Activity Report

Universities under pressure: party, personnel, and dissent in Socialist Slovenia

In 2026, the EUI's Widening Europe Programme has fostered a wide range of important new research. This includes a new research initiative, "Universities under Pressure: Party, Personnel, and Dissent in Socialist Slovenia," led by Professor Glenda Sluga (European University Institute) with Tomaž Ivešić (New University/ Nova Univerza, Ljubljana). Centered on the history of the University of Ljubljana, when it was part of a Yugoslav higher education system, the project combines a "view from above" – party directives, rectorate correspondence, ministerial communications, and faculty council minutes – with a "view from below" – faculty dossiers, appointment and promotion files, competition reports, external reviews, student records, memoirs, and selective oral histories, to trace how career trajectories diverged for professors inside and outside the Communist Party, and whether student critics paid a measurable price for dissent.

On 20 May 2026, the Faculty of Slovenian and International Studies at New University in Ljubljana hosted the workshop "Universities Under Pressure," bringing together researchers from Slovenia, Croatia, Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to examine how universities across state-socialist Europe navigated political pressure and ideological vetting, and how they responded to the suppression of academic dissent. This included papers examining the formal and informal mechanisms through which the socialist state constrained academic freedom in Slovenia. Luka Martin Tomažič (Alma Mater Europaea, Maribor) applied Lon Fuller's "inner morality of law" to the normative environment governing Slovenian academics, arguing that, beyond the familiar restrictions of socialist legalism, an underlying unpredictability further eroded academic autonomy. Jernej Letnar Černič (Nova Univerza, Ljubljana) revisited two of the darkest episodes in the history of Slovenian higher education, the show trials of Boris Furlan, first postwar Dean of the Faculty of Law, and of anatomist Milan Cunder, to argue that academic freedom survives only where rule-of-law safeguards are robust. Ana Šela

(University of Maribor) examined a dimension of control, showing how the State Security Service extended its surveillance to foreign students at the University of Ljubljana, who were simultaneously celebrated as symbols of Yugoslav non-alignment and treated as security risks.

A second panel moved from law and surveillance to the everyday mechanics of personnel vetting. Željko Oset (Nova Univerza, Ljubljana) presented archival findings, showing how references to “working-class,” “peasant,” “bourgeois,” or “petty bourgeois” origin featured in political character assessments of Slovenian scientists in the late 1940s and early 1950s, though social origin proved less decisive for careers than conformity and participation in party-linked organizations. Tomaž Ivešić (Nova Univerza, Ljubljana) presented his research on the 1974 Ljubljana student trial, examining how the regime used legal mechanisms to criminalize critique and monopolize public discourse. Tomislav Kardum (Institute of History, Zagreb) offered a comparative counterpoint from the University of Zagreb, tracing how communist youth organizations enforced ideological conformity through “courts of honor” and press campaigns against "reactionary" professors between 1945 and 1948.

The closing panel widened the lens beyond Yugoslavia. Agata Zysiak (University of Vienna) traced academic biographies in postwar Poland to show how institutions continued to reward inherited cultural capital even under Stalinist reform. Jan Surman (Masaryk Institute, Prague) examined sociologist Radovan Richta, a “liberal” among Czechoslovak socialists who, after 1968, became a face of normalization, to interrogate the legends around his political shifts and their effect on his standing in the Eastern bloc and the West. László Szabolcs (ELTE Budapest) closed with a study of how socialist Hungary sought to control cross-border academic mobility while researchers pursued their own professional interests within that system.

For Tomaž Ivešić, co-organizer of the workshop, the event “provided an excellent forum for in-depth academic discussion, bringing together researchers to exchange ideas on the challenges facing higher education in different historical and political contexts.” He noted that the discussions were “highly productive and generated numerous new perspectives for future research, particularly regarding the value of a transnational approach to studying universities under pressure.” Participants, he added, “identified several promising avenues for collaborative comparative research that extend beyond individual national case studies,” and there was “a broad consensus to build on the workshop by developing a joint research project that would strengthen the emerging research network and deepen cooperation among the participants.” In the longer term,

he said, participants “also agreed to work towards preparing a larger collaborative proposal for funding under the Horizon Europe programme.”

Arina Fedorova
PhD Researcher
EUI Department of History

This project has received funding via the EUI Widening Programme call 2026. The EUI Widening Europe Programme initiative, backed by contributions from the European Union and EUI Contracting States, is designed to strengthen internationalisation, competitiveness, and quality in research in Widening countries, and thus foster a more cohesive European Higher Education and Research area.

Co-funded by
the European Union