2013 Debates of University Students from Serbia and Slovakia

Strengthening Debating Skills and Promoting Democratic Values among Youth

A project of M.E.S.A.10 in cooperation with CEAS,
supported by the National Endowment for Democracy

mesa10

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In the spring of 2013, MESA10, in cooperation with its partner, Center for Euroatlantic Studies in Belgrade (CEAS), launched the project of innovative online debates between the university students from Serbia and Slovakia. It aims at promoting democratic values, strengthening debate skills, and encouraging independent and critical thinking among university students in both Serbia and Slovakia. In cooperation with two universities from Serbia and two from Slovakia, MESA10 organized two series of lectures and conducted two debate tournaments on Euro-Atlantic integration, with a special emphasis on NATO.

Having pursued both EU and NATO membership after regaining freedom in 1989 and having become a full NATO member in 2004, Slovakia can serve as a powerful example of successful democratic transition for countries in the Western Balkans and beyond. MESA10 was actively involved in a number of Slovakia's reform processes and has used its experience and know-how to share lessons learned and best practices with counterparts abroad. Drawing on the extensive experience of its team and experts in the context of Slovakia's NATO accession and membership, MESA10 is making a contribution to promote an open debate about NATO among the university students.

The students from four universities were selected to participate in the project, taking into consideration universities' curricula and strong emphasis on political science and security studies. Two universities were from Serbia: Belgrade University and University of Novi Sad. In Slovakia, students from Comenius University of Bratislava and Matej Bel University of Banska Bystrica participated in this pilot project.

The project consisted of two rounds of tournaments between university students - one in the spring semester and the other one in the fall semester. Student teams competed in front of their domestic audiences. Audience members were encouraged to comment on the arguments presented during the debates and pose questions. Debate tournaments were preceded by lectures on NATO, security issues and regional cooperation. Each debate tournament included a an opinion poll mapping the positions of students.

The project begun with a simple question: Can a debate among university students from two different countries help them strengthen their skills and have an impact on their opinions? As the debates were prepared, other questions appeared: Will the students be interested in debating issues that can carry a strong political and emotional weight? Will they have an interest in more information about European and Transat-

lantic Security? Will they be interested to work more in this field? Will the debates encourage the students to work with students from other countries on joint security projects? Do the students believe that Slovakia's experience from its integration into European and Transatlantic institutions is useful to Serbia? Will they be able to use that experience while shaping their opinions and later on?

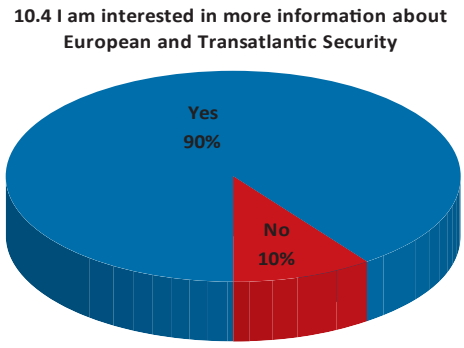
We certainly do not have all the answers to these questions. However, the results of the debate tournaments and of the opinion polls are encouraging. Students from Serbia and Slovakia are ready to undertake and prepare for difficult challenges. They are neither shy nor unwilling to formulate their opinions and to support them with arguments. Yes, they are in the process of mastering their debating skills. Yes, there is a long way to go to achieve that. But this is, above all, a learning process. We are glad that we could have contributed to that process. And we hope that you will find the students' responses worth your attention.

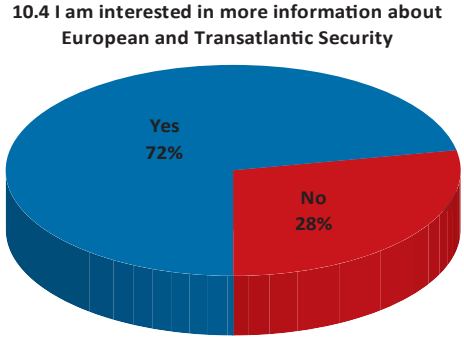
A number of students who were polled, have answered questions in both semesters. However, in the fall semester poll, we have deliberately included also students who were not part of the tournaments. We decided to do that to determine whether such an inclusion would have any impact on the students' answers. To achieve that, some of the students polled were neither in the audiences at the time of the debate tournaments nor on the debating teams. In addition to that, in the fall semester, we have polled a higher number of junior students. In the spring semester, 50% of students were under 21 years, while in the fall semester, 63% of the students were younger than 21 years. As the results demonstrate, the participation in the debates and seniority of the students has a substantial impact on the opinions of students. This can be clearly seen in points 2 and 3, 13 and 14 and the others.

On the other hand, some of the questions in the polls ended with similar results (see points 20.3, 20.4, 20.5, 20.6). It is worth noting that none of these topics were discussed in the course of the tournaments.

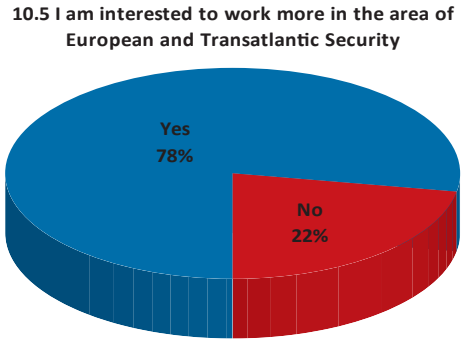
In addition to that, some identical data was gathered in the spring and fall semester. However, it was not connected to answering any question. In fact, the only identical result in both spring and fall semester polls was the ratio of participating men and women. In both semesters, 61% of the participants were women. The remaining 39% were men. The number of students participating in the polls, was not identical in both semesters.

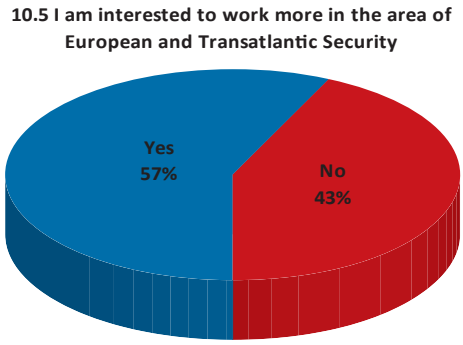
1. Students are eager to learn about European and Transatlantic Security. In the spring semester, 90% of the students were interested in more information about European and Transatlantic security. A decrease to 72% in the fall semester can be attributed to the inclusion of responses of younger students and those who did not participate in the tournament. However, even with that, an impressive almost ¾ of the students are interested in more information about European and Transatlantic security.



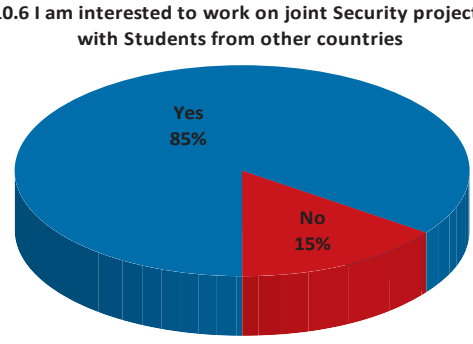


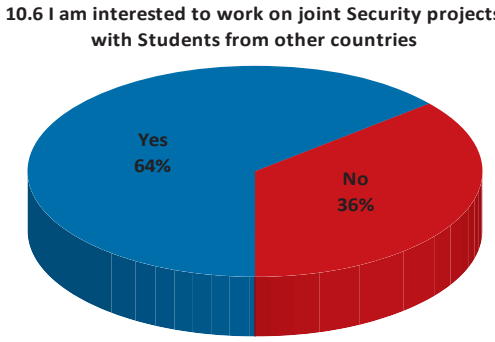
2. Students are interested in working more in the area of European and Transatlantic Security. The majority of students are interested in working more in the area of European and Transatlantic security. As the spring semester shows (78%), if the students have an opportunity to be a part of the tournament and to get more information about European and Transatlantic security, their interest grows (by 23%).



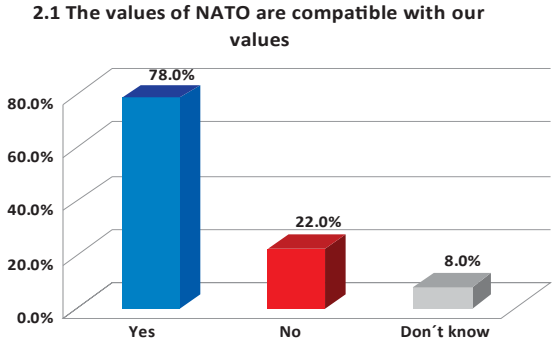


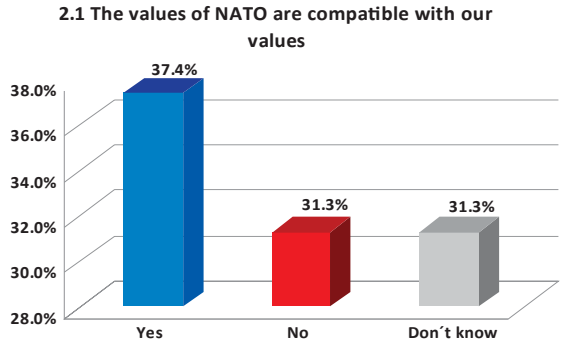
3. Students are interested in working on joint security projects with students from other countries. The majority of students (85% in the spring and 64% in the fall) have interest in working on joint security projects with foreign students. If the students are younger and they do not have an opportunity to participate in the tournament, their interest in working on joint security projects with students from other countries decreases (by 21%).



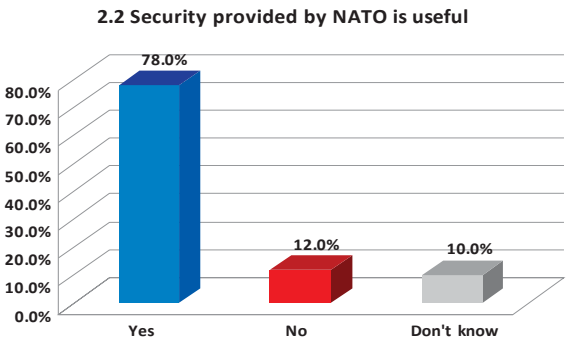


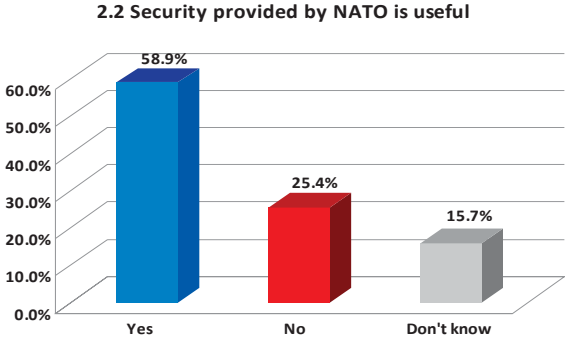
4. Do the students believe that the values of North Atlantic Treaty Organization are compatible with theirs? When the values of NATO were discussed in the spring semester, 78% of students thought that the values of NATO are compatible with their values. The issue was not included in the fall semester tournament. The result was a major contraction in "yes" from 78% to 37.4% and an increase of those without an opinion from 8% to 31.3%.



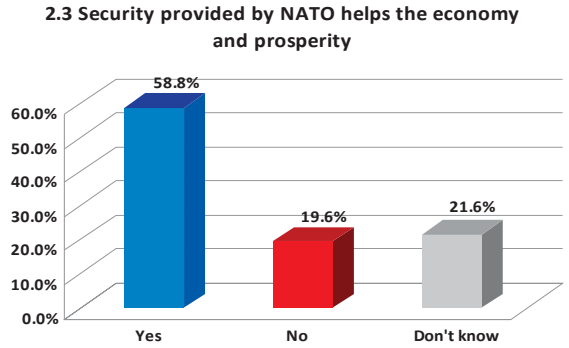


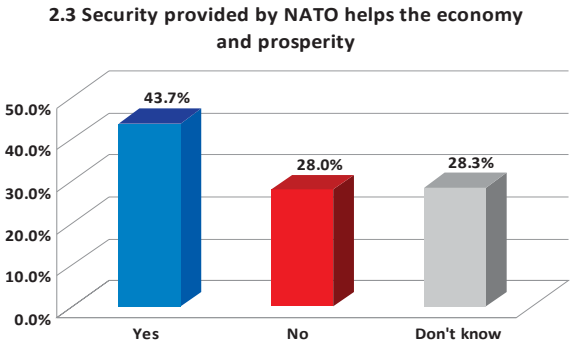
5. Security provided by NATO is useful. The majority of students in both semesters believe that security provided by NATO is useful (78% in the spring and 58.9% in the fall semester).



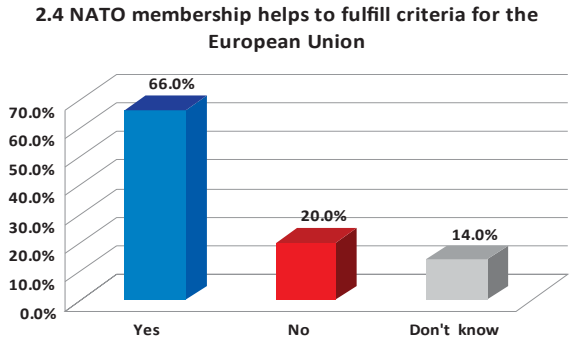


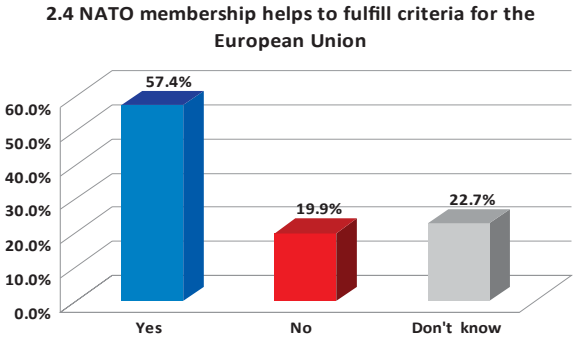
6. Security provided by NATO is helpful to the economy and prosperity. Majority of students in the spring semester (58.8%) were convinced that security provided by NATO helps economy and prosperity. In the fall semester, the support fell to 43.7%).



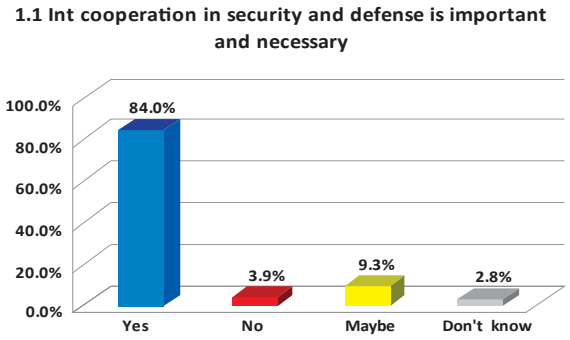


7. NATO membership helps fulfill criteria for membership in the European Union. The majority of students (66% in the spring, 57.4% in the fall) believe that NATO membership helps fulfill criteria for EU membership.

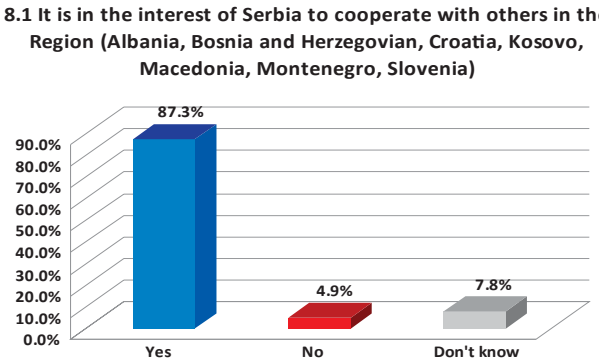


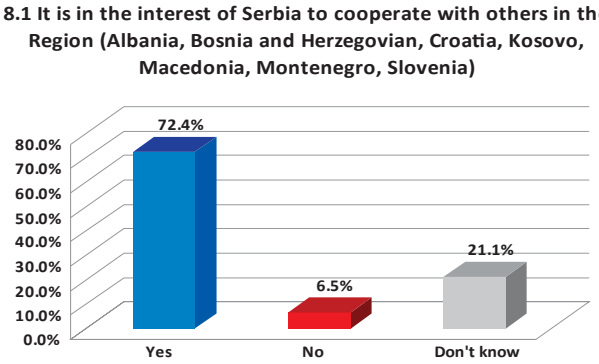


8. Students think that international security cooperation is important. 84% of the students replied with a clear "yes". However, we have included this question in the fall semester poll only.

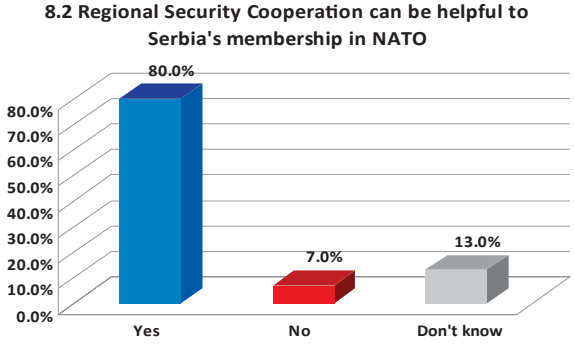


9. Students believe that it is in the interest of Serbia to cooperate with others in the region. Almost ¾ of the students in both semesters believe that. Spring semester resulted in an impressive "yes" of 87.3%. Inclusion of younger students and those who did not take part in the tournament ended in a decrease by almost 15% in the fall semester. While the number of those responding with a "no" was relatively stable in both semesters, the number of undecided students increased almost by 15% in the fall semester.

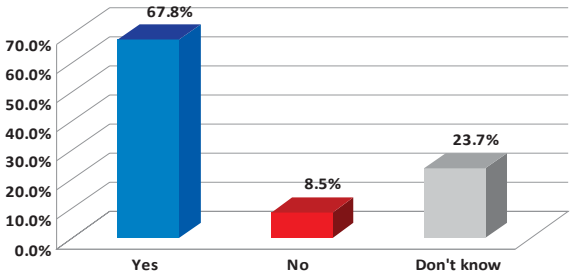




10. Regional security cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in NATO. More than 2/3 of the students (67,8%) think that regional security cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in NATO. The data in the spring semester were even higher and reached 80%.

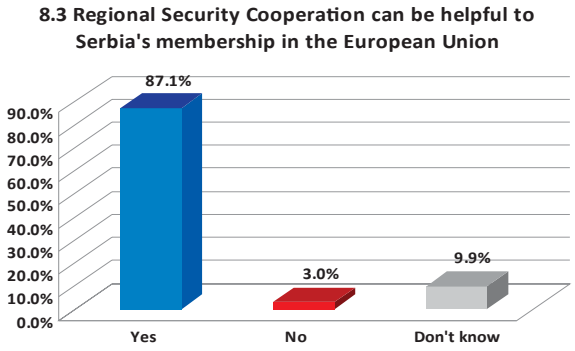


8.2 Regional Security Cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in NATO

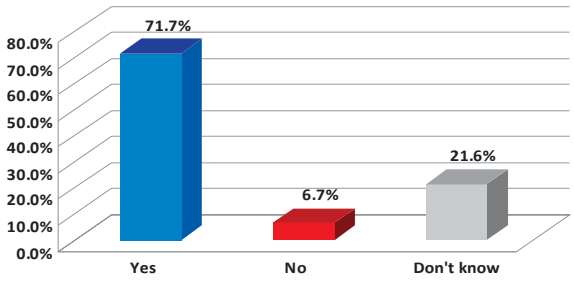


11. Regional security cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in the European Union. More than 2/3 of the students (87.1% and 71.7%) are persuaded that regional security cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's EU membership.

8.3 Regional Security Cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in the European Union

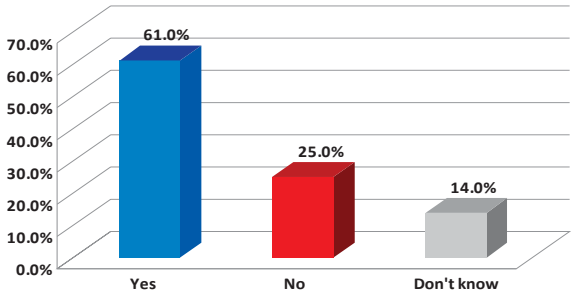


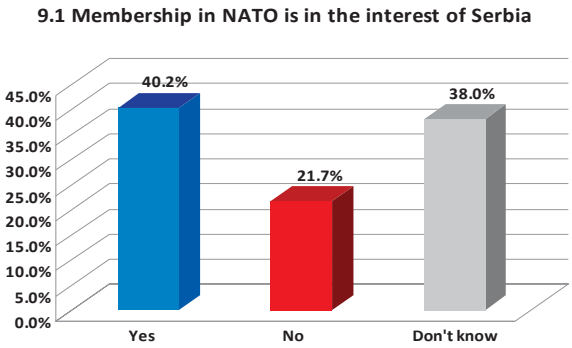
8.3 Regional Security Cooperation can be helpful to Serbia's membership in the European Union

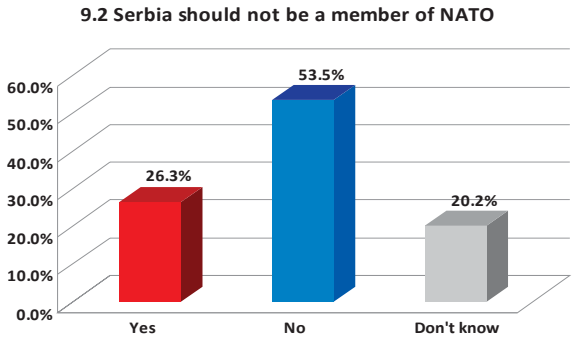


12. Membership in NATO is in the interest of Serbia. 61% of students in the spring semester were of the opinion that NATO membership is in the interest of Serbia. Support for NATO membership was lower by 20% when younger students and those who have not participated in the tournament were included in the fall polls. Similarly, the number of undecided grew by 24%.

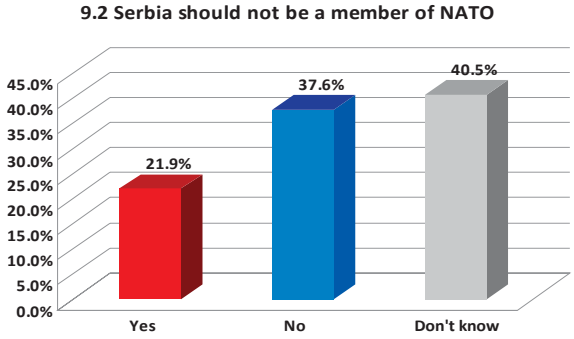
9.1 Membership in NATO is in the interest of Serbia



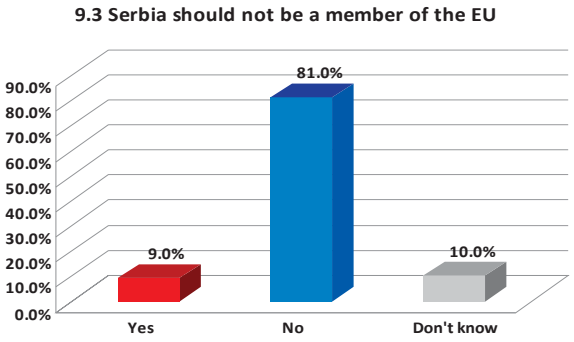


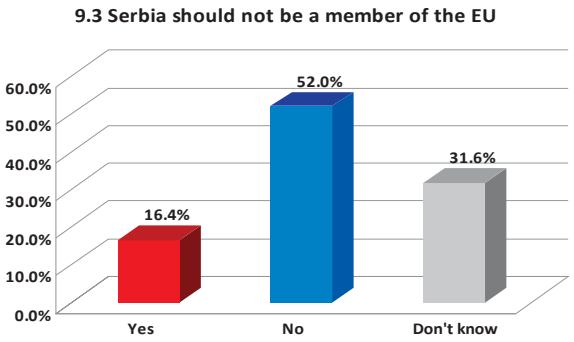


13. Do students believe that Serbia should not be a member of NATO? A negative question about Serbia's membership in NATO was also put to the students. Responses are close to mirroring those in point 11.

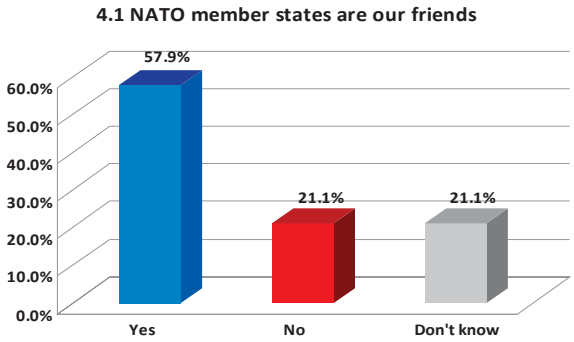


14. Students do not believe that Serbia should not be a member of the European Union. Majority of students in both semesters did not think that Serbia should not be a member of the European Union. However, in the fall semester, the "no" response was significantly weaker (52%), almost by 30%. There was a stronger "yes" and also a substantial increase of undecided students in the fall semester.

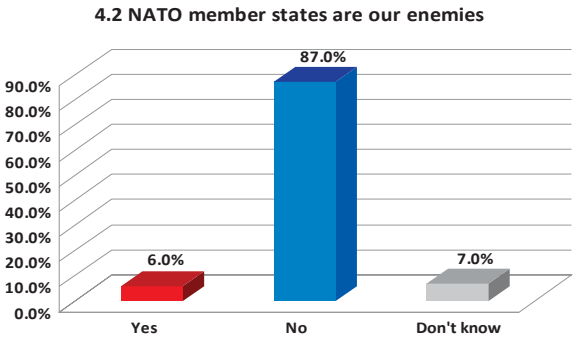


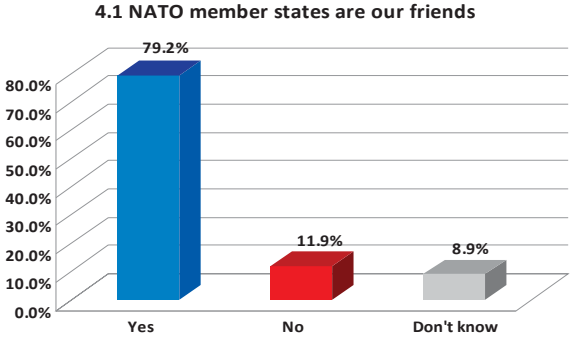


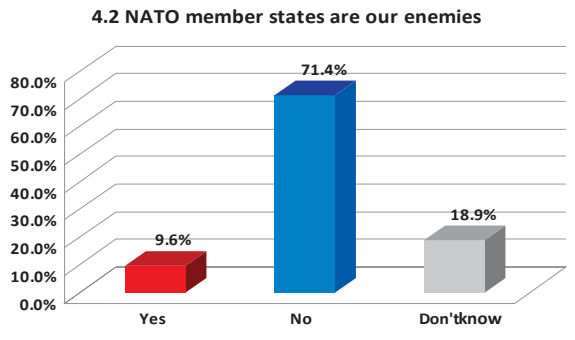
15. Students believe that NATO member States are their friends. Majority of students think that NATO member states are their friends. In the fall semester, the figure was at 57.9%, while in the spring semester it reached 79.2%.



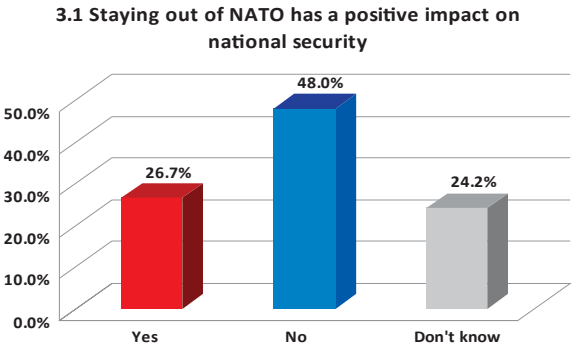
16. Students do not believe that NATO member States are their enemies. More than 2/3 of the students do not think that NATO member states are their enemies. In the spring semester, the figure reached 87%.



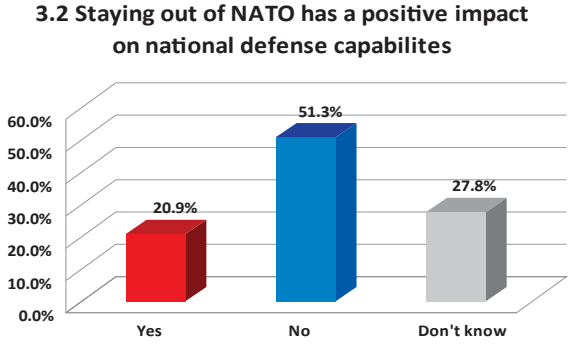




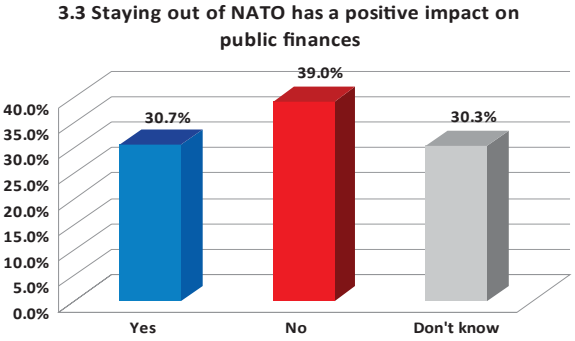
17. Staying out of NATO does not have a positive impact on national security. The question was asked in the fall semester only. Only 26.7% of students are of the opinion that staying out of NATO has a positive impact on national security.



18. Staying out of NATO does not have a positive impact on national defense capabilities. The majority of students (51.3%) did not believe that staying out of NATO has a positive impact on national defense capabilities. The poll was done in the fall semester only.

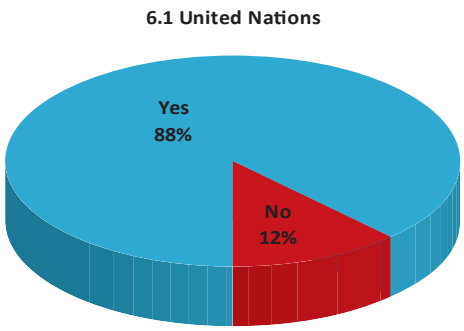


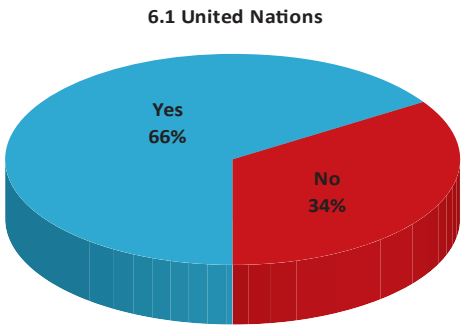
19. Staying out of NATO does not have a positive impact on public finances. Though the students are slightly leaning towards "no", they are rather closely split into "yes", "no" and "don't know". The poll was done in the fall semester only.



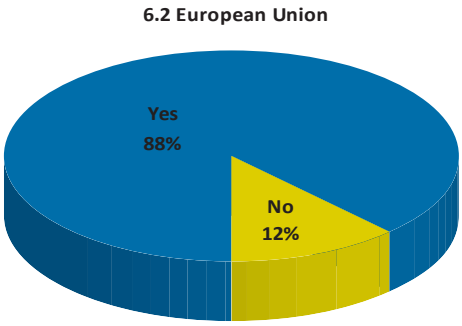
20. Students say who their friends in security are. 88% support in the spring semester and 81% support in the fall semester made the European Union the winner. NATO came second with 81% and 70%. United Nations made it to the podium with a strong showing of 88% in the spring semester but with a significant drop to 66% in the fall semester. Thermometer for Russia registered comparable temperatures in both semesters, while the one for the United States went from the warm 56% in the spring semester to cold 40% in the fall semester.

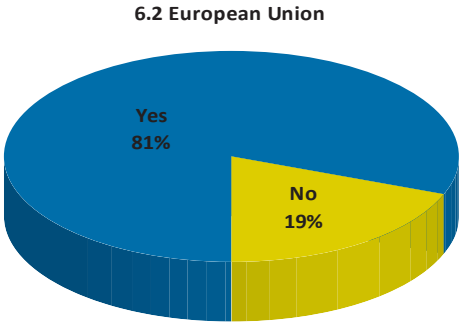
20.1. United Nations



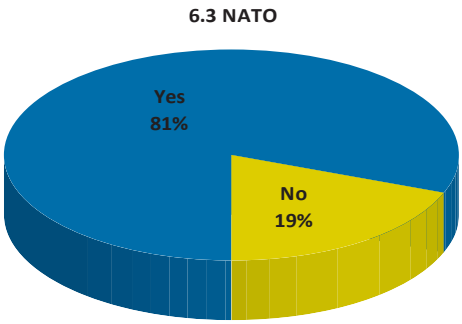


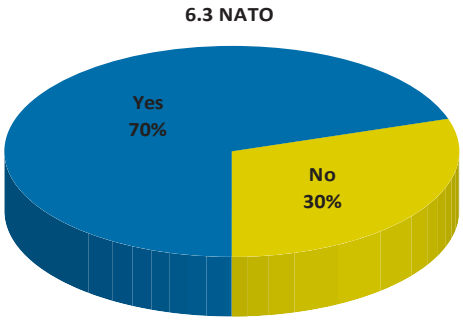
20.2. European Union



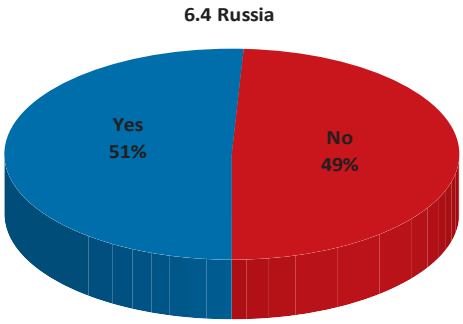


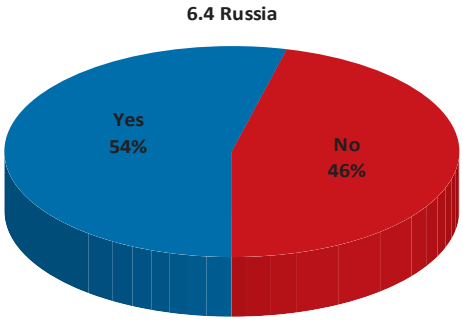
20.3. NATO



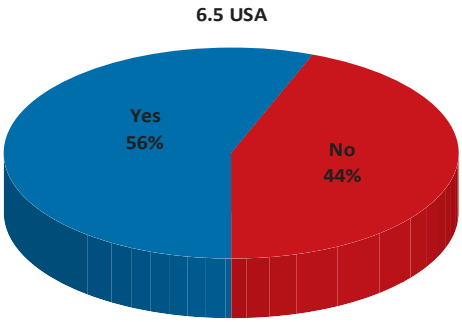


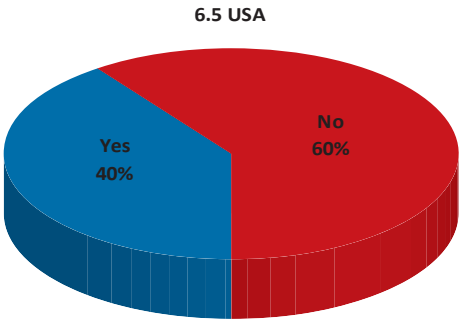
20.4. Russia





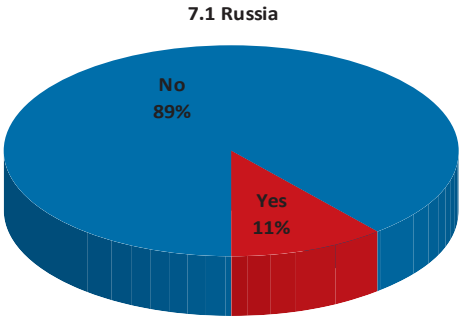
20.5. United States

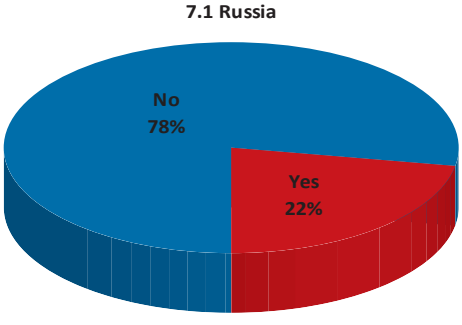




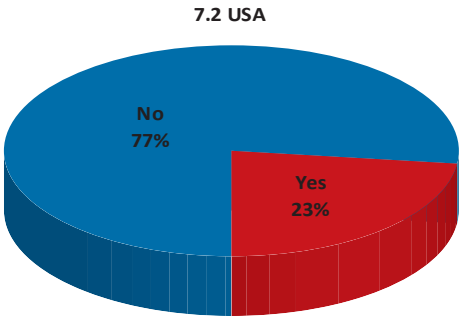
21. Students identify threats to security. Economic Crisis was at the forefront (86% and 81%), followed by Organized Crime (82% and 83%), Regional Political Instability (79% and 77%) and Terrorism (59% and 58%). These numbers demonstrated a remarkable stability in both semesters. It needs to be noted that these issues were discussed in neither tournament. The number of those students who regard Russia as a security threat grew twice (from 11% to 22%), while the figure for the United States rose in the fall semester by 6% only (23% and 29%).

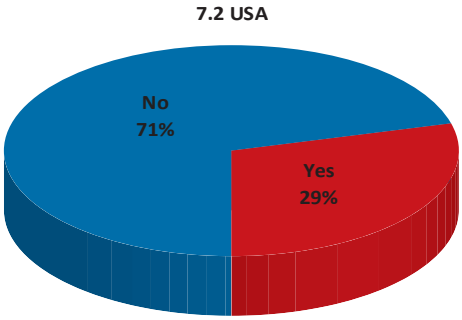
21.1. Russia

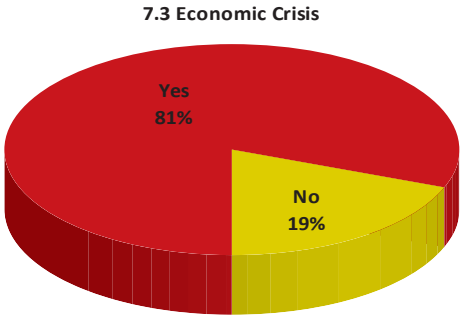




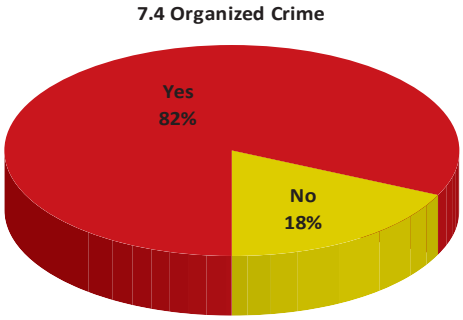
21.2. United States



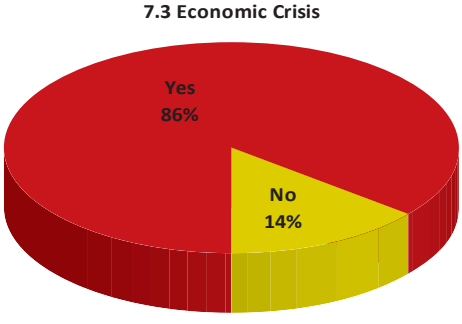


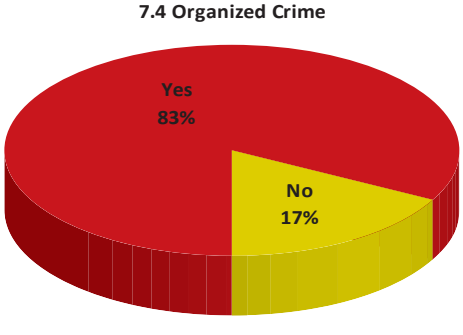


21.4. Organized Crime

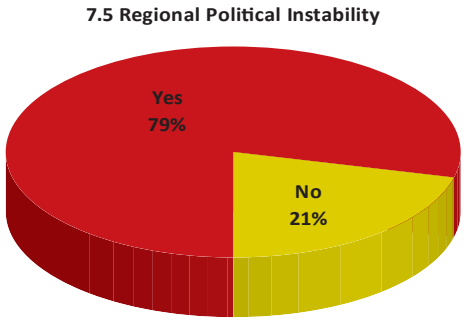


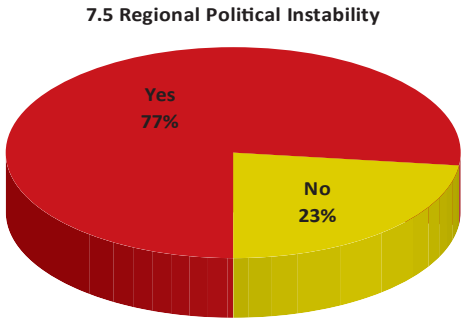
21.3. Economic Crisis



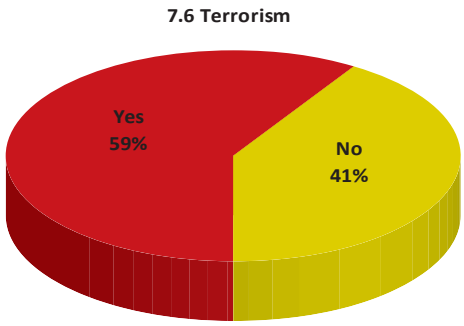


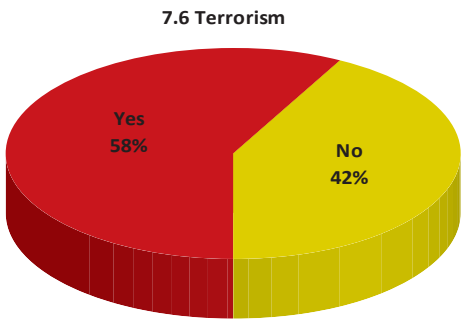
21.5. Regional Political Instability



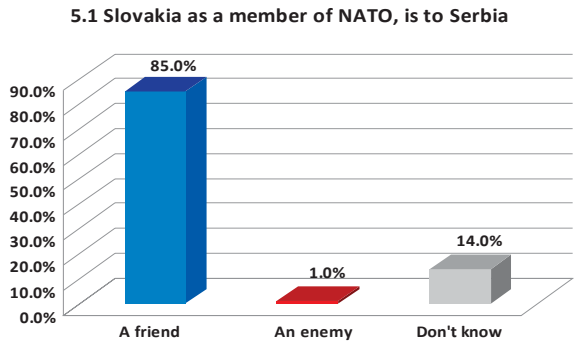


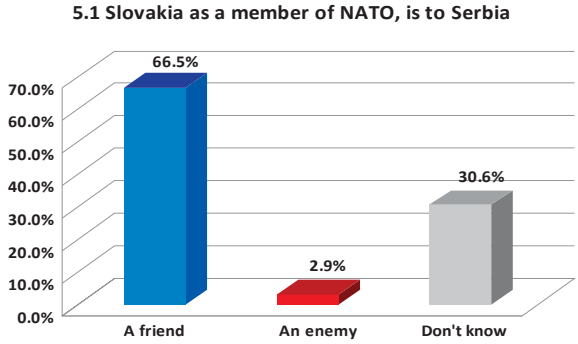
21.6. Terrorism



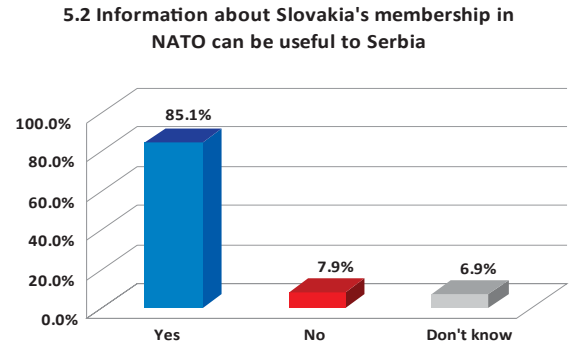


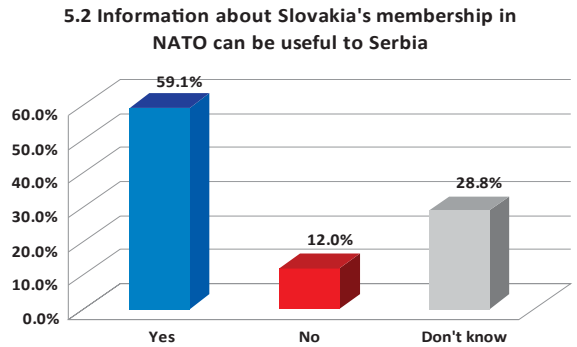
22. Students believe that Slovakia, as a member of NATO, is a friend of Serbia. More than 2/3 of the students think that Slovakia is a friend of Serbia. Affirmative answer was significantly stronger in the spring semester (85%). The number of undecided grew more than twice in the fall semester.





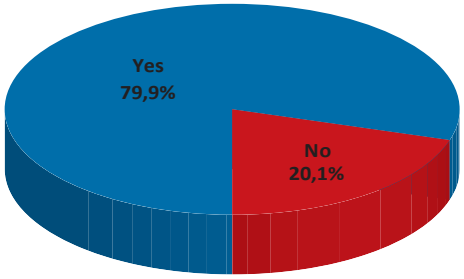
23. Students believe that the information about Slovakia's membership in NATO can be useful to Serbia. A strong 4/5 of the students (85.1%) in the spring semester believed so. The figure decreased to 59.1% in the fall semester.





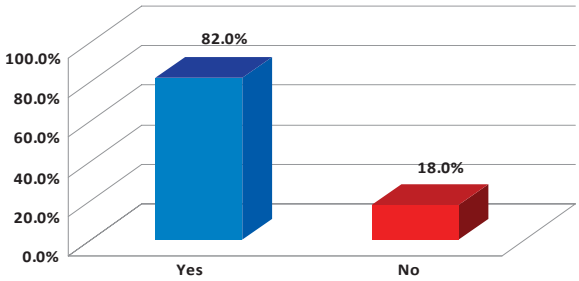
24. Students believe that the lessons of security and defense cooperation of Visegrad countries can be useful to Serbia. The issue of Visegrad security and defense cooperation was specifically discussed during the fall tournament only and resulted in a strong "yes" of 79.9%.

1.2 Lessons of security and defense cooperation of V4 can beuseful to Serbia

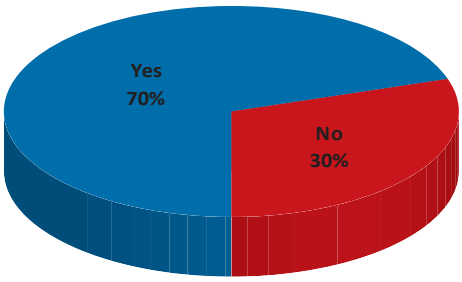


25. Students are interested in attending/watching the next debate. More than 2/3 of the students in both semesters were interested in attending/watching the next debate tournament. In the spring semester, as we polled only the students in the audiences of the tournaments, the figure reached 82%, while in the fall it was lower, at 70%.

I would be interested in attending the next debate

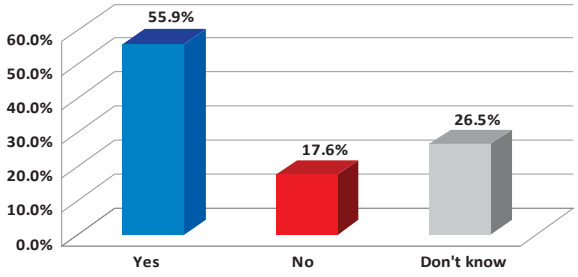


1.3 I am interested in attending/watching the next debate

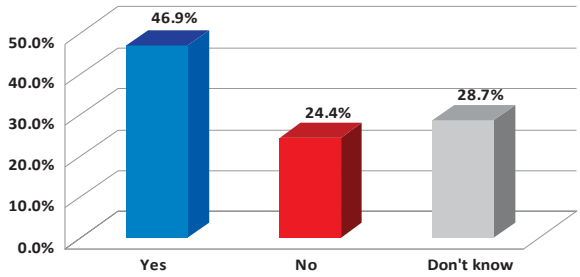


26. Students are interested in being a tournament team member. The majority of students in the spring semester (55.9%) expressed their interest. Their number decreased by 9% in the fall semester (46.9%).

10.7 I am interested in being a part of the debate team in the future

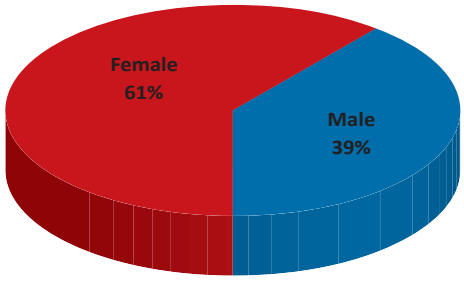


10.7 I am interested in being a part of the debate team in the future

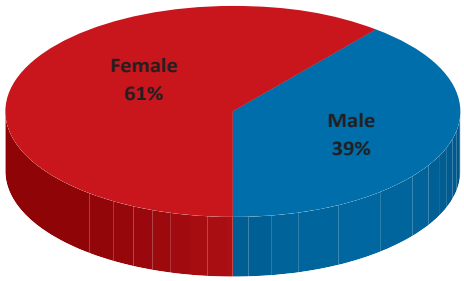


27. Stronger participation of women. Significantly higher number of women participated in the debate tournaments (61% compared to 39% of men).

10.1 Sex

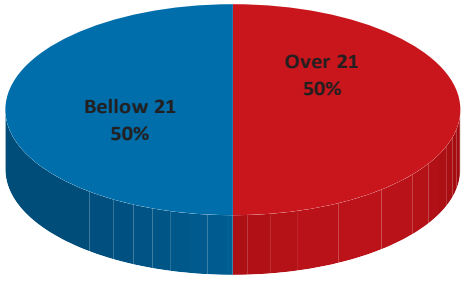


10.1 Sex

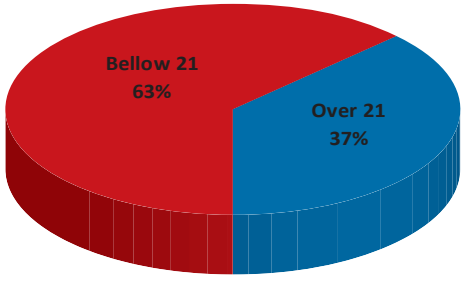


28. Younger students in the fall semester tournament. In the fall semester, junior students were included in the polls. This resulted in an increase of students bellow 21 years by strong 13%.

10.2 Age



10.2 Age



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