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Participation among young members of the Slovene minority in Italy

The survey we are going to present was an empirical study of the population of high school students attending the Slovene medium schools in Trst-Trieste and Gorica-Gorizia. The aim of the research was to provide an overview of youth participation in the cultural, sports and other activities offered by the Slovene organisations in Trst-Trieste and Gorica-Gorizia, on the attitudes, needs and expectations of the youth towards the minority organisation system and on the extent of their active involvement in it. The results also illustrate how young minority members experience their ethnic affiliation and reveal their attitudes towards the Italian majority members.

The Slovene minority in Italy has a structured and rich network of cultural, sports and other organisations which includes young people attending the Slovene medium schools in the provinces of Trst-Trieste and Gorica-Gorizia. The participation of young people in the minority organisations and their active involvement in the executive bodies is a way of developing that network and of preserving the ethnic affiliation of the minority itself.

The survey was commissioned for the Programme Conference of the Slovene minority organisations, a conference for the analysis of the overall current situation of the Slovene minority in Italy in all areas of activity (culture, media, economy, education...). One theme was dedicated specifically to youth and a team of 4 young researchers was formed to carry out a study with the object of providing a more clear vision of youth participation among the minority as well as their opinions regarding the minority organization framework. The primary need was for the minority policy-makers to be better informed so that they may create the guidelines for more efficient involvement of young minority members in minority organizations. On the basis of the results of the research a list of suggestions on how to improve youth participation in the minority framework was presented during the final part of the Programme conference in November, 2003, in Gorica-Gorizia.

The research was carried out among the whole population of 15- to 19-year-old students (N= 576) attending Slovene medium schools in Trst-Trieste and Gorica-Gorizia, two of the three provinces where the Slovene minority in Italy is extensive. Due to different circumstances the province of Videm-Udine was not included in that phase of the research.

The sample represents the major part of the Slovene minority youth, though some minor segments of the population have been left out: the sample does not include members not attending Slovene medium schools, dropouts, nor those attending vocational schools.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire structured in order to obtain a vision of youth participation both as a passive presence at spare-time sport and cultural activities of the minority organisations (e.g., watching sports, assisting at a concert or theatrical presentation) and their active participation (e.g., playing sports, playing a musical instrument, acting in a theatre group). Moreover, the active participation was divided into being active and being part of an executive body (having organisational and management responsibility or duties).

The questionnaire had 17 units, mainly closed question, scales, a series of items with statements and scales, etc. It was prepared considering the needs of the commissioners, the structure of the minority organization network, the activities offered by the minority organization system for youngsters, the general opinion and critiques of the minority organization framework as commonly perceived among the minority and the general perceptions about Slovene minority-Italian majority relationship as commonly perceived among the minority.

The items can be divided into 8 sections:

- background information of the respondents;
- statements about experiencing ethnic affiliation in everyday life;
- data on individual leisure time activities and attendance at activities and events promoted by the minority organisations;
- general knowledge of the minority reality;
- data about the active involvement in the executive bodies leading the minority organisations;
- statements about features that attract or repel youth participation in the minority organisations;
- a space at the end to express freely any other opinion or comment.
- statements about the minority organisational framework and the factors that influence the success of an activity

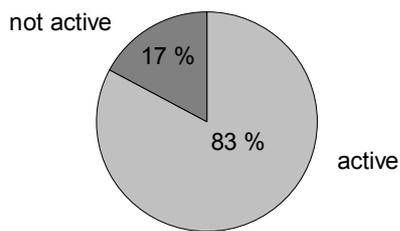
The data collection was carried out in March, 2003. On the basis of a previous agreement with the headmasters, all the students attending Slovene medium schools were asked to fill in the questionnaire during school lessons, a task requiring about 20 minutes to 30 minutes. The researchers delivered and collected the copies of the questionnaires, presented the nature and aims of the study and were present in the class in case of any need for clarification.

MAIN OUTCOMES

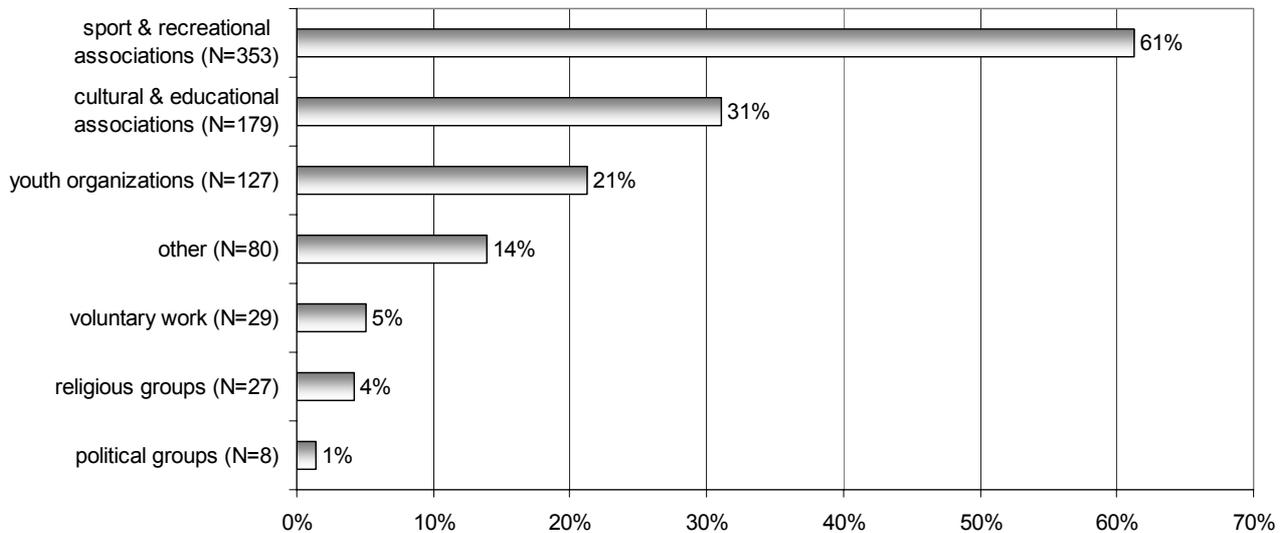
The results of the research are interesting and useful for several reasons. They provide a general overview of youth participation among the Slovene minority in Italy. Moreover, the outcomes of such research can be used by policy-makers in order to develop more effective policies aiming for the retention of young people in the community and involving them in the network of organisations.

The answers about what ethnic affiliation they feel they belong to were grouped into four categories: 70% of students felt they are Slovene, 14% both Slovene and Italian or Slovene and another nationality, 14% felt they are not Slovene (mostly they felt Italian) and 2% are undecided. Among the questioned students, 83% had a spare time activity, mainly a sport (61%) or cultural-educational activity (31%) and/or involvement in a youth organisation (21%) (graphs 1 and 2).

Graph 1: Activity (N= 576)

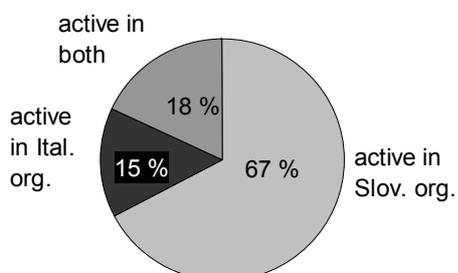


Graph 2: Activity by area



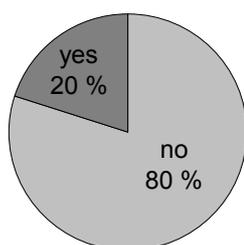
Out of those active, 67% were active in an organisation belonging to the Slovene minority network, 15% in an Italian organisation and 18% in both Italian and Slovene (graph 3).

Graph 3: Activity by language of organization (N=477)

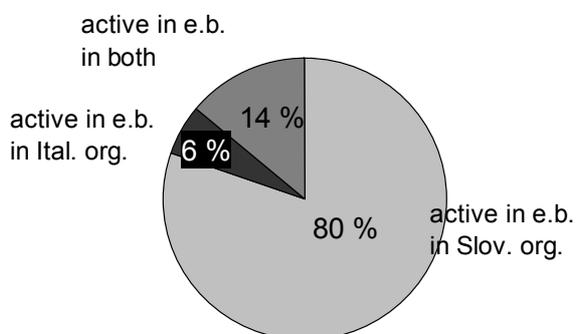


Out of those active, 20% were also involved in the executive bodies: 80% in the Slovene organisations, 14% in both Italian and Slovene ones and 6% in Italian (graphs 4 and 5).

Graph 4: Activity in executive body (N=576)

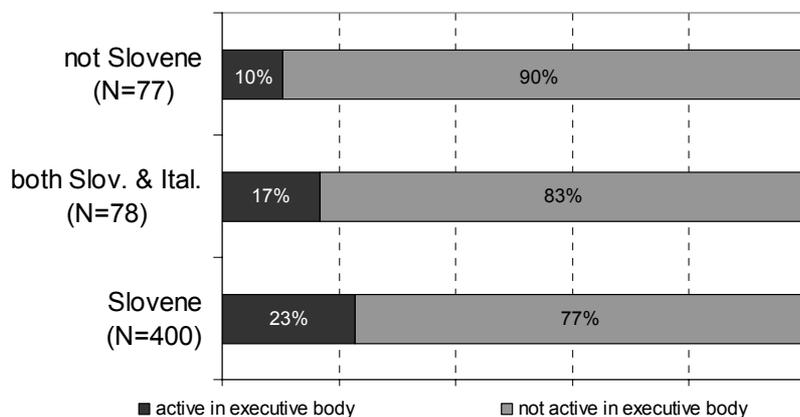


Graph 5: Activity in executive body by language of organization (N=116)



23% of those active who felt they are Slovene are also active in executive bodies while the percentage is lower for those who felt they are both Slovene and Italian or Slovene and another nationality (17%) and for those who felt they are not Slovene (10%) (graph 6).

Graph 6: Activity in executive body by ethnic affiliation



Students usually assist with the events offered by the network, mostly sports, theatre, and different cultural-educational events, as well as attending the Slovene library.

The influence of key factors such as coexistence with majority organisations, the problem of infusing fresh blood into the cadres and relations with older members, the advantages and disadvantages of active participation, and the suitability of the actual minority organisation to the future challenges are all analysed.

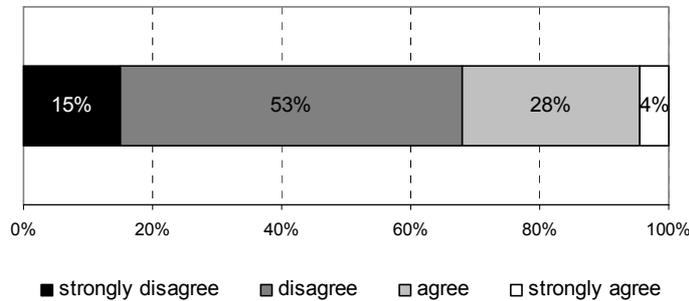
In general those respondents who are actively involved in the minority organisation are satisfied with the activities offered. But for those who are not involved the situation appears different, almost opposite: the available opportunities do not generally match their interests; the activities of the minority organisations are not attractive for approximately 1/3 of the respondents. Among these, half are not actively involved.

Hereafter the results that are more significant and related to the topic of the conference will be presented.

The first block of statements investigated coexistence with Italian organisations. In the minority context the activities of the Slovene organisations are present on the territory besides the Italian ones. Which factors make one or the other more attractive for the youngster belonging to the Slovene minority? There is not a direct match between attending a Slovene medium school and attending the activities of the Slovene organisations. To analyse this problem we present the answer to 3 statements that are representative and useful for getting the general picture of the situation. Especially for those participating in the minority organisations, these activities are attractive.

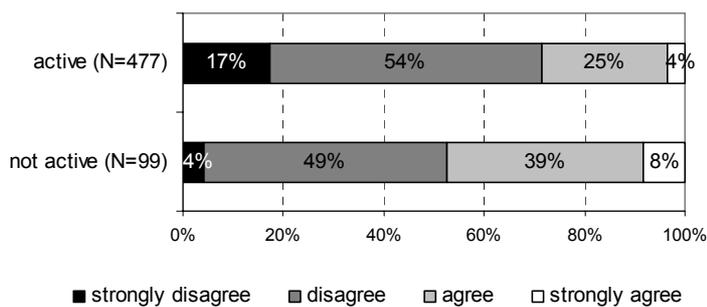
The statement: “The activities of the minority organisations are not attractive” got approximately a 70% negative response (graph 7).

Graph 7: “The activities of the minority organisations are not attractive”



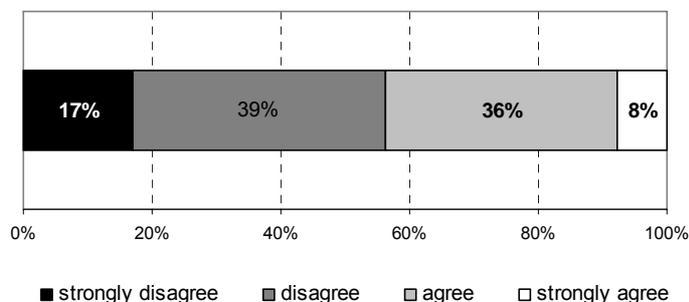
For further analysis we can point to a significant difference among the answers of those already participating in activities (71%) and those who are not (53%) (graph 8).

Graph 8: “The activities of the minority organisations are not attractive” by activity



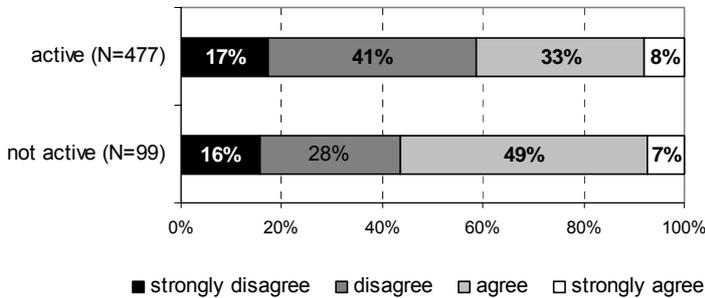
Besides the challenging activities that are offered, other factors influence the students’ choices. The statement “The Italian organisations are more attractive, because they offer a wider variety of activities” received 56% of negative respons (graph 9).

Graph 9: “The Italian organisations are more attractive, because they offer a wider variety of activities”



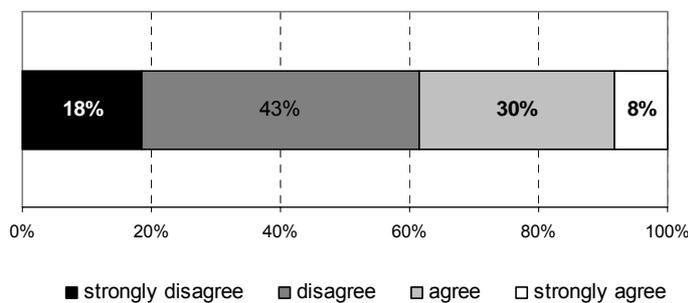
Again the rate of negative responses is higher among those who are already participating in the activities offered by the Slovene organisations (58%) (graph 10).

Graph 10: “The Italian organisations are more attractive, because they offer a wider variety of activities” by activity



The better economic condition and higher budget of the Italian organisations are sometimes a matter of discussion and are often considered a problem when recruiting new members. The hypothesis that “The Italian organisations offer higher quality activities (better possibility for advancement, better trainers, etc.)” was rejected by the majority (61%) of the respondents (graph 11).

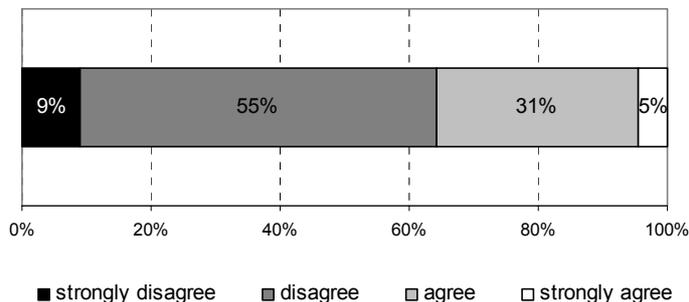
Graph 11: “The Italian organisations offer higher quality activities (better possibility for advancement, better trainers, etc.)”



Another vital topic is the need to infuse fresh blood into the cadres, the training and coaching of the next generation of leaders and the relation with the older generation of members. We analysed the youngster’s point of view on that topic through a series of statements.

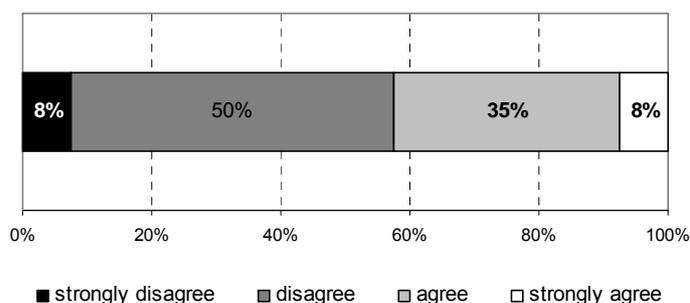
Is the presence of the member of the older generation an obstacle to youth commitment? The statement: “The minority organisations do not attract youngsters because their members belong to the older generation” received a negative response rate of 64% (graph 12).

Graph 12: “The minority organisations do not attract youngsters because their members belong to the older generation”



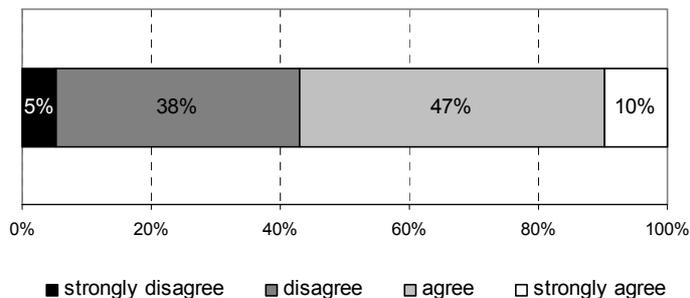
Meanwhile the statement “The youngsters do not join the minority organisation because the older generation does not leave the leading positions” obtained a 58% negative response (graph 13).

Graph 13: “The youngsters do not join the minority organisation because the older generation does not leave the leading positions”



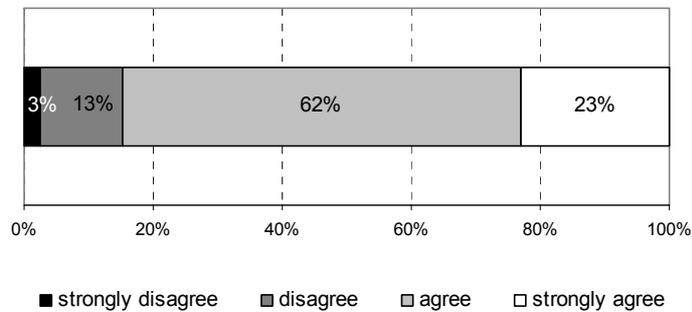
“The older members are against innovations that the youth would like to introduce”. There is a high rate of agreement with this statement (57%), which suggests that the problem among the younger and older generations is not so much coexistence as a difference in attitude towards innovation and new ideas.

Graph 14: “The older members are against innovations that the youth would like to introduce”

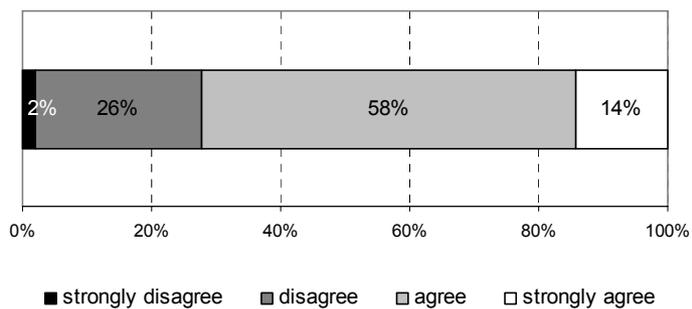


Considering the big resource the young generation represents, we asked the students to express their opinion regarding a series of proposed improvements. All the actions presented in the following had a high rate of positive feedback.

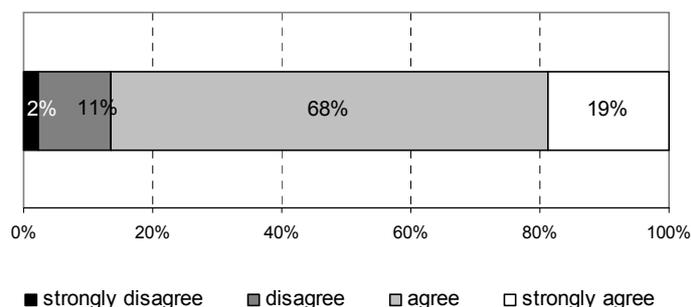
Graph 15: “The Slovene school should make the student most aware about the Slovene minority organisations”



Graph 16: “The minority organisations are limiting their activities to the bordering area and are undertaking few common activities with similar organisations from Slovenia, Italy and Europe”

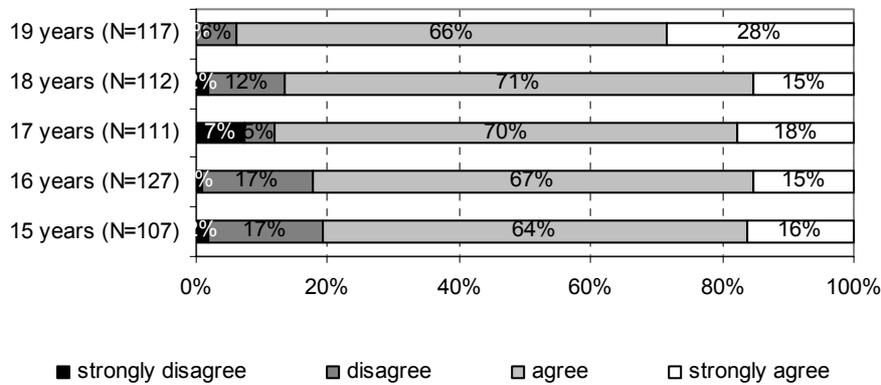


Graph 17: “The youth organisations should have their own board and representatives, who should protect their needs and protect their interests”

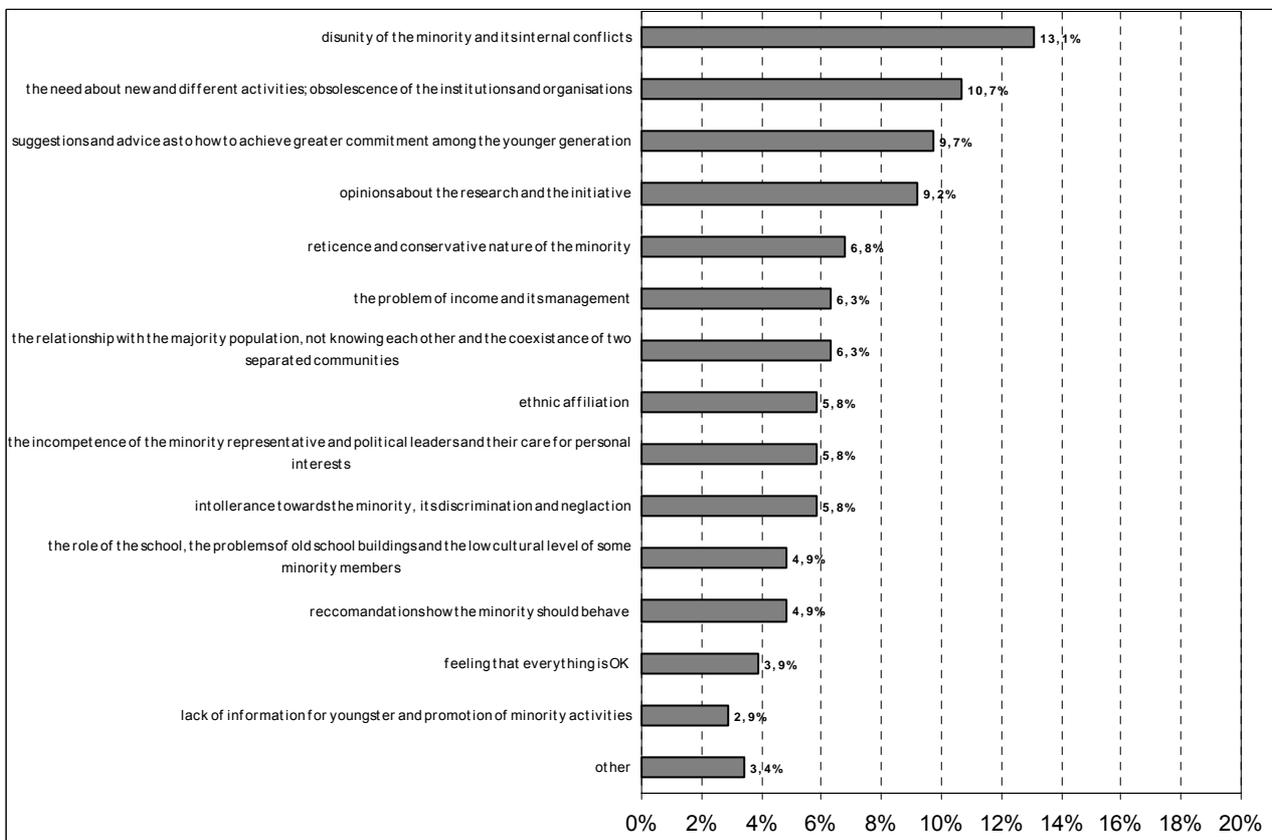


The rate of positive answers rises as the age of the respondents gets higher, reaching 94% among high school graduates.

Graph 18: “The youth organisations should have their own board and representatives, who should protect their needs and protect their interests” by age



At the end of the questionnaire we left space for free comments and opinions. The main topics that arose from these open comments confirmed that we were going in the right direction: the issues and problems expressed as vital conformed to most of those of our initial investigative hypotheses. For a general overview of the open comments we grouped them by topic and analysed how often these categories were mentioned.



To summarize, those who are active in the Slovene organisations are also satisfied with them, while those who are not participating in them are more critical. The majority believe that the Italian organisations are not more attractive because they offer more activities and more qualified activities. Three quarters of them think that participation in the Slovene organisations contributes to their personal development. The fact that active participation is not paid, so that it requires responsibilities and self-sacrifice, is not seen as an obstacle. The presence of the members of the older generations in the Slovene organisations is not an obstacle to the participation of youngsters, but the majority of the students think that they obstruct the innovativeness and the novelties that the youngsters would like to introduce.

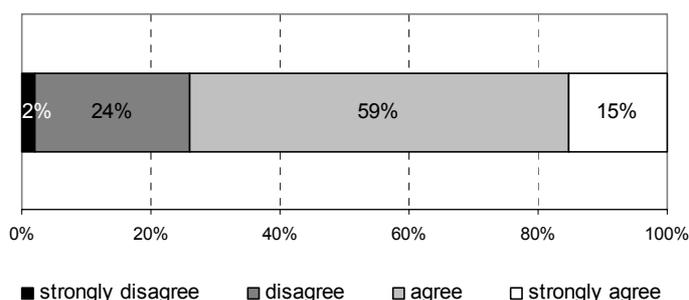
Young students are of the opinion that the Slovene minority in Italy should be more united internally (presently it is led by two umbrella organisations representing two political wings of the minority); it should have more international relations with other minorities in Europe, including Italy and the region Friuli Venezia Giulia itself. Moreover, it should have more contact with the other Slovene minorities in Austria, Hungary and Croatia and among the minority in Italy between the three provinces of Trst-Trieste, Gorica-Gorizia and Videm-Udine. The school should take on the main role in promoting those activities and also the contacts with youngsters from the Italian majority.

Although students are aware that the main role of the Slovene organisations is the preservation of the Slovene culture and identity in Italy, they suggest the introduction of innovations, including turning them into centres or laboratories where young people can fulfil their own potentials.

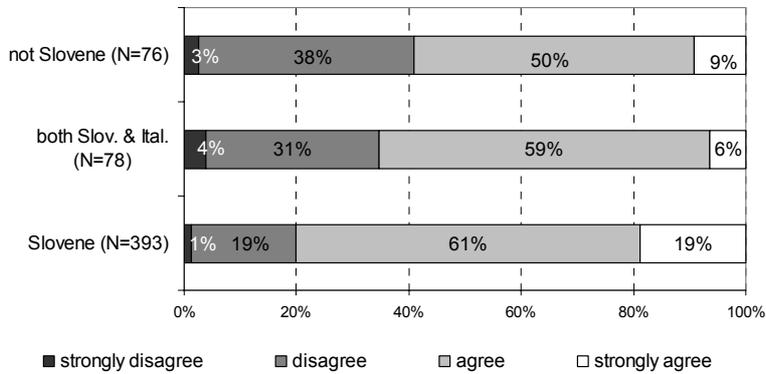
Young people would like to have their own youth forum where they can share experiences, discuss common activities and have a common youth representative body.

The data show that the relationship between majority and minority members is still problematic. Being a member of an ethnic minority still represents a situation highlighting their differences from the majority. The relations between the minority members and the Italian majority are perceived as difficult and problematic. The perception of being discriminated against and/or disregarded is still widespread and students feel that there is a lot of mutual ignorance and division between the two ethnic groups. The above mentioned perceptions and feelings are spread among all the categories of ethnic affiliation with little difference as the graphs from 20 to 25 show.

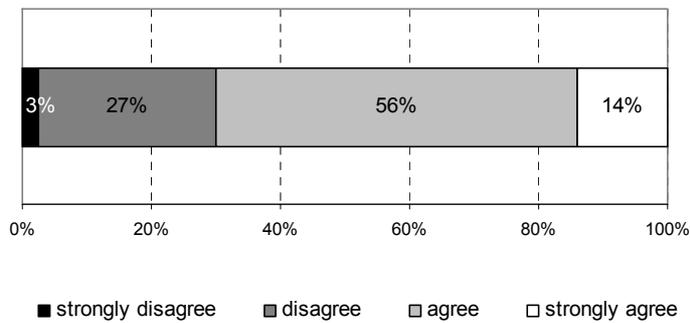
Graph 20: “Members of the majority discriminate members of the Slovene minority”



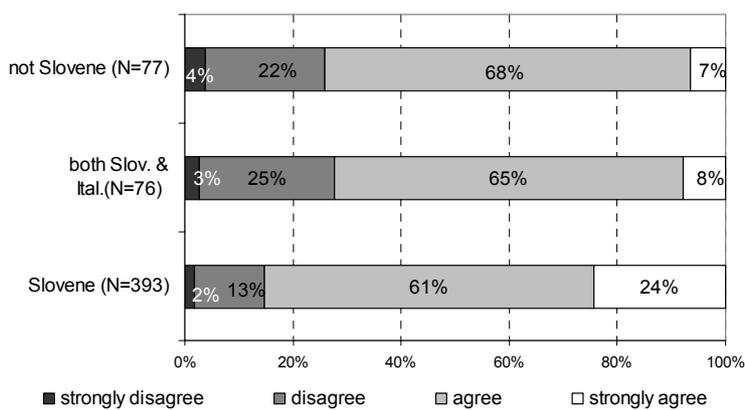
Graph 21: “Members of the majority discriminate members of the Slovene minority” by ethnic affiliation



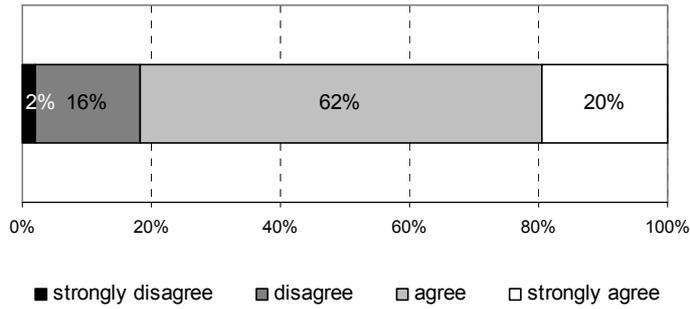
Graph 22: “Members of the majority do not appreciate Slovene culture and language”



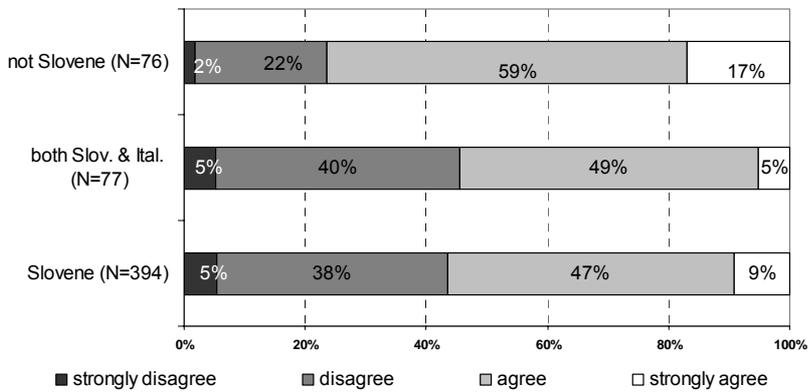
Graph 23: “Members of the majority do not appreciate Slovene culture and language” by ethnic affiliation



Graph 24: “The majority does not know the minority reality”

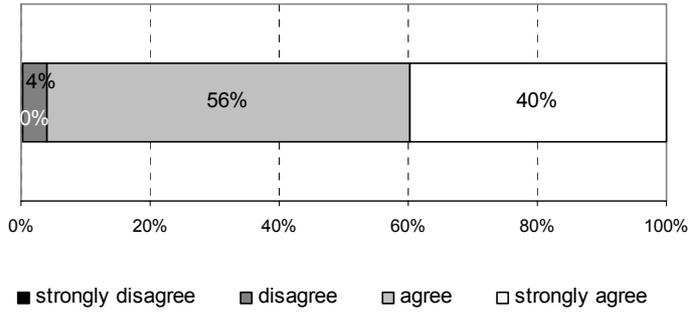


Graph 25: “The majority does not know the minority reality” by ethnic affiliation

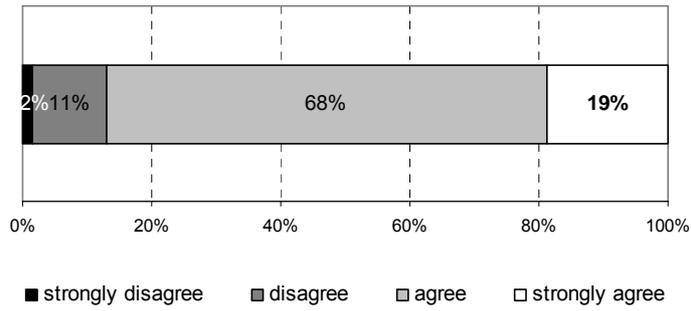


On the other hand there are also positive connotations of being a minority member and living in an ethnically mixed environment: it represents the opportunity for cultural enrichment by learning two languages and absorbing two different cultures. The above mentioned perceptions and feelings are spread among all the categories of ethnic affiliation as graphs from 26 to 28 show.

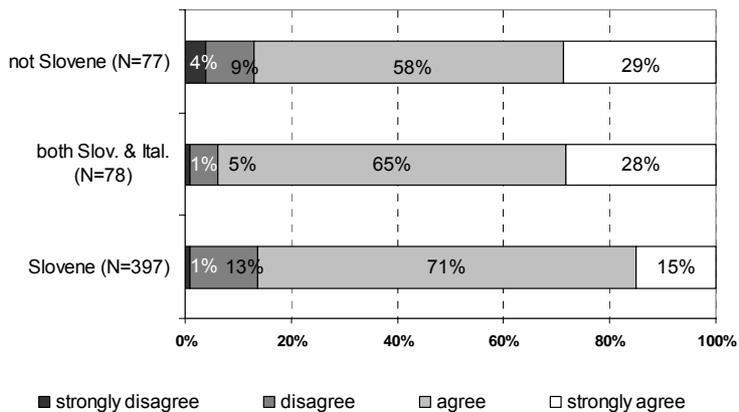
Graph 26: It is good to live in a ethnically mixed environment because you learn two languages and know two cultures”



Graph 27: “I will find job easily because beside Italian I know also Slovene language”



Graph 28: “I will find job easily because beside Italian I know also Slovene language” by ethnic affiliation



In the socialisation process among members of minority communities and, more specifically, the Slovene community in Italy, there are socialisation factors which transmit cultural patterns to individuals that constitute the basis as well as a source of their ethnic identity and for the prevention of assimilation. The main socialisation factors are family, friends, the media, schools and also organisations for leisure time (Susič, Sedmak, 1983). Thus members of minorities should pay special attention to prevent spare time from becoming a means of assimilation, especially among students and young people. Members of ethnic minority groups are exposed to both dominant and minority group socialization factors. Though none of them guarantees the maintenance of ethnic identity, such identity will have a greater probability of resisting and, vice versa, there will be a lesser probability of assimilation if a definite number of such factors are constantly present in the life of minority groups' members (Susič, Sedmak, 1983).

Young people are the core for the future of the minority, thus their views and ideas should be taken into account while planning the development guidelines of the minority.

References

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