



16 YEARS.
**OLD ENOUGH TO DECIDE ON EDUCATION,
LIVING SITUATION AND CAREER. TOO YOUNG
TO CO-DECIDE ABOUT OUR FUTURE.**



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
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 **RennerInstitut**

A contribution

by

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Like in many other European countries that are currently dealing with a sort of crisis of democracy and disinterest of citizens, which is also reflected in lower voter turnout, there are increasingly frequent discussions in Slovenia about the possibility of giving voting rights to young people once they turn 16 instead of when they reach the age of majority. This possibility is in most cases founded on the argument that lowering the voting age would represent a step forward in the development of participation of youth in the society.

Some European countries have positive experience with the aforementioned, however that should be put into context. At the recent international conference¹ hosted in Ljubljana, which has been organised within the project exploring the sensibility of decreasing the voting age limit, we have been told by Austrians, who in 2007 as the first nation in the EU invited 16-year-olds to vote in the election, that voter turnout in the first election has increased considerably due to the new voters, however the high turnout has not been repeated since.

This probably points to the fact that apart from lowering the voting age, we need to equip the young people with a range of knowledge if we wish to achieve their truly active societal and political participation/activity.

The same has been established at the aforementioned conference, where representatives of Slovenian youth clearly stated that they do not oppose to the possibility to cast their vote at the age of 16 and that they are not afraid of the election, however they actually do not know what it means to be an active citizen. They pointed out that it is strictly necessary to introduce civic education in Slovenian high schools. This is currently conducted in year 7 of elementary school and is in fact the only subject providing 'political literacy' for the generation. However, many experts and the youth believe that such education is too demanding for 12-year-olds.

I am convinced that it is indeed so. Not because they would not have been able to understand the context of the subject, but rather due to the slightly erroneous planning of the whole concept of civic education. Within the current system, year 7 pupils should have absorbed organisational, systemic and other information about the structure of the country and politics in a single year, and after that they have nothing to do with the aforementioned – apart from taking a test. Until the first election. Their first election happens – if it turns out that way – at the end of high school and they do not participate, apart from exceptional individuals, because they would wish to do so, but rather because they are encouraged by their parents, who also impose their political will upon them. Of course, this is not unusual at all.

I merely wish to point out that within the current concept of civic education of youth it is utopian to expect that Slovenian 16-year-olds, who usually reach that age in year 2 of high school, would be able to contribute to the reduction of crisis of democracy in any way.

Social Democrats of Slovenia have entered the possibility of lowering the voting age into our programme for the future. However, we do realise that democratic participation and active citizenship must be understood as a life-long and comprehensive learning process. The skills based on which the children, youth and people in general are able to choose and take decision are suitably implemented into the curricula much sooner, in accordance with the level of development. Civic education should not have been an exception. Civic knowledge should have been included into various subjects in elementary school and reinforced in high school. Only in such a case our 16-year-olds would have been capable of taking responsibility for their own lives in the elections within a democratic society, take interest into political developments and be prepared to actively take decisions and contribute to the development.

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