

## **Political knowledge and the political attitudes of youth in EU and Slovakia**

**Prof.Ladislav Macháček, CERYS FF UCM in Trnava**

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### **SLOVAKIA**

Currently, experts and political representatives across Europe<sup>1</sup> are widely discussing the results of PISA 2003 survey<sup>2</sup>. The survey examined the performance of 14-years old students in mathematics, science, and reading<sup>3</sup>. However, neither experts nor the political community paid much attention to a similar project, the CIVIC EDUCATION STUDY, conducted in 1999 by The International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Amsterdam). This study was conducted in twenty-eight countries while using nationally representative samples of 14-years old students<sup>4</sup>.

It aimed to test students' knowledge and comprehension of materials with civic and political content (e.g. texts, cartoons) and their understanding of fundamental political principles (e.g. democracy and citizenship). It further measured the political attitudes of respondents such as trust in national government and willingness to participate in political and civic activities.

The study found that civic knowledge is high in Finland (similar result was found in PISA 2003), followed by Italy and Slovakia with the same score. Germany and the United Kingdom were below the international mean. Among those countries scoring below the international mean are: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Bulgaria and Romania.

For the cases of Finland, Italy, Germany, and Estonia the observed differences between political knowledge and interpretation skills confirmed previous findings (94 score points in knowledge section and 95 score points in skills section).

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1 Losch,H. Zu diesem Heft. In Diskurs 1,2004, p.2.

2 Bratislava 28.4.2005–Conference of Slovak Paedagogical Society and Ministry of Education SR

3 PISA SK 2003 National report SR(P.Koršňáková), Štátny pedagogický ústav, Bratislava 2004, p.38.

4 Civic Education Study. Civic education survey among 14-years old students in SR. (M.Čapová, I.Sklenárová) State Paedagogical Institute, Bratislava 2002,156 p. Countries participating in the study : Slovakia, Estonia, the UK, Italy, Germany, Finland. France and Austria, EUYOUNG partners, were absent.

On the other hand, some participating countries showed significant differences. For example, in the US sample students scored 102 in the political knowledge and 114 in the interpretation skills part (similarly the UK with 96 and 105 score points).

In Slovakia and some other countries, including Poland, knowledge at the age of fourteen significantly outweighs civic and political skills (107 and 103 score points).

In Slovakia, a Pearson coefficient ( $r=0,689$ ) suggests a direct interdependence of variables. A higher score in knowledge and civic principles correlates to a higher score in correct interpretations of political materials (CEA, Bratislava 2002, p.22).

Slovak students showed high knowledge in civic and political issues; **they performed better in knowledge tasks than in tasks requiring interpretation skills** <sup>5</sup>.

### **Test of Political Knowledge**

EUYOUPART further suggested the importance of measuring not only the opinions and attitudes of respondents but eventually their civic and political behavior as well as some **fundamental knowledge** *about political life, in particular with regards to countries of the European Union*<sup>6</sup>.

Four questions from each area were chosen, totaling eight questions. Respondents could answer: 'right,' 'false,' or 'I don't know.'

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<sup>5</sup> One of the main challenges faced by the Slovak education system is to encourage interpretation of texts and information more than just currently supported memorizing. „It is rather unfortunate to admit that Slovakia was placed last among all twenty-five countries participating in the survey (PISA 2003, p.22). In this section, Slovakia was placed behind Finland, France, Germany, Austria and Italy.

<sup>6</sup> *This set of questions was not obligatory and some countries did not include these questions into their questionnaire (Germany,Finland).*

**Table 1**

**Political knowledge via 8 questions**

		<b>Right</b>	<b>False</b>	<b>(I don't know)</b>
1	<b>Serbia is member EU</b>	<b>12,4</b>	<b>70,6</b>	<b>17,1</b>
2	<b>EU has 25 members</b>	<b>68,4</b>	<b>18,6</b>	<b>13,0</b>
3	<b>Flag EU is blue with white stars</b>	<b>26,2</b>	<b>71,9</b>	<b>2,0</b>
4	<b>Josè Barroso is had EC after Romano Prodi</b>	<b>41,1</b>	<b>18,4</b>	<b>40,5</b>
5	<b>Prime Minister SR is MD</b>	<b>92,6</b>	<b>5,8</b>	<b>1,6</b>
6	<b>Head of Party is XY</b>	<b>10,3</b>	<b>78,9</b>	<b>10,8</b>
7	<b>Parliament Voting in Slovakia (4 years)</b>	<b>93,2</b>	<b>3,0</b>	<b>3,8</b>
8	<b>Prime Minister has the right dissolve Parliament</b>	<b>26,6</b>	<b>48,2</b>	<b>25,2</b>

**Note:** Young people had alternatively a chance to agree with correct statements (e.g. number of EU members) or disagree with incorrect statements (e.g. the EU flag).

**Results in Slovakia (Table 1 and Table 2)**

in European issues

Approximately 70% of young people have correct knowledge about the EU, its members and symbols. Only the question on the recent change of the head of the European Commission (R.Prodi – J.Barroso) invoked 40% “I don’t know.” In each of the four questions 15-20% of respondents answered incorrectly.

in national politics

Respondents know much more about their national politics (80-90% correct answers), when it comes to parliamentary elections or the name of the Prime Minister or Vice-Chairman of a particular political party.

Young people performed lower in questions dealing with the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Parliament; 25% did not know the answer and 27% did not answer correctly.

Main results: The political knowledge of young Slovaks seems to be relatively high.

- Out of 8 indicators, 13.6% of Slovak young people answered almost all of them correctly
- At the other extreme, a slightly lower percentage (8%) could answer 0-2 questions correctly
- 43% have medium-strong knowledge
- There is not a clear gender difference: Young women and men have similar political knowledge
- 18-25 year olds have better knowledge than the younger age group

Table 2 Political knowledge via knowledge indicator: Slovakia (%)

	Male	Female	15-17 years	18-25 years	Entire sample
Weak (0-2 correct)	7,9	8,4	<b>12,0</b>	6,6	8,0
Medium-weak (3-4 correct)	32,3	35,9	35,8	33,3	34,2
Medium-strong (5-6 correct)	43,7	42,2	40,9	43,8	43,2
Strong (7-8 correct)	<b>16,2</b>	13,5	11,3	<b>16,2</b>	13,6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

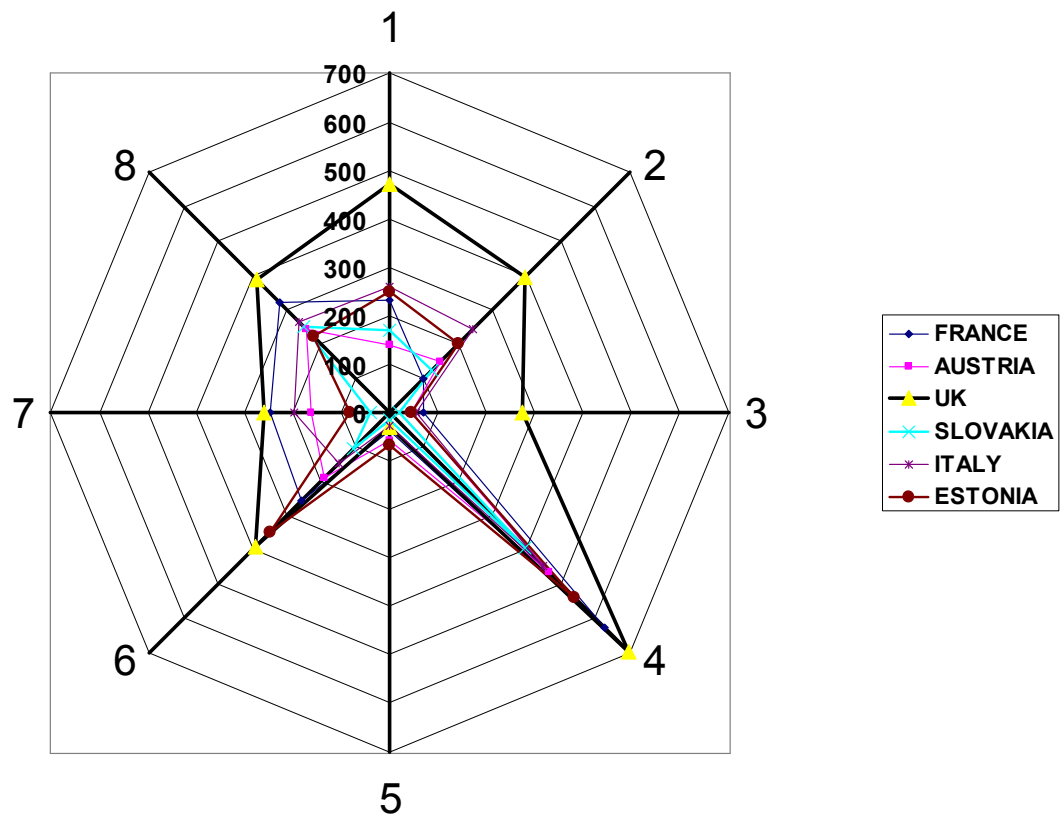
### Comparative analysis: 6 EU countries

#### **No answer- I don't know**

In a survey of knowledge, it is important to look at how many respondents answer with "I do not know."

The United Kingdom is a country where most young people answered "I don't know." With an exception for the name of their Prime Minister, they placed first in all other questions with an "I don't know" answer as compared to the other five countries (Chart no.1).

CHART no.1 I don't know



**In European issues**

Slovakia and Austria lead in the number of correct answers, followed by France, Italy and Estonia. Young people from the UK placed last.

***Question no. 1: Knowledge about new EU members (Serbia-Slovenia)***

During this period many significant changes occurred; ten new members joined the EU on May 1, 2004. However, only one of them was a former Yugoslav state (Slovenia). Serbia currently has the lowest chance of becoming a member of the EU. Young people of Austria performed best, which is not surprising since it borders with countries of former Yugoslavia.

***Question no. 2: Number of EU members (15 or 25 members).***

We assumed that the correct answer would be found primarily among young people from countries that have just become EU members, i.e. Slovakia and Estonia. Surprisingly, France placed first.

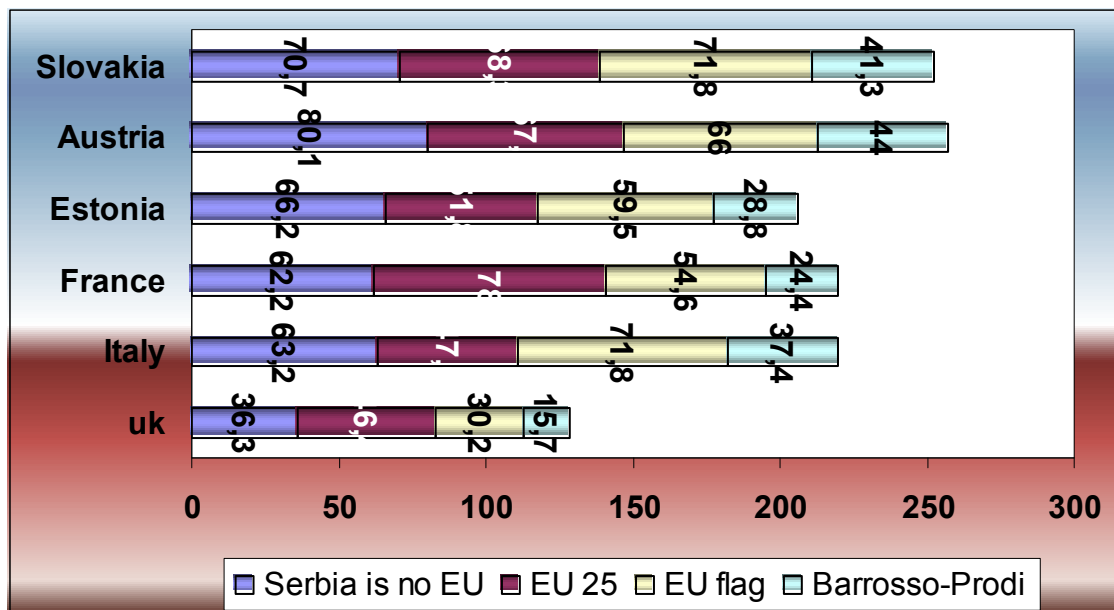
**Question no. 3: Knowledge of the fundamental EU symbols: flag.**

This question was submitted with a wrong answer, it said that the EU flag was blue with white stars. Young people of Slovakia and Italy gave the most incorrect answers.

**Question no 4: J. Barroso replaced R. Prodi in the post of the European Commission leadership**

The most correct answers were reported in the Austrian and Slovak sample. Most correct answers were found in the Austrian sample among females under 18. In Estonia, France, Italy, the UK and Slovakia more correct answers were found among those above 18 and more so amongst males.

CHART no. 2 Youth Knowledge about European Policy



**National politics**

**Question no.1(5): The name of the Prime Minister**

Young people know the name of their Prime Minister. British youth placed first with the most correct answers but also other countries scored high when it comes to key executive position and its knowledge among all age groups, both sexes.

**Question no. 2(6): Who is the leader of a political party?**

This relatively difficult question was rather tricky since we asked students whether a particular representative (in fact, the leader of a right-wing or conservative party) was a leader of the left-wing political party. To answer correctly, respondents would have to know

the leader by his/her surname and his/her political affiliation. That means that respondents had to mark the statement “the leader of the political party is XY” as incorrect. Most correct answers were found among Slovaks (79%), followed by French (60%). In the case of Slovakia it can be assumed that it was rather easier to “uncover” the leader of Christian democrats than the leader of the Communist party.

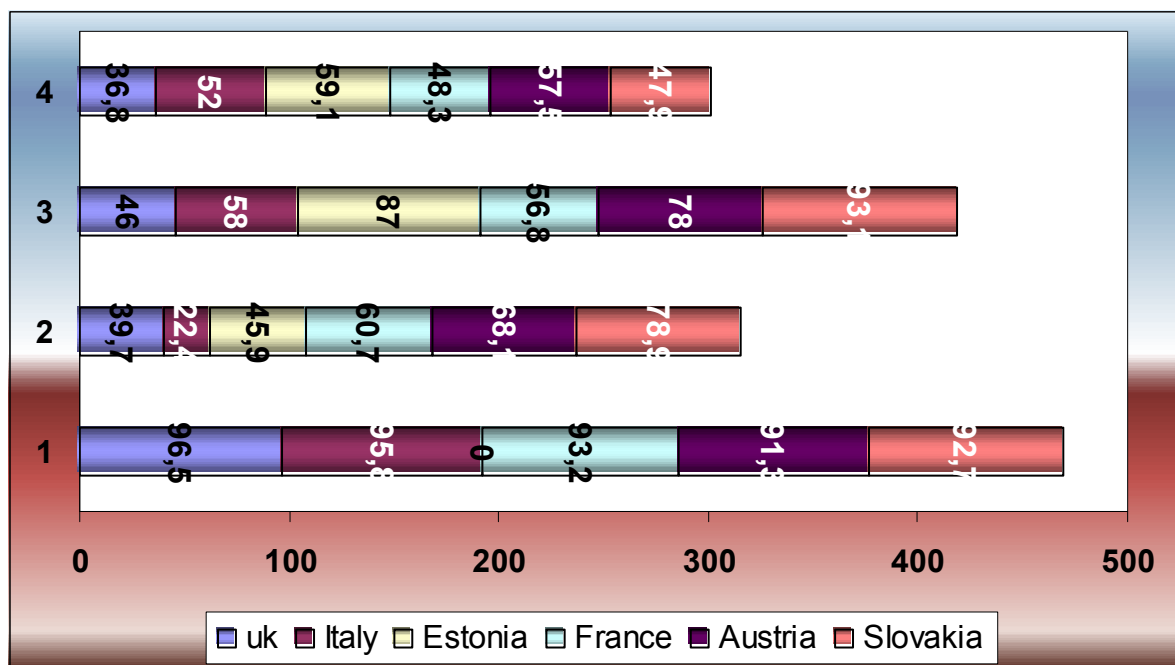
**Question no. 3(7): How often are parliamentary elections held?**

This presumably easy question on the organization of parliamentary elections wielded surprising results. Slovakia (93%) is a “leader” of young European democrats.

**Question no. 4(8): Does the Prime Minister have the right to dismiss Parliament?**

Overall, young people scored lowest in this question (ranging 36.8%-59.1%). This was the most difficult question and the most problematic one. It does not provide any information on “knowledge” only, yet it speaks about the “values” of the respondents. At the same time it provides relevant information regarding respondents’ “civic maturity and knowledge of parliamentary democracy”.

CHART no.3 Questions about National politics NO 1-4

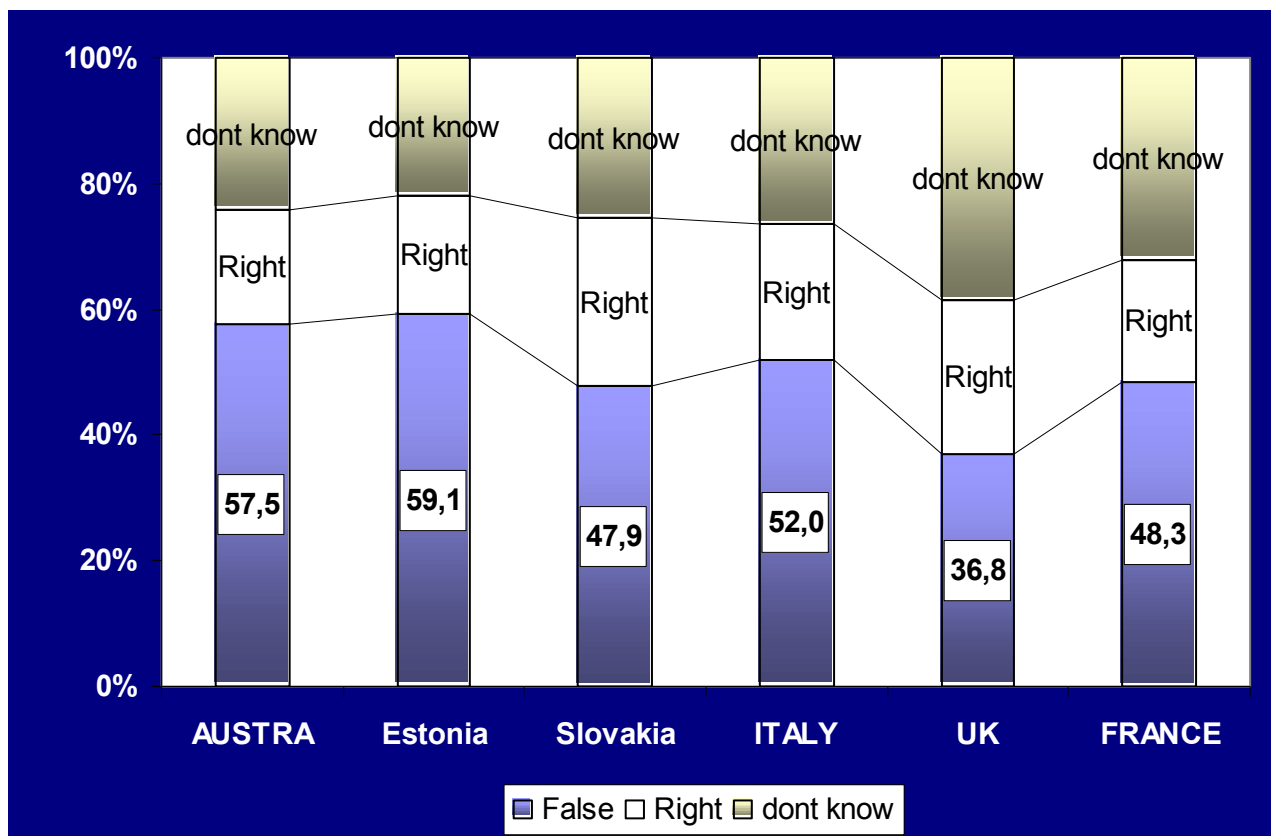


What captured the attention of political scientists and politicians in all participating countries is the fact that approximately 40-50% of **young people do not have knowledge regarding how parliamentary democracy works.**

This was true also in the Slovak case where young people admitted they did not know the answer (25%) and even more (27%) *claim that it is right if the Prime Minister had the right to dismiss Parliament.*

In the case of the United Kingdom more young people (39%) admitted that they did not know the answer. However, the number of incorrect answers did not differ significantly from other countries. Yet the complicated relationships between executives, representatives, and the monarchy are a very unique aspect of the United Kingdom

**CHART no.4 Does the Prime Minister have the right to dismiss Parliament?**



**Age - Gender**

In **Austria**, more men than women under 18 (W: 78.9%-M: 81.9%) knew this principle of parliament democracy when compared to those age 18-25 (men and women: 73-74%).



In the **Slovak, Italian and English** samples the results were reversed. Young men above 18 reported more correct answers than women. Girls gain their knowledge at schools more than in practical life through political participation.

**France** reported interestingly balanced score between right and wrong answers in both age groups and sexes (70%-73%).

### **The Knowledge about democracy and attitudes towards democracy: Slovakia**

#### *Parliamentary democracy and authoritarianism*

Since 1989, the young generation in Slovakia has received rich knowledge on issues that have been disputed in the National Parliament and within the ruling coalition, even after 1998 (e.g. University tuition, tracing of financial/wealth sources).

Many of them hold an assumption that **only a strong leader would be able to solve problems of our country more efficiently** (28.2% of young people).

**Table 3**

The Prime Minister has the right to dismiss Parliament

– a strong leader is able to solve problems more efficiently than Parliament

	Strong leader would be more efficient than Parliament					Total
Prime Minister has the right to dismiss the Parliament	Strongly agree	Agree	I don't know	Don't agree	Strongly disagree	
Right	39.7	37.4	<b>40.3</b>	28.4	15.4	34.%
Wrong	60.3	62.6	59.7	<b>71.6</b>	<b>84.6</b>	65.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Mutual correlations of these two attitudes imply (Table 3) that incorrect knowledge about how democracy works, i.e. the relationship between executive and legislative power, is interconnected with distrust in the ability of the Parliament to solve the problems of our country. Those who refuse “strong leader” (in Table 3 this attitude was expressed by “disagree and strongly disagree”) know that the Prime Minister does not have the right to dismiss Parliament. Only parliament has the right to dismiss Ministers and the Prime Minister. The results might imply that those who have some fundamental knowledge about principles of plural democracy do not agree with the statement that a strong leader is better than the worst parliament.

### ***Political knowledge and preference of political party***

When we speak of the “affinity” (“close” or “very close”) for a political party among young people, we may find different levels of knowledge among the supporters of different political parties.

In Slovakia correct knowledge on how parliamentary democracy works is high above the average score among those who feel **very close** to KDH-christian democracy (77%), SDKU (75%) and SMER-socialdemocracy (70%). Those who are “very close” to HZDS-LS scored well below the overall average with only 56.3% of correct answers. Supporters of HZDS-LS who feel just “close” to their party, performed the same as supporters of other political parties.

Who are the supporters of “a strong leader” and “ample rights of the Prime Minister”? These are primarily represented by young people with a low standard of living, low education, and those whose parents also have a lower educational. For the vast majority of them, politics is perceived as too complicated and not in the scope of their interest.

### **Reflection**

The results of political knowledge among young people are not the quality reflection of civic education in Slovakia that we would like to see. Still, the comparison showed that the same situation can be found in other countries as well.

Interest in politics, national politics in particular, is associated with higher knowledge of democratic principles. For example, in Slovakia, knowledge climbs higher no matter what political orientation young people prefer (“left-wing” or “right-wing”), 71-72%. More intense political preferences underscore fundamental knowledge of democracy and its principles.

The Indicator from the eight knowledge questions implies that with increasing age (15-25) the score in Slovakia is growing with an exception of **knowledge about how parliamentary democracy works**. This knowledge is significantly influenced by education on democracy and citizenship as taught in Civic Education and Science on Society courses.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, this knowledge is undoubtedly determined by the transformation process of the political system in post-communist countries like Slovakia. Young people are rather skeptical when it comes to public political life; they distrust institutions of the state of law, there is a tendency to support autocratic forms of leadership in the society.

*Our finding confirms the hypothesis that education in some countries (e.g. Austria) devotes much attention to EU issues and its institutional background. Likely due to more precise attitude toward studying and memorizing, women measure overall better on knowledge than men.*

*In other countries (e.g. Estonia) young people between 18-25 gain knowledge via political participation and general interest in politics which is more typical of boys and young men than girls and young women.*

*In the third group of countries (e.g. Slovakia) real civic and political participation invokes rather contradictory doubts to what young people learned at school about principles of democracy.*

Democratic citizenship of individuals and nations is built on gaining the knowledge of a democratic legal system. Developing one's knowledge potential is one part of legal awareness, yet not the only one, and, under certain social circumstances, not even the decisive one. Another element that interferes with the whole process is the conflict of social interests. This conflict could eventually, after reaching a certain limit, in fact eliminate the constructive knowledge potential that was gained through education.<sup>8</sup>

The rather worrying results of the civic knowledge test on EU issues may be viewed as a challenge to modernize education towards democratic citizenship in schools as well as in informal education outside of schools. Year 2005 was declared "The Year of Education toward European Democratic Citizenship."

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<sup>7</sup> Interviewees in Edinburgh(56%) and Manchester(61%) were significantly less likely to be exposed to any formal education about the European Union than those from other sites participating in the study. For example: Vienna(18%), Bratislava(31%), Chemnitz and Bielefeld(34-36%). Final reports Youth and European Identity(2002). Proj.coord.L.Jamieson, Uni of Edinburgh.Brussel, February 2005, pp.45

<sup>8</sup> A new type of citizen occurs. While in 1995 we would have called him „pseudo-democrat” (valaškár): he knows principles of democracy and a state of law very well, yet he prefers other than democratic means (valaška – transl., axe, sword) to be used in the name of social justice. R.Roško: Smer demokratické občianstvo.Bratislava,SU SAV 1995, p.108.

Many assignments of this program can be found in the Action Plan of Youth politics in Slovakia for 2005<sup>9</sup> and are a substantial part of the European commission monitoring the participation and educating the youth in all EU countries<sup>10</sup>. The results of the survey communicated important information for everyone involved in youth work, youth policy, and youth education within the European Union.



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<sup>9</sup> Action Plan of Youth Politics 2005 was approved by the Slovak government in March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Communication from the Commission to the Council on European policies concerning youth. Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe- implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship. Mr. Figel (SK) in association with Mr. Špidla (CZ). Brussels 30.05.2005, p.9.