



Call to Europe Slovenia – Vote 16



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
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



RI RennerInstitut



Ljubljana, Slovenia

29th March 2018

FEPS Activity Report

FEPS
March
2018

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES





In March 2018, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) joined forces with the Društvo Progresiva from Slovenia and the Karl Renner Institut from Austria, and organised a series of workshops and an international conference in order to facilitate wider debate on lowering the voting age, from the point of view of election participation and democratic legitimacy of such a decision for the political system. The “*Call to Europe, Democracy Lab Slovenia: Vote 16*” consisted of three events held in different parts of the country.

VOTE 16: When opponents turn into supporters

The right to vote is a fundamental political right, as well as one of the founding elements of the modern democratic and of a pluralist state. However, the exercise of such right has, in many European countries, an age limit and so it does in the Republic of Slovenia. The Slovenian national constitution states that the right to vote, in both active (to vote) and passive (to be elected) form, is granted after reaching the age of 18. Comparatively and legally, the Slovenian system is very similar to the voting legislations in the majority of EU member states. However, two European countries that tend to stand out in this context are Austria and Malta. Austria changed the currently (still) prevailing age limit over 10 years ago (2007), while the Maltese agreed to raise the level of democracy and increase the level of legitimacy of people's decisions a month ago (at time of writing), and lowered the voting age limit to 16. Whether Slovenia too could give some thought to make a similar move was a topic discussed with secondary school students, political representatives, academics and the wider public, in the towns of Velenje, Nova Gorica and Ljubljana, respectively.



The Vote 16 project officially kicked off with an interactive workshop on the 9th March 2018, in the Inter-entrepreneurship Centre in Velenje. One of the initially presented arguments was the inconsistent “*double standard*” – the fact that a person may acquire work and sign a work contract and be subject to labour taxation at the age of 15, but not being entitled to the role of a citizen actively participating in decision-making processes. Speakers at the workshop pointed out certain issues directly linked to the question of legitimacy of the democratic process. It was clearly highlighted that the current election participation and structure of the electorate allow for a situation in which elder voters decide on issues that directly affect the youth. The low voting turnout issue was highlighted, as one of the reasons for which, according to the president of the Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), can likely be traced to the fact that young people are disinterested in contemporary politics, and have small chances for an active and meaningful political participation, as in fact, the FEPS Millennial Dialogue project shows.

The president of the Youth Council also reminded of the Council of Europe's resolution in which it encouraged member states to review the possibilities of lowering the age limit (following the example of the Republic of Austria). In the course of the debate, secondary school students admittedly recognised that they do not feel the responsibilities they are entitled to along with the status of a citizen. One of the possible solutions to the issue, as presented by the president of the Young Forum, would be to boost civic education in secondary schools to improve political literacy and the level of political culture, the proposal which achieved a high level of support from participating secondary school students. They made an additional suggestion for a longer period to be taken into account in the context of a more efficient implementation, which would finally lead to the lowering of the voting age. The interactive workshop extended beyond the proposed framework, as a number of secondary school students also spoke in favour of a secondary education reform, which they now see as rigid and not facilitating full potential development of their talents, and which fails, as they added, to encourage creativity, the only way towards progress.



The project continued on the 16th of March 2018, when a round table took place on the premises of the Crafts and Entrepreneurship Chamber in Nova Gorica, predominantly with participants from the region. The Auditorium was full with secondary school students, who focused on two arguments that help explaining the low voting turnout among youth: inexperience and insufficient information the

youth have with regards to politics. Although the large portion of secondary school students agreed that their (current) political knowledge is insufficient and that despite the age of technological advancements they do not have enough information as basis to form their opinion, they do wish to co-decide, as the FEPS Millennial Dialogue project attests. They believe that answers could lie in the shortcomings of our education system, which does not encourage their sense of belonging into political environment. Participants also warned about the irony of the situation, namely that they often hear the 'encouragement' mantra being repeated - 'the young are the foundation of the world' - while the development of their personalities is not being supported. Similar to the previous event, a pre- and post- debate online survey took place and gave interesting results. A large share of opponents of lowering the voting age changed their position in the course of a critical debate into a supportive one.

Extensive debate and series of discussions were round up with an international conference, which took place on the 29th March 2018 in Ljubljana. In addition to guests from Brussels, Maria Freitas (*Policy Adviser at FEPS*), and Vienna – Melanie Zvonik (*Socialist Youth of Austria*), the guests at the event included Member of the European Parliament Tanja Fajon (*S&D Group*), full professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, Dr. Jernej Pikalo, PhD, and two representatives of youth, Tin Kampl (*President of the Council of Youth of Slovenia*) and Andrej Omerzel (*President of the Youth Forum*). The debate was moderated by member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, Jan Škoberne.



Central idea of the debate was similar to that of the first workshop – namely, the pressing *necessity of introducing political civic education in high schools*, which received the support of all participants. Two additional arguments of apathy and (in)experience of the young were pointed out, which as both international guests pointed out, are often over-generally applied terms. Maria Freitas warned that the issue is often not with the young, but with methods used by decision-makers to increase interest in politics, which have now (obviously) become inefficient and outdated. She used the concrete example of political parties, which tend to function in a closed-off way and excessively underline conventional forms of participation in politics. She also stated several international best practices

which highlight certain (progressive) methods of political participation. She proposes the *political e-participation* as a potential solution. The guest from Vienna also presented the best practice example, and highlighted that in Austria the lowering of voting age resulted in the increased interest of young people in the nature of functioning of the political process, while the measure also resulted in the increased turn-out of young people at the elections, a positive consequence for legitimacy of decisions of people's representatives.

Key recommendations

- Lower the voting age as it can instil at an earlier stage, in a young peoples' life the habit of voting;
- Boost civic education in secondary schools to improve political literacy and the level of political culture (both national and European level);
- Support mechanisms that allow participatory policy-making and co-decision among young people and policy-makers (local, national and European level).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, we could say that arguments stated in the discussions confirmed what had been anticipated as one of the purposes of the project - a wider debate which would increase critical evaluation by secondary school students, those who immediately supported the lowering of age limit, and - even more importantly - those who were initially against such a measure. The encouraging conclusion is that young people seek equal decision-making and being adequately informed and educated about their responsibilities. We were also able to build a constructive debate using rational arguments to convince certain (even those fiercer) opponents that the 21st century just might be the time to think about such more progressive ideas.

