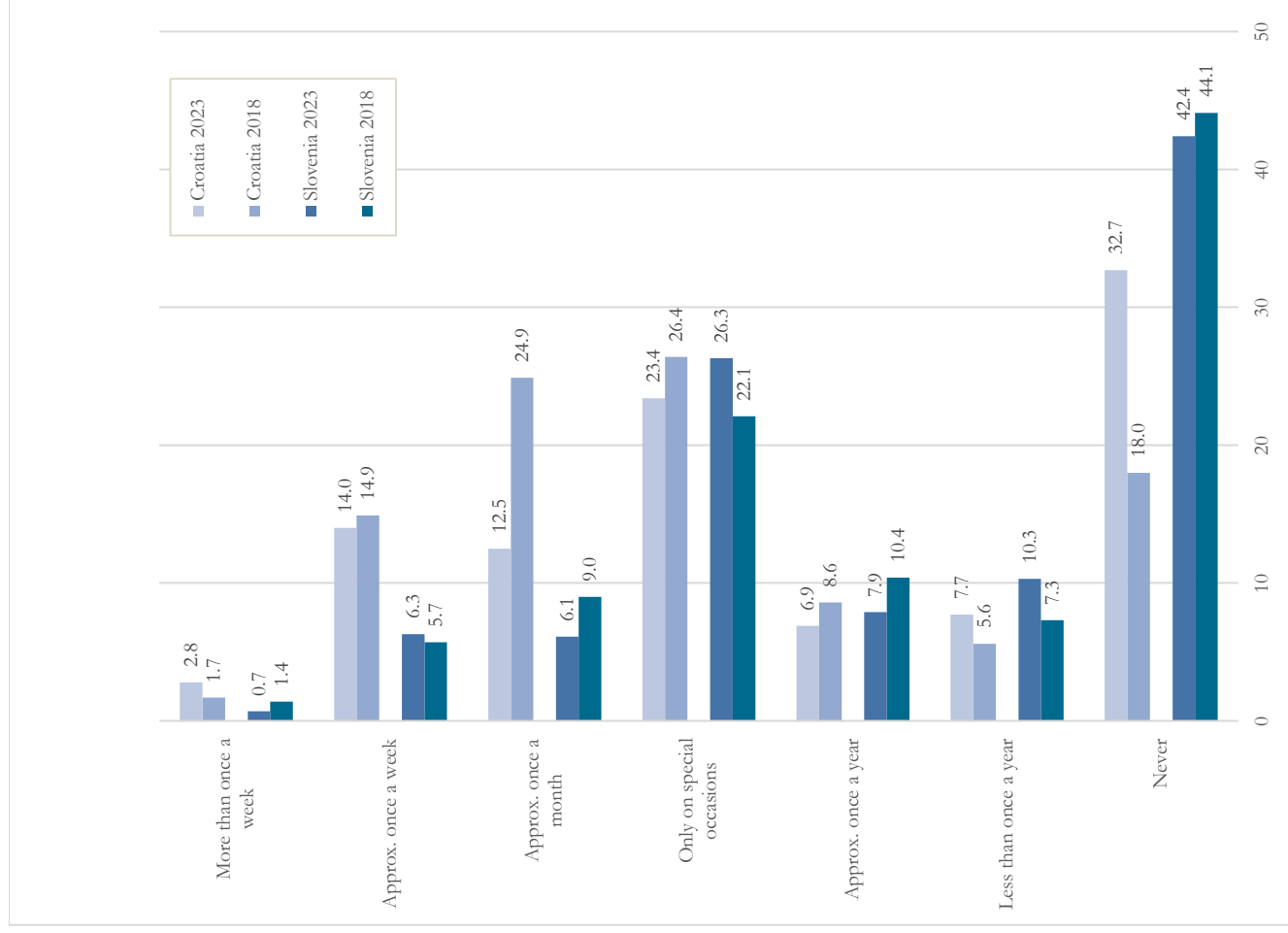


Figure 12.6: Attendance at religious services, by country and year of survey (%)

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

Only 69% label themselves religious, 22% are ambivalent, and 8% declare non-belief, indicating that for many young Croats Catholicism functions more as a cultural or national marker than as an active faith commitment (Gvozdanović et al., 2019). Important to this study, Filipović and Rihtar (2023) found that, during the COVID-19 crisis, the religiosity of adolescents in Croatia tended to become more personal and internalised, which contributed positively to their psycho-social resilience and personal development. This effect, however, was contingent upon the presence of strong family cohesion that was both reinforced by religiosity and, in turn, played a mediating role in fostering personal growth.

Figure 12.5 reveals two markedly different trajectories. In Croatia the mean importance of God barely moved between 2018 (6.20) and 2023 (6.13), yet the shape of the distribution changed dramatically: the proportion of young people who placed God at the very centre of their lives (score 10) jumped from 20.5% to 29.3%, while those who deemed God “not important at all” (score 0) doubled from 8.8% to 18.6%. The concomitant thinning of the middle categories (scores 4–6) indicates that moderate religiosity is eroding and the cohort is sorting into two increasingly distinct camps of committed believers and overt secularists. Such polarisation aligns with recent evidence that post-pandemic value quests and culture-war politics have intensified identity stakes around religion in Croatia, pushing some youth toward renewed devotionism while freeing others to embrace explicit non-belief. Slovenia, by contrast, exhibits relative stagnation: more than one-third of respondents continue to identify with the secular pole, and fewer than one in ten give God maximal importance. The Slovenian pattern thus confirms a long-standing “believing without belonging” plateau, whereas Croatian youth are moving toward a bifurcated religious landscape in which institutional Catholicism competes with a growing secular alternative.

Attendance data reinforce the picture of divergent religious trajectories: while Slovenian youth remain stably disengaged from institutional practice, Croatian youth have begun to disengage rapidly. Between 2018 and 2023 the share of Croatian respondents who never attend services outside weddings or funerals almost doubled - from 18% to 32.7% - and the proportion attending roughly once a month collapsed from 24.9% to 12.5%. Weekly participation also slipped, albeit less dramatically, indicating a broad retreat from organised worship. In Slovenia, by contrast, patterns scarcely moved: the already large group of non-attenders ($\approx 44\%$) held steady, and

all other categories fluctuated only marginally. Taken together with the earlier results on the importance of God, these figures suggest that Croatia is experiencing a growing gap between personal religiosity and institutional involvement - evidence of a fast-moving privatisation of faith - whereas Slovenia remains on its established secular plateau, with both belief and practice largely stagnant at low levels.

When it comes to religiosity, Slovenia shows marked stability between 2018 and 2023: the salience of God remains low, secular self-identification is common, and participation in religious services persists at minimal levels. Croatia, by contrast, exhibits clear polarisation: young people increasingly gravitate toward either extreme on the importance-of-God scale, while worship attendance falls sharply, signalling a widening gap between private belief and institutional practice.

The fact that religiosity remained relatively low or even declined does not imply that it had no influence on how young people coped with the COVID-19 pandemic and related social circumstances. In our survey, we also examined whether participants received help from a religious organisation during this period. They responded to the question, “*During the pandemic, how much did a religious organisation help you in asserting your rights or solving life problems?*” using a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Figure 12.7. illustrates the strong relationship between respondents’ level of religiosity and the extent of help received from a religious organisation during the pandemic.

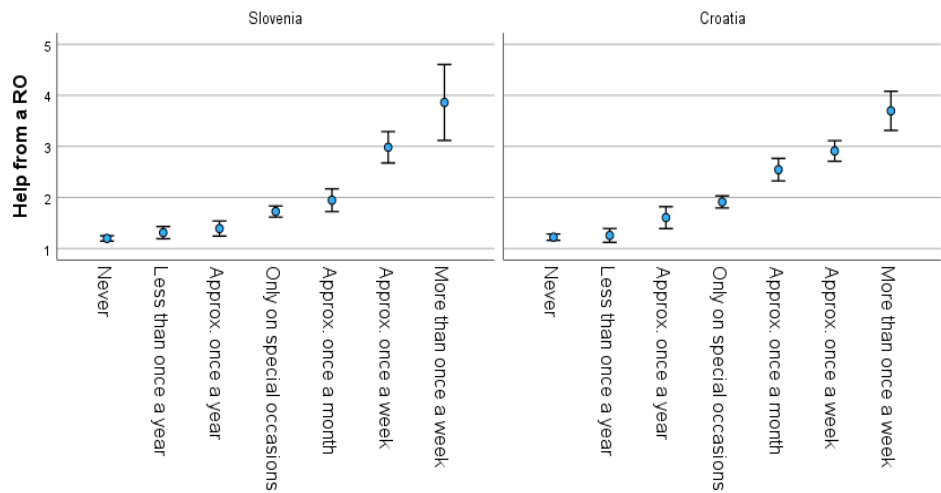


Figure 12.7: The relationship between attendance at religious services and receiving help from a religious organisation during the pandemic, Slovenia and Croatia, 2023. (mean scores)
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Although attendance at services is obviously (see Figure 12.7) correlated with receiving help from religious organisations, the more pertinent issue was whether any facet of religiosity buffered young people's psychological distress during the pandemic. To test this, we estimated separate multiple linear regressions for Croatia and Slovenia, using a single-item indicator of negative affect ("*During the COVID-19 pandemic I experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear and anger*") as the dependent variable. The three religiosity measures (service attendance, importance of God, and receipt of religious assistance) served as predictors, with controls for gender, age, settlement type, mother's education, and household finances. In Croatia none of the religious indicators reached significance. In Slovenia, however, a higher subjective importance of God was associated with slightly lower negative affect ($\beta = -0.082$; $p < 0.05$), whereas service attendance and religious assistance showed no independent effects.

Although religiosity is generally associated with psychological well-being, none of the religious indicators predicted youths' psychological well-being during the pandemic in Croatia. In Slovenia, only the perceived importance of God yielded a modest protective effect, whereas service attendance and help from religious organisations showed no significant association with negative affect.

Thus, the data point to a context-dependent role for religion in buffering youth distress during the pandemic. In Slovenia, where institutional practice is weak but "believing without belonging" endures, a personally important God offered a modest cushion against negative affect, even after socio-economic controls. This suggests that an internalised, privatised faith can supply meaning, hope and a sense of control when external routines are disrupted, whereas communal rituals (curtailed by lockdowns) and occasional aid from church charities did not add further protection.

No comparable effect emerged in Croatia. Here, religious identity is highly salient but increasingly polarised and decoupled from regular worship; for many adolescents Catholicism functions more as a cultural marker than a source of interiorised coping resources. In such a setting, the subjective salience of God may be diluted by identity politics, while falling service attendance deprives youth of the social support that communal religion can otherwise provide.

12.3 Broader attitudes on social issues

Young people's attitudes toward social issues are a key element of how they position themselves within the social sphere and can have significant implications for their psychological well-being. In our survey, we measured three such attitudes: egalitarianism, altruism, and egoism.

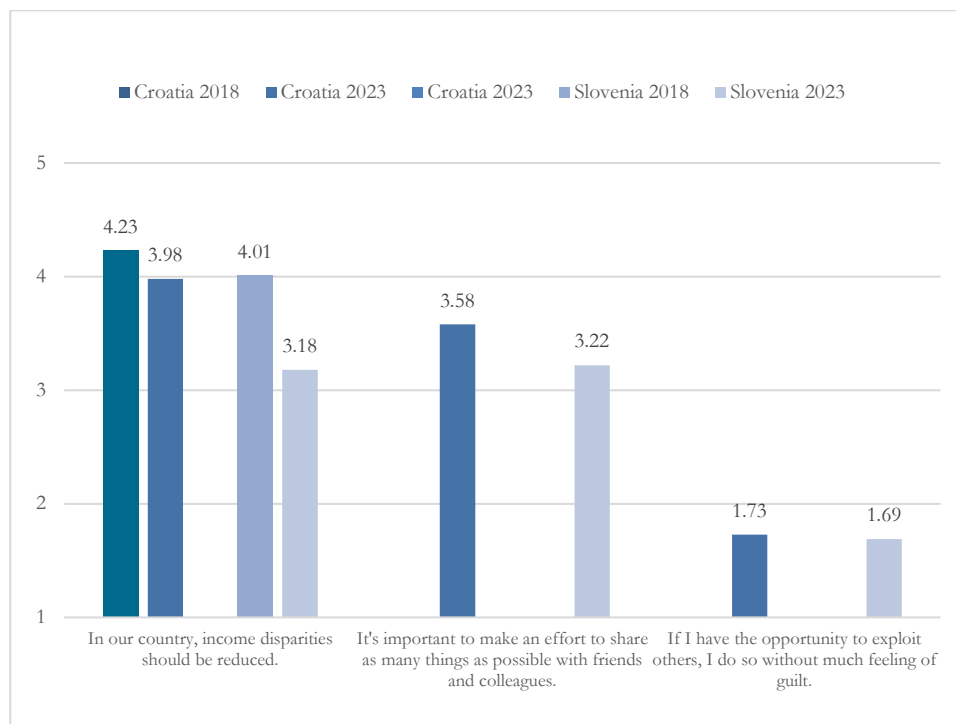


Figure 12.8: Average agreement with selected pro-social attitudes, by country and year of survey (mean scores)

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

As shown in Figure 12.8, solidaristic attitudes, measured by support for narrowing income disparities, slipped notably among Croatian youth and decreased even more sharply in Slovenia. The 2023 cross-section additionally shows stronger altruistic sentiment in Croatia than in Slovenia. Furthermore, when the Slovenian results are set against the 2010 benchmark ($M_{2010}=3.86$; Lavrič et al., 2011), they reveal a pronounced decade-long decline in willingness to share with peers. Despite this

softening of egalitarian and altruistic norms, youth in both countries continue to reject egoistic exploitation, scoring well below the scale midpoint on the amoral item. Taken together, the data suggest a gradual erosion of the positive pro-social commitments that sustain social solidarity. This erosion seems longer-running and more pronounced in Slovenia, though also visible among Croatian youth.

Between 2018 and 2023, youth in Croatia and Slovenia showed a decline in solidaristic attitudes. For Slovenian youth a sharp long-term decline can be observed also when it comes to altruism.

This does not mean however, that there are no cases of a very high solidarity among the youth. As one of the interviewed experts pointed out:

“Young people showed strong solidarity with older citizens during the crisis, but we must not take that for granted; these values need nurturing.”

(Ministry official, Croatia)

Nonetheless, the observed general trends in social attitudes can have important negative implications for the psychological well-being of youth. Altruism and egalitarianism are widely understood to foster social support networks, bolster feelings of belonging, and mitigate stress by promoting pro-social behaviour (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Consequently, a reduction in these orientations may be associated with weakened peer relationships, an erosion of collective cohesion, and thus lower resilience to life stressors (Thoits, 1995; Taylor, 2011; Putnam, 2000).

An expert from Slovenia sensing the described trends suggested:

“We have to work on healthy relationships and informal socialising, otherwise sharing norms will keep fading.”

(NGO youth worker, Slovenia).

12.4 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of shifting levels of social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes among Croatian and Slovenian youth, illustrating how these changes may influence their psychological well-being and broader social cohesion. The main findings are as follows:

- Generalised social trust is modest among youth in both Slovenia and Croatia; in Slovenia it dropped sharply during the COVID-19 period but returned to its pre-pandemic level by 2023.
- Across both countries young women report lower generalised social trust than young men, a gender gap that is especially wide in Croatia.
- From 2018 to 2023 interpersonal trust deteriorated, most markedly in Croatia, with the steepest declines in confidence toward neighbours, classmates, colleagues, and extended family.
- Religious engagement among Slovenian youth remains consistently low, both in personal belief and in church attendance. In Croatia, secularisation and polarisation unfold side by side: the share of young people who place God at the centre of their lives has grown, but so has the proportion of those on the other extreme. At the same time, church attendance saw a general decline among Croatian youth.
- None of the religious measures predicted youth psychological well-being during the pandemic in Croatia, while in Slovenia only the personal importance of God offered a small protective effect.
- Support for income redistribution weakened in both countries between 2018 and 2023, and long-term data reveal a marked decline in altruism among Slovenian youth; such erosion of egalitarian and altruistic norms may undermine the social support crucial to young people's psychological well-being.

To address these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- Support low-threshold, peer-led youth centres to renew weak-tie networks. Fund community hubs that combine informal socialising with non-competitive sports, volunteering and creative activities.

- Rebuild everyday social trust through school-based social-and-emotional learning (SEL). Integrate structured SEL curricula into secondary schools in both countries to cultivate competencies shown to raise generalised trust (e.g. perspective-taking, conflict-resolution and civic dialogue skills).
- Create gender-responsive safe-space programmes for adolescent girls. Establish after-school clubs and digital platforms that offer mentoring, harassment-prevention workshops and peer-support groups, particularly in Croatia where girls exhibit the lowest trust levels and highest post-pandemic vulnerability.
- Embed service-learning and voluntary civic projects in upper-secondary curricula. Mandating or incentivising youth participation in local charity, environmental or inter-generational initiatives can counter the documented erosion of altruism and egalitarianism.
- Visibly address socio-economic inequality to reinforce solidaristic norms. Combine transparent anti-poverty measures (e.g., targeted scholarships, youth employment subsidies) with public communication that highlights fairness. Credible institutional action can be effective in reversing the slide in redistribution support and restoring trust in collective solutions.

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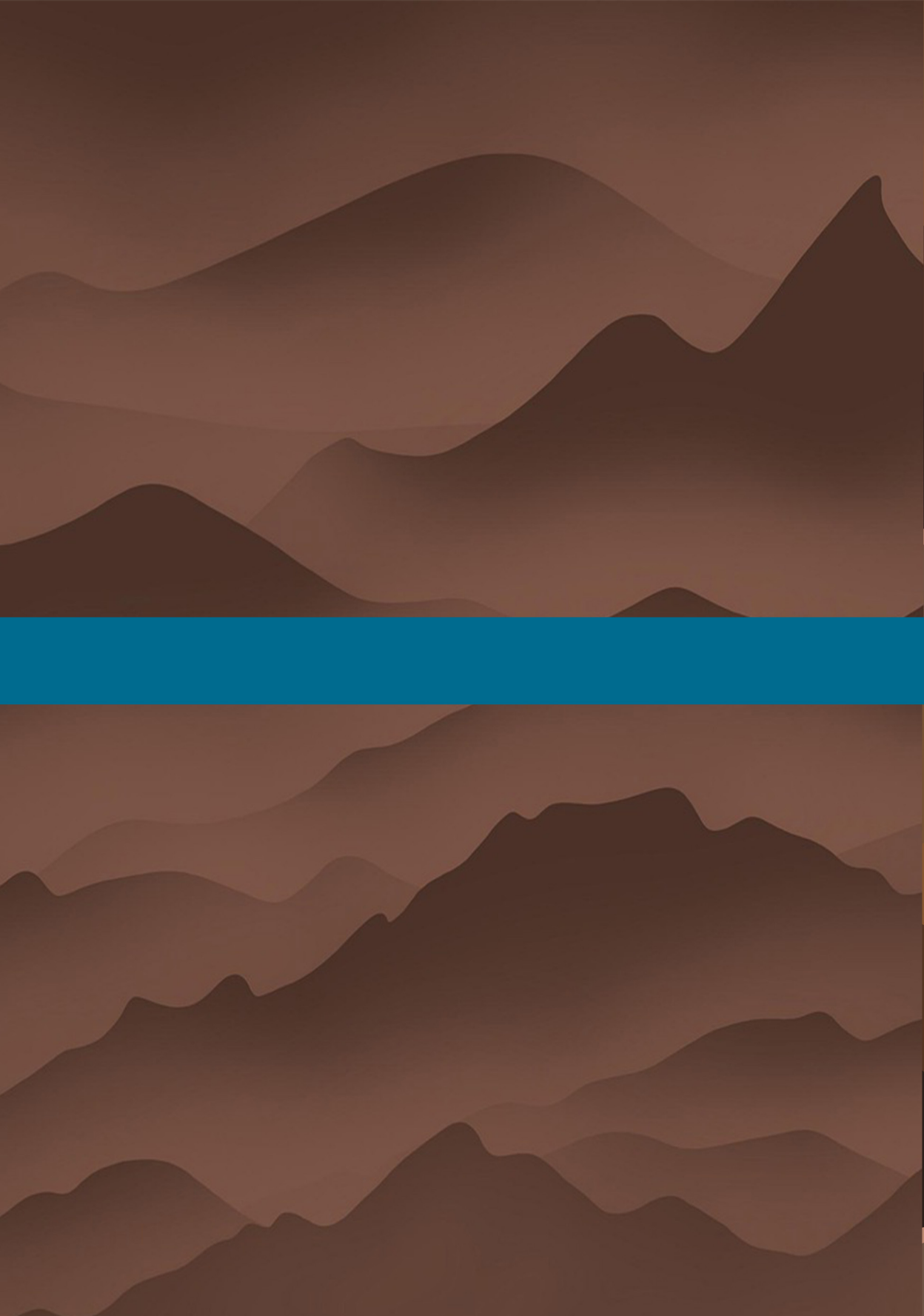
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TWO COUNTRIES, ONE CRISIS: THE YO-VID22 PANDEMIC STUDY

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The publication analyzes the experiences, values, and well-being of young people in Croatia and Slovenia before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The results show that the pandemic worsened physical and mental health, with young women being the most affected. In addition to stress, social isolation intensified, strongly reinforcing feelings of loneliness, while housing and financial barriers limited independence, especially among disadvantaged and urban youth. Mental health problems, particularly stress, depression, and burnout, remain widespread, and the pandemic further exacerbated these issues. In this context, Croatian youth report stronger family support, whereas Slovenian youth experienced more tension within the family environment. Regarding political participation, Croatian youth are evidently disappointed and passive, while Slovenian youth are more active. A general decline in trust and solidarity in both groups points to the need for inclusive policies to improve youth well-being.

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I believe that the publication of such a comparative work is of great importance, not only for the two countries involved in the research, but also for future comparative studies focused on societies before, during, and after major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparative insights of this kind are rare and will serve as a valuable basis for further analyses of social dynamics. [...] Particular praise is due for the inclusion of an intersectional approach in the analysis, which demonstrates how age, gender, social status, and cultural context intersect and jointly shape the life trajectories of young people. The policy-oriented recommendations presented throughout the volume add significant value, making this work equally useful for scholars and for professionals involved directly or indirectly in policy development.

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The YO-VID22 Pandemic Study offers a thorough examination of the post-pandemic situation and challenges faced by young people, addressing various aspects of well-being in Slovenia and Croatia, and shedding light on the changes and consequences brought about by the pandemic. It tackles a notable research gap by focusing on youth, a population often underrepresented in scholarly inquiries and given limited attention in the broader public discourse on pandemic-related issues. Since the ways in which young people navigate the challenges of this period significantly shape their future trajectories and affect multiple dimensions of their lives, this study makes a valuable contribution to understanding and addressing these complex issues.

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