

Intellectuals as the Opposition in Slovenia in the 1980s

Intelektualiści jako opozycja w Słowenii w latach osiemdziesiątych XX w.

ABSTRACT: In the search for a way out of the 1980s crisis, there were differences both between the leaders of the six Yugoslav republics, and between the authorities and their intellectual critics. In Slovenia, public criticism of the authorities emerged in the punk subculture, in magazines, books and films. Since 1982, open letters and petitions with signatures were published in newspapers, proposing changes to certain laws. Some new social movements found support in the youth organization (Union of Socialist Youth of Slovenia) and in the Slovenian Writers' Association, so that the activities did not take place in illegal forums. In January 1985, intellectuals and people from the state structures debated both cultural and clearly political issues on a public platform for the first time. Since, in the opinion of Slovenian intellectuals, the League of Communists of Slovenia did not react strongly enough to the centralist pressure from Belgrade, they themselves organized a public tribunal on constitutional changes (1987) and the need for a new Slovenian constitution (1988). Since the Slovenian authorities did not prevent this kind of activity by the Slovenian intellectual opposition, it was criticized by other Yugoslav republics for allegedly supporting "counter-revolutionary" forces and "separatists."

KEYWORDS: intellectuals, opposition, Slovenia, open letters, *Nova revija* magazine, Slovenian Writers' Association

STRESZCZENIE: W trakcie poszukiwania drogi wyjścia z kryzysu lat osiemdziesiątych XX w. uwidoczniły się różnice zarówno między przywódcami sześciu republik jugosłowiańskich, jak i władzami oraz ich krytykami. W Słowenii publiczna krytyka rządzących pojawiła się w subkulturze punk, na łamach czasopism, w książkach i filmach. Od 1982 r. gazety publikowały listy otwarte wraz z nazwiskami sygnatariuszy, postulujące zmiany w niektórych ustawach. Część nowych ruchów społecznych zyskała poparcie Związku Socjalistycznej Młodzieży Słowenii i Stowarzyszenia Pisarzy Słoweńskich, dzięki czemu ich działalność nie odbywała się na nielegalnej płaszczyźnie. W styczniu 1985 r. intelektualiści i przedstawiciele struktur państwowych po raz pierwszy wzięli udział w publicznej debacie poświęconej zagadnieniom nie tylko kulturalnym, lecz także wyrażnie politycznym. Ponieważ zdaniem słoweńskich intelektualistów Związek Komunistów Słowenii nie reagował wystarczająco na centralistyczną presję Belgradu, oni sami zorganizowali publiczne dyskusje nad zmianami w konstytucji (1987) i potrzebą nowej słoweńskiej konstytucji (1988). Jako że słoweńskie władze nie przeciwdziałały takiej działalności słoweńskiej opozycji intelektualnej, były one krytykowane przez rządzących w innych republikach jugosłowiańskich za rzekome popieranie sił „kontrrewolucyjnych” i „separatystów”.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: intelektualiści, opozycja, Słowenia, listy otwarte, czasopismo „Nova revija”, Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Słoweńskich

The Wave of Criticism of the ‘Cultural Opposition’ in the First Half of the 1980s

Just as the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev was a political breakthrough for the Eastern Bloc countries, for Yugoslavia the turning point was the death of its undisputed leader, Josip Broz-Tito, in May 1980. However, even before that, the situation of the Yugoslav intellectuals was very different from that of other Eastern European Communist countries. In March 1980, in anticipation of Tito's death, the CIA prepared an analysis in which it pointed out this fact and substantiated it with the following statements:

The frustrations of being denied a voice in local politics are thus not as widely felt in Yugoslavia as in other parts of Eastern Europe. In addition, the government does not prohibit intellectuals from acquiring materials in the West or from contacting their Western colleagues – nor are the intellectuals bound by rigid ideological restrictions.

The regime also has an open border policy – which permits thousands of Yugoslavs to work and travel in the West – and is thus unable to control completely the ideas and political practices to which the population is exposed.¹

After Tito's death, Yugoslavia no longer had a strong leader, and the differences between the republics became increasingly apparent. Slovenia was the most economically developed part of the country, and the standard of living of its population was far above the Yugoslav average. The first disagreements between the republics were thus the result of the economic crisis, soon followed by national contradictions. Criticism of the authorities was loudest in Serbia and Slovenia, while in Croatia the authorities made public criticism impossible. The most liberal atmosphere was in Slovenia,² as, despite controlling the activities of intellectuals, the authorities did not prosecute or imprison them, as occurred in Serbia, despite their increasingly harsh criticism.

In June 1980, one month after Tito's death, an initiative was prepared to establish a new journal. This document was signed mainly by writers, poets, and humanities and social sciences professors at the University of Ljubljana. Among them were certain individuals who were under surveillance by the Ministry of the Interior, or who had even been imprisoned for their beliefs, as well as people who had been forced to give up their professorships due to political purges and/or had suffered various difficulties due to the harsh restrictions on cultural and political activities at the time. The signatories of this document addressed their initiatives to all authorities and political bodies whose approval was required for the publication of the journal and who could have supported it with state subsidies. The signatories argued that a new journal was necessary because “the media space occupied by the existing journals has been stagnant for years. There can be no discussion or debate among these publications, either, as they are no different from each other. Despite appearances, there are hardly any differences between the few magazines on the market.”³

¹ “Yugoslavia: A Look at the Society on the Eve of Post-Tito Period,” https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000371959.pdf (accessed 7 October 2024).

² A. Bing, J. Mihaljević, and J. Niesser, “Yugoslavia, Cultural Opposition and Dissent in Yugoslavia: Different Shades of Red,” in *The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe*, ed. B. Apor, P. Apor, and S. Horváth, Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2018, pp. 104, 109.

³ *Nova revija* 1 (1982/83), p. 1.

The initiative to establish this new journal, intended to bring together numerous intellectuals, was met with little approval from the government. A series of debates took place in various forums, where the pros and cons of the new magazine were repeatedly discussed. The poet Niko Grafenauer, philosopher Tine Hribar, and sociologist Dimitrij Rupel were the most active supporters of the journal's establishment. It is also worth mentioning that the initiative was supported by the basic organization of the League of Communists of Slovenia (LCS) in the Slovenian Writers' Association (SWA) and that several members of the LCS who successfully defended their position at official forums were among the signatories. Nevertheless, the politicians who disapproved of the 'oppositional' orientation of the magazine founders did not succeed or did not want to prevent the official founding of the magazine. The long debates that followed unintentionally led to the journal's name; as the *Nova revija* ("New Journal") debate went on for over a year, the founders decided to call it just that.

The very first issue, published in May 1982, confirmed the authorities' worst fears, as the journal's authors initiated debates on topics that had previously been silenced, and pursued a policy of publishing articles that other periodicals refused to print. In doing so, they continued the tradition of the magazines banned in the 1950s and 1960s. While the first of these, *Beseda* ("Word," published 1951–1957), was still limited to artistic and broader cultural topics, its also banned successors, *Revija 57* ("Magazine 57," published 1957–1958) and *Perspektive* ("Perspectives," 1960–1964), were already publishing contributions with a distinctly ideological and political focus.⁴ However, authors in *Nova revija* made a point of being even harsher in their criticism than their predecessors to whom they referred.

The topics researched by the magazine's contributors included the role of the Communist Party during and after World War II and the treatment of its opposition. Initially, the authors relied on the statements of Edvard Kocbek and Dušan Pirjevec, who were both still members of the leadership in 1945 (the former as a Christian Socialist, and the latter as a Communist) but soon distanced themselves from it. In 1985, the *Nova revija* magazine publicized the case of Stane Kavčič, who had been forced to resign as the president of

⁴ A. Gabrič, "The younger generation's magazines in the eyes of communist ideologues," *Review of Croatian History* 15 (1) (2019), pp. 43–59; B. Repe, *Obračun s "Perspektivami"* Ljubljana: Znanstveno in publicistično središče, 1990, pp. 40–88.

the Slovenian government in 1972. *Nova revija* also ensured the (unofficial) rehabilitation of many Slovenians whose cultural contributions had been ignored by the state officials. In discussions with public figures who had served time in Communist prisons because of their convictions and whose works had been banned, the criticism was always aimed at ensuring greater freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. The State Security constantly screened the work of the *Nova revija* circle, reporting to leading politicians on their ideas, views, and activities. However, the authorities never took action against *Nova revija* by banning the publication of individual issues or prosecuting the editors and authors of published articles.⁵

Although the *Nova revija* was a notable novelty, it was not alone in its field. While the intellectuals in the Soviet Union and its allies had great difficulty publishing their works, and *samizdat* was often the only solution, the situation was different in Yugoslavia, especially in Slovenia. The works of controversial authors were also published by the state publishing houses and in magazines subsidized from the state budget. In the years following Tito's death, there was an avalanche of criticism of the state leadership published in cultural works. Authors began to speak openly about the days of Yugoslav Stalinism and the darkest chapters of the Communist rule, which had been taboo until Tito's death, including everything regarding Goli Otok, the largest concentration camp in Yugoslavia located on an island in the northern Adriatic and intended primarily for the so-called "kominformovci" (Cominform supporters), the alleged sympathizers of the Soviet Union after Yugoslavia's break with it.⁶

Two novels were particularly well received in Slovenia. Branko Hofman's difficulties in publishing his novel *Noč do jutra* (The Night Until Dawn) show how much the changed cultural and political conditions affected book publication. The novel, focusing on the taboo subject of the Goli Otok camp, was printed in November 1975 by one of Slovenia's most renowned publishing houses, Slovenska Matica. Shortly before the book was bound, the entire edition was withdrawn from print without a prior formal ban. After protracted negotiations, Hofman's novel finally reached the readers in the autumn of 1981. As is usual in such cases, the book sold out immediately, and the second

⁵ A. Šela, D. Friš, "Nova revija v primežu Službe državne varnosti," *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia* 27 (4) (2017), pp. 828–833.

⁶ A. Gabrič, "Slovenska kulturnopolitična razhajanja med kulturno ustvarjalnostjo in politično akcijo 1980–1987," *Zgodovinski časopis* 56 (1/2) (2002), pp. 206–210; D. Bilandžić, *Jugoslavija poslije Tita 1980–1985*, Zagreb: Globus, 1986, pp. 178–197.

edition of the coveted novel soon followed the first one. The work was also translated into several foreign languages.⁷

The second taboo subject – the Stalinist trials in Slovenia – was addressed in the novel *Umiranje na obroke* (Dying in Instalments) by Igor Torkar, who himself was convicted during the so-called Dachau trials of 1949. The first edition was published in 1983, but not as the author had foreseen. The book was to be accompanied by an appendix consisting of an opinion poll with the question (posed by Torkar): “Do you believe that the Dachau trials held in Slovenia were Stalinist?” However, the last pages, containing the affirmative answers of thirteen highly respected Slovenian cultural figures, was missing. The pages had been removed on the spot at the printing plant following the intervention of the State Security Service. Torkar’s novel sold out just as quickly as Hofman’s and was reprinted several times. However, from the third edition onwards, it included the controversial opinion poll.⁸

When the abovementioned novels shook up the reading public, there were also adopted the measures allowing the publication of numerous older works that the Communist authorities had banned in previous years. Thus, writers became some of the leading critics of the Communist regime.

In the mid-1980s, the Slovenian Writers’ Association (SWA) went beyond a purely professional organization and increasingly became a political one. In 1985, the Committee for the Protection of Freedom of Thought and the Press was founded within the SWA. Under the chairmanship of Venko Taufer, the Committee began to react to violations of basic human rights and freedoms.⁹

The critical wave in the arts was the strongest in Serbia and Slovenia, and books about what had previously been taboos became especially resounding. These taboos were related primarily to the bloodshed after the end of the World War II and the terror of the Communist authorities during their ascent to power and during their reign, with the staged political trials and concentration camps. Furthermore, Serbian writers also addressed the issue that was not noticeable in the other republics, i.e. the national question in Yugoslavia. Some of their works already addressed the theme that would be further developed in the subsequent years: that the Serbian nation had won wars and fought heroically for the common South Slavic state but had been

⁷ A. Gabrič, “Prepoved izida romana Branka Hofmana ali šestletna noč do poznega jutra,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 75 (3/4) (2021), pp. 492–515.

⁸ I. Torkar, *Umiranje na obroke*, Ljubljana: Littera picta, 1996, p. 438.

⁹ A. Gabrič, “Slovenska kulturnopolitična razhajanja,” pp. 213–214.

split into several parts when it joined this state due to the division into the republics. Thus, it was actually a victim and prisoner of Yugoslavia.¹⁰

Although the written word was best at expressing critical thought, social and political criticism also manifested itself in all other areas of culture, including theater, music (especially punk), poetry, film, etc. Let us point out a few films that open up new perspectives on the time of the founding of the communist regime in Slovenia. The 1980 film *Nasvidenje v naslednji vojni* (Farewell Until the Next War) introduced the figure of the partisan who is not a mythical heroic image but rather makes fun of the ardent revolutionaries. The 1982 film *Razseljena oseba* (Displaced Person) introduced Slovenian political emigration into film art and presented the two diametrically opposed views of what had happened on Slovenian soil during World War II. In the same year, the ban imposed on jazz (as a product of American imperialism) in the cultural life of the post-war period was illustrated by the film *Rdeči boogie* (Red Boogie). In 1987 – a few years after the comedy with the same title had already made audiences laugh in several theatres – the film *Moj oče socialistični kulak* (My Dad the Socialist Kulak) depicted the futility of collectivizing agriculture.¹¹

The demand for political freedom was increasingly formulated in the open letters signed by an increasing number of like-minded people and addressed to the state or political authorities. The demand for the abolition of Article 133 of the Criminal Code (or the abolition of the so-called verbal offence) originated in Belgrade and also found vocal supporters in Slovenia, although the Slovenian courts hardly ever applied it. More than 600 artists and scientists signed an open letter published in the *Naši razgledi* (Our Views) magazine in July 1982, in which they spoke out against the secondary education reform taking place at the time and resulting in the deterioration of the education system. In November 1983, around 1,500 people signed a petition against the death penalty. Other open letters demanded independent journalism or supported various political prisoners. Initially, the open letters had a hard time getting into the newspapers. However, after just a few years, their publication in the press became almost the norm.¹²

¹⁰ J. Dragović-Soso, *Spasioci nacije: intelektualna opozicija Srbije i oživljavanje nacionalizma*, Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2004.

¹¹ A. Gabrič, "Pot v demokracijo in samostojnost," in A. Gabrič, D. Guštin, V. Prebilič, J. Prinčič, C. Toplak, and A. Valič, *Osamosvojitve Slovenije: priručnik za učitelje osnovnih in srednjih šol*, Ljubljana: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo, pp. 28–29.

¹² A. Puhar, *Peticije, pisma in tihotapski časi*, Maribor: Obzorja, 1985, pp. 98–109; A. Gabrič, "Pot v demokracijo in samostojnost," pp. 29–32.

Critical responses in the public and the increasingly bold media opened new possibilities for dialogue between people with different opinions. The reactions of the authorities differed between the republics. The wave of criticism in culture was the strongest in Serbia and Slovenia, where the authorities accepted it with various levels of tolerance. What clearly distinguished Slovenia from the rest of Yugoslavia and thus from the rest of the Eastern world was its legal practice at the time. In Slovenia in the mid-1980s, it was common to ban articles without their authors standing trial, and it was also not uncommon for courts to drop charges against magazines and publications.¹³ In Slovenia, tolerance was considerable, while in Serbia, where Slobodan Milošević gradually took over the power, it was in much shorter supply. There, the courts once again started persecuting intellectuals with increased zeal. Because of its increasing tolerance of those who thought differently, the Slovenian justice system was even criticised in 1988, as the provisions about the verbal offence “were used by all other courts in the country except for the courts in the S(ocialist) R(epublic) of S(lovenia).” The Ljubljana public prosecutor responded to these reproaches, claiming that these provisions were still in force in Slovenia and that in 1978–1986, Slovenian courts had deliberated on breaches of Article 133 (i.e. article on the so-called verbal offence) nine times.¹⁴ When the journalists of the *Mladina* weekly were arrested in the middle of 1988, on 9 June, the Serbian Writers’ Association expressed solidarity with the demands of the Slovenian Writers’ Association that the journalists should be released, voicing its concern “that arrests are spreading to your society, which had previously, for quite a while, been safe from them.”¹⁵

The counter-offensive of the authorities was most noticeable in Croatia, where the wave of criticism was far less prominent due to the media’s relative closed-mindedness. In October 1983, the Croatian orthodox Communist ideologist Stipe Šuvar prepared a consultation about the modern historiographic, memorial, and publicist literature, while in May 1984, he also organised a Croatian republican consultation. The materials for this consultation also included a list of recent works evaluated as politically unacceptable and

¹³ M. Horvat, “Cenzura, zaplembe, prepovedi tiskane besede v Sloveniji 1945–1990,” in *Kamniški sociološki zbornik: humanistične in družboslovne študije*, Kamnik: Kamniški sociološki zbornik, 1999, pp. 115–134.

¹⁴ A. Žerdin, *Generalni brez kape. Čas Odbora za varstvo človekovih pravic*, Ljubljana: Krtina, 1997, p. 256.

¹⁵ Archives of the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter ARS), SI AS 2027, box 36, 255, Dopis Udruženja književnika Srbije, 9 June 1988.

unsuitable. The list contained the works of 186 authors, mainly from Belgrade and Ljubljana.¹⁶ While certain Serbian authors included in this list also had to defend themselves in court, this no longer happened in Slovenia. Soon, this Slovenian particularity was also felt in the other parts of the state, and Slovenians were somewhat envied for the dialogue between the intellectuals and politicians that gradually developed.

The conflicts between artists and the authorities had far-reaching political consequences. The so-called Nazi punk affair of 1981, for example, represented a particular turning point for the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (LSYS), in which the future leaders of the League of Communists gained political experience. The affair began with the arrest of three young men who were allegedly punks and Nazis. These accusations, constructed by state security and backed up by propaganda and slander, were only valid in one respect: that the youth subculture refused to follow the path laid out by the programs of the ideological leadership – the League of Communists. This was also the problem faced by the LSYS leadership. The LSYS was forced to choose between two options: to listen to the Communists in power, as always, and lose its influence over a significant part of Slovenian youth, or to listen to the actual wishes of the youth and risk a deterioration of its relations with the LCS. The LSYS functionaries chose the second option and opposed (however tentatively) the League of Communists. A modicum of change was already noticeable at the LSYS Congress in 1982, when a decision was reached to support all activities popular with the youth at the time.¹⁷

The decision was a milestone in Slovenia's political development. The LSYS did not only open itself up to new musical trends but also to the peace, environmental, feminist, and lesbian movements, all of which were explicitly political. The fact that these movements were supported by an officially recognized political organisation contributed significantly to the propagation of views on general social issues other than those propagated by the Communist Party.

Politicians then would have often refrain from resorting to the (hidden) censorship they had made use of so zealously just a few years earlier. The feeling among intellectuals in the other parts of Yugoslavia – that Slovenia was an oasis in this part of the world – was not unfounded. Members of the

¹⁶ K. Nikolić, S. Cvetković, and Đ. Tripković, *Bela knjiga – 1984. Obračun sa "kulturnom kontrarevolucijom" u SFRJ*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2010.

¹⁷ G. Tomc, *Profano: kultura v modernem svetu*, Ljubljana: Študentska organizacija Univerze, 1994, pp. 194–197.

Slovenian judiciary were also increasingly of the opinion that the public prosecutor's office and the courts should primarily be concerned with establishing criminal and corporate liability and that the more sensitive issues of the freedom of the press were best left to other institutions. In their opinion, criminal courts and prosecutors' offices were not supposed to be used as instruments while discussing articles published by experts in philosophy, history, sociology, culture, and other fields, as the resolution of such issues was primarily in the domain of the professionals in these fields rather than the judiciary. The view that the judiciary was unsuitable for judging professional and political issues became increasingly prevalent. Thus, the debates between the authorities and the cultural opposition gradually shifted from the courts to a more public platform.¹⁸

The debates conducted through the cultural platforms became increasingly political. At the beginning of the decade, writers and artists still justified their opinions with the right to artistic expression. However, in the middle of the 1980s, they started abandoning this form of protection and focused the dialogue between the authorities and the opposition on new topics. The organizational initiative was taken over by the *Društvo slovenskih pisateljev* (Slovenian Writers Association, SWA), led by Tone Partljič as its president between 1983 and 1987 as well as Rudi Šeligo in the following four-year term. Increasingly often, the leading politicians reproached the intellectuals, claiming that they were not only dealing with the cultural questions but also introducing political connotations into the debate while hiding from reality by appealing to culture. Politicians believed that artists should only focus on the questions of culture, while political problems should remain under the auspices of political organisations. However, by criticising cultural activities and resorting to censorship, politicians often crossed this line and intervened in the cultural sphere.

The SWA organised several public debates in Slovenia's central cultural institution, the *Cankarjev dom* cultural and congress center in Ljubljana. At the SWA tribune on 9 and 10 January 1985, the participants were supposed to discuss the current cultural issues, but they crossed the fine line between the cultural and the political and talked openly about the pressing political issues. The president of the SWA, Tone Partljič, cautioned that people were

¹⁸ A. Gabrič, "Pot v demokracijo in samostojnost," pp. 42–45.

increasingly turning to the intellectuals and SWA members with questions about the current political problems.

Shouldn't our organizations, the Socialist Alliance of Working People and the League of Communists, take the time to consider why we writers are being asked about Kocbek, Dachau, Rog, and so on every time we discuss literature with the adult audience? Why are our fellow citizens turning to me, a cultural worker and writer, with these inquiries? Are they afraid to ask someone else? Don't they believe the answers they get? Political organisations should ask themselves why these frequently asked questions are not addressed to the League of Communists and the Social Alliance of Working People.¹⁹

Partljič emphasized this, pointing out that the SWA had become an acceptable political interlocutor for a broader circle of the public. One month later, on 25 February 1985, Tone Partljič began his report at the Association's General Assembly with the following words: "Please do not take offence if my introduction to the annual report on the work of our Association is somewhat 'political'. It is just that the current conditions, our commitment and the cultural and political circumstances of this time require such an approach. Politicians talk a lot about culture, so we cultural professionals are forced to talk about politics."²⁰

Under the presidency of Partljič's successor Rudi Šeligo, elected in March 1987, the Association took further steps in a more politically engaged direction.

The changes also influenced the patterns of political behavior in the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia. At its congress in April 1986, much criticism about the situation in the state could be heard, unlike the preceding congresses – especially regarding the economic problems faced even by the highly successful Slovenian companies due to the measures implemented by the federal government. This congress was probably the first occasion where the older leading politicians had to face the public and its direct disagreement with their standpoints, as the discussion also focused on the criticism aimed at the opponents of the ecological movement, or the workers' right to strike. Indirectly, it was apparent who strengthened the

¹⁹ *Slovenski narod in slovenska kultura / Javna tribuna Društva slovenskih pisateljev, Cankarjev dom, Ljubljana, dne 9. in 10. januarja 1985*, Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih pisateljev, 1985, p. 11.

²⁰ A. Gabrič, "Slovenska kulturnopolitična razhajanja," p. 215.

ranks of the opposition, also in light of the (unsuccessful) attempts to find a reason for the rapidly diminishing percentage of intellectuals and youth in the League of Communists.²¹

After the Congress, the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia was taken over by Milan Kučan. Like Gorbachev, he was a younger-generation Communist and a lawyer. Already at the Congress, he openly spoke about the profound economic and social crisis in the country, in contrast with the previous political practice of the Communist authorities. In conclusion, he underlined that “people do not only live on bread, but they also do not live only on ideas.” He also emphasised that it was only possible to address the crisis by relying on knowledge (and, consequently, on intellectuals), which also diverged from the rhetoric of the older Communists, who usually referred to the working-class masses. “The intensive development of Slovenia and Yugoslavia should be based on overcoming the scientific and technological lag.”²² Kučan stated straightforwardly at the end of the Congress.

Disagreements Between Slovenian and Serbian Intellectuals

The viewpoints of the League of Communists of Slovenia differed significantly from the Communists from the other republics standpoint, especially of the League of Communists of Serbia, where Slobodan Milošević kept consolidating his power. However, such obvious differences did not only emerge among the Communists of the various Yugoslav nations but also among ‘cultural opposition,’ i.e., among the nations’ various intellectuals. The first face-to-face meeting between the Slovenian and Serbian intellectuals, where the political fate of Yugoslavia was discussed, took place on 15 November 1985 in Ljubljana. The meeting was supposed to be hidden from the eyes of the official politics. However, the secret police found out and reported this to the political leadership. The Serbian intellectuals discussed the crisis in Yugoslavia through the eyes of the Serbs, emphasizing the fragmentation of the Serbian nation, which lived in several republics even though it had allegedly sacrificed the most for Yugoslavia in both World Wars. The crisis in Kosovo was often mentioned as a pressing problem. On the other hand, the Slovenian

²¹ *Deseti kongres Zveze Komunistov Slovenije, Ljubljana, 17. april 1986*, Ljubljana: Komunist, 1987.

²² B. Repe, *Milan Kučan, prvi predsednik*, Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2015, p. 110.

intellectuals – the circle of the *Nova revija* contributors – frequently focused on comparisons with the West. Therefore, while the Serbs compared the development of Slovenia with the Yugoslav average, the Slovenians focused on the lag in Slovenian development compared to similar regions in the Western European countries.²³

After the departure of the Serbian representatives, Slovenians analyzed the discussion and agreed it had probably been the most sincere conversation about the destiny of Yugoslavia recorded to that day. However, they were disturbed by some of the arguments from their Serbian colleagues. While they agreed that Yugoslavia required thorough restructuring, they did not find any common ground regarding the future of Yugoslavia. The Slovenian intellectuals were concerned about the obsession of their Serbian colleagues with Kosovo and the Albanian question, as this obstructed the focus of the discussion on the topics of development, which was what Slovenians were primarily interested in. Regarding the relations with Belgrade, they were not worried – like the Serbs – merely about the leading Communists, as the Slovenian intellectuals believed that some central institutions were dominated by far too many people with the Greater Serbian agenda and that this was not merely a unique characteristic of one or the other political leadership. Some Slovenians were exceedingly bothered by the fact that their Serbian colleagues would not even begin to discuss the future of Yugoslavia in the context of Europe. Instead, the debate kept revolving and remained focused (merely) on the Balkans. In the conclusion, which would later turn out to be very accurate, one of the Slovenian intellectuals summed up the differences between the Slovenian outlook and the Serbian intellectuals participating in the discussion: “Boys, I’ll just go ahead and say that it’ll be impossible to have a solid discussion with them.”²⁴

The other side was not enthusiastic about the results of these discussions either, as, in their opinion, Slovenians showed no understanding for the question of Serbs in Yugoslavia. The Serbian representatives were deeply disappointed with the course of the talks. Dobrica Ćosić, as one of the most influential Serbian intellectuals, later reproached the Slovenian interlocutors for their egoism in supporting further decentralization of Yugoslavia. He stated that

²³ ARS, SI AS 1589, IV, t. e. 2637/37, Magnetogram pogovora v Ljubljani [Recording of the conversation in Ljubljana], 15 November 1985.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

he was the first Serbian Communist to realize that the Slovenians were not for Yugoslavia, but for their own national state within Yugoslavia under precisely defined conditions. In his later works, Dobrica Ćosić – a year later he was one of the co-authors of the *Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts* – described this sentiment most vividly. For several decades, he had seen Slovenians as the nation that had threatened the existence of Yugoslavia from within the most. In the 1980s, he complained in his writings that Slovenians, when they kept demanding decentralization, did not understand the sacrifices for Yugoslavia made by the Serbian nation. He thought that Slovenians did not understand and did not even want to comprehend the Kosovo problem; that they wanted to distance themselves from the Balkans too much; and that their aspirations for Europeanization could only result in a miserable existence on the European periphery.²⁵

Slovenian and Serbian intellectuals, who had until then been united in their criticism of the Communist authorities, disagreed in their opinions regarding the further destiny of Yugoslavia. Serbian intellectuals and politicians were the loudest advocates of the necessity to change the constitutional system. They claimed the Yugoslav political crisis had been caused by the strong confederal elements of the 1974 Constitution. The Serbian political leadership and intellectuals were also disturbed by what was, in their opinion, an excessive autonomy of both the autonomous provinces in the context of Serbia: Kosovo and Vojvodina. Allegedly, this situation placed Serbia in an unequal position compared to the other republics. Serbian politicians and intellectuals were relatively united in their opinion that the Serbs were the victims of the 1974 Constitution. Increasingly often, they would emphasize the dilemma, assessed by Slobodan Milošević in 1984 as the “disagreements about the issue of unity vs. separatism.”²⁶

In September 1986, when the *Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* containing these ideas was made public, members of some other nations became notably concerned about the Serbian position on Yugoslavia. The Memorandum outlined the Serbian national program and was based on the conviction that Serbia and the Serbs were neglected in Yugosla-

²⁵ L. Perović, “Srpski književnik, nacionalni ideolog i političar Dobrica Ćosić o Sloveniji i Slovencima,” in *Slovenska pot iz enopartijskega v demokratični sistem*, ed. A. Gabrič, Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012, pp. 200–202; M. Zajc, “Nova revija i odnosi sa Srbijom,” in *Jugoslavija: poglavlje 1980–1991*, ed. L. Perović, Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2021, pp. 726–730.

²⁶ S. Milošević, *Godine raspleta*, Beograd: Beogradski izdavačko grafički zavod, 1989, p. 33.

via, as the developed republics of Slovenia and Croatia supposedly held the majority of the power, which was also why they were so evidently opposed to changing the constitutional system.

The Entry of the 'Cultural Opposition' into the Center of the Political Arena

The leading figures of Slovenian cultural life finally became prominent in the political arena when the debate on amending the Yugoslav constitution began. In 1986, the Yugoslav federal leadership submitted proposals for new constitutional amendments, drafted under the dictate of the centralist forces in Belgrade, for discussion. In the same year, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts drafted the Memorandum that traced the Yugoslav crisis back to the 1974 Constitution and its (con)federal principle, stating that the Serbian nation was the greatest victim of this principle. Both were reasons enough to seriously consider a redefinition of Slovenia's national goals. External pressure temporarily defused the conflict between the Slovenian political leadership and the 'cultural opposition.' Since, in the opinion of the cultural circles, the official Slovenian politics reacted far too indecisively or even timidly to the pressures from Belgrade, they decided to take the initiative and define the Slovenian political will themselves.

In the autumn of 1986, the staff of the *Nova revija* magazine responded to the new political situation with a "contribution to the Slovenian national program." The editors called on their colleagues to reflect on the existence and development of the Slovenian nation, submit the most consistent and daring contributions, and refrain from "any self-censorship."²⁷ The *Nova revija* editors described these articles as "contributions to a program that does not yet exist, and whose formulation clearly exceeds the competencies of this magazine and its staff." The articles were published in the 57th issue of *Nova revija* in February 1987 and immediately triggered a political storm throughout Yugoslavia. The authors of the 16 articles were writers, professors of the University of Ljubljana, lawyers, philosophers, and sociologists, and their articles touched on sensitive issues such as the question of Slovenian statehood within Yugoslavia; the demand for Slovenian independence with reference to the

²⁷ ARS, SI AS 2096, box 5, a. e. 379, Dopis uredništva Nove revije – Francetu Bučarju [Nova Revija editors to France Bučar], 20 June 1986.

right to self-determination and separation from the federation; the demand to deprive the League of Communists of its privileges and monopolies; the use of Slovenian language in the Yugoslav People's Army; the increased rights of the civil society and individuals with regard to the state; and the demand for the depoliticization of many areas of social life.²⁸

The political demands, stated in the 57th issue of the *Nova revija* magazine, were subject to considerable criticism throughout Yugoslavia. The authorities resorted to the classic mechanism: the leaderships and field committees of various political organizations kept submitting resolutions, protesting the "unacceptable theses" of the *Nova revija* magazine, although the vast majority of those who protested never even opened the said magazine, let alone read it. The official responses from Belgrade were equally negative, while those in Ljubljana were divided, as the media also published favorable comments on the 57th issue of the *Nova revija*. Officially, the Slovenian political leadership was against the *Nova revija* demands. However, despite the maelstrom, the judicial authorities did not initiate any criminal proceedings. The charges, accusing the authors of the contributions published in the *Nova revija* magazine of hostile and counter-revolutionary activities, anti-state association, and hostile propaganda, were lodged by the Association of National Liberation War Veterans from Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. However, the Slovenian public prosecutor rejected it, as the 57th issue of *Nova revija* supposedly contained nothing it was accused of. The fact that the Slovenian public prosecution rejected the charges was another reason for the increasingly intense attacks against Slovenia in other parts of Yugoslavia. The federal public prosecutor attempted to take the initiative, and take over the proceedings himself. However, in June 1987, the Slovenian lawyers kept proving to him that such a move would be unconstitutional, as the incident was subject to the jurisdiction of the Slovenia, not the federal (Yugoslav) judiciary.²⁹

The echo even spilled across the Yugoslav border as the Western European media began to take note of the new political demands, whose realisation had the potential to cause significant political upheaval in that part of the world. The BBC, for example, broadcast a report repeating the accusations Belgrade

²⁸ *Nova revija* 57 (1987), p. 2.

²⁹ B. Repe, *Jutri je nov dan: Slovenci in razpad Jugoslavije*, Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2002, pp. 44–52; A. Gabrič, "Zaostrenost mednacionalnih odnosov," in *Slovenska novejša zgodovina: od programa Zedinjena Slovenija do mednarodnega priznanja Republike Slovenije: 1848–1992*, ed. Z. Čepič, N. Borak, and J. Fischer, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2005, pp. 1170–1173.

had been making against the Slovenian leadership all along – namely, that it supported the opposition and that the LCS and the intellectual opposition were becoming allies against Belgrade.³⁰

After the change at the top of the LCS at the Party Congress of 1986, when Milan Kučan was elected as the new president, the pressure against the ‘cultural opposition’ eased. The judiciary was no longer used as an instrument for dealing with the Party’s opponents, as had been the case until then, as can be seen from the Slovenian public prosecutor’s 1987 report: “The public prosecutor’s office should nevertheless accept certain criteria for banning printed matter, as the existing regulations for the press are vague and excessively flexible, leaving far too much leeway for measures that probably need not even be reasonable from the professional and political point of view.”³¹

The political affairs and the leniency of the Slovenian authorities reinforced the conviction that Slovenia was very different from the other Yugoslav republics. The fact that the ‘cultural opposition’ had also been considering the implementation of its program was demonstrated one month after the publication of the 57th issue of the *Nova revija* magazine, when the SWA called for a public debate on the adoption of constitutional amendments on 16 March 1987. The most notable developments announced at this meeting were that some of the leading members of the LCS and the members of the ‘cultural opposition’ had come together and discussed many of the most pressing political dilemmas professionally – i.e., without attempts at political disqualification – at a debate convened by the ‘cultural opposition.’³²

The cultural opposition started actively participating in the political scene when it touched upon the most pressing issue: the constitutional question of the relations between the Yugoslav Federation and the Republic of Slovenia. In June 1987, when a discussion brochure was presented during a public debate, the Constitutional Committee of the SWA was founded. In October 1987, when the majority of the demands submitted to the Federal Assembly in Belgrade were rejected (as usual), the SWA leadership asked its chairman Rudi Šeligo to “send a written request to the Constitutional Committee of the Slovenian Writers’ Association and propose that it begin drafting a new

³⁰ *Ampak*, supplement of *Nova revija* 141–142 (1994).

³¹ M. Horvat, “Cenzura, zaplembe, prepovedi tiskane besede v Sloveniji 1945–1990,” pp. 115–134.

³² *O ustavnih spremembah. Društvo slovenskih pisateljev. Javna tribuna*, Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1987.

constitution.”³³ This work was subsequently carried out by the Constitutional Committee of the SWA and the Constitutional Development Group of the Slovenian Sociological Association. At the second public debate, which the SWA organized on 25 April 1988, the *Gradivo za slovensko ustavo* (Materials for the Slovenian Constitution) were presented. The introductory contributions were followed by the proposal of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia.³⁴

Gorbachev in Ljubljana – Facing a Different Kind of Socialism

Mikhail Gorbachev visited Yugoslavia between 14 and 18 March 1988. At his express wish and against the will of the Yugoslav authorities in Belgrade, he also stopped in Slovenia to familiarize himself with the Slovenian version of socialism in Ljubljana.³⁵ His interlocutor, the President of the LCS, Milan Kučan, said that Gorbachev had described the Slovenian path as a “laboratory of socialism.”³⁶ Apparently, Gorbachev knew about the difference in the Slovenian approach but did not know the details. He perceived the meeting with Kučan as an “open demonstration of Slovenia’s independence” within Yugoslavia and deemed the Slovenian reforms far more radical than elsewhere in the country.³⁷ However, Kučan was of the opinion that Gorbachev’s reforms were on par with those that the reform Communists in Yugoslavia had strived for during the early 1950s.³⁸

Slovenian peculiarities were not hidden from those who were interested in them. The fact that Slovenia was different from other parts of Yugoslavia and other parts of the Communist world was assessed both in Yugoslavia and abroad. In his 1986 work *Jugoslavija poslije Tita* (Yugoslavia after Tito), the Croatian historian Dušan Bilandžić wrote: “In Ljubljana, the critical thought has developed more or less freely and normally, with a high level of tolerance by the responsible political factors. There, the Party officials have participated

³³ A. Gabrič, “Slovenska kulturnopolitična razhajanja,” p. 219.

³⁴ *Gradivo za slovensko ustavo*, Ljubljana: Časopis za kritiko znanosti, 1988.

³⁵ G. Bajc, J. Osojnik, “Obisk Mihaila Gorbačova v Ljubljani,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 60 (3) (2020), pp. 253–276.

³⁶ “Milan Kučan in Josip Vidmar o Mihailu Gorbačovu,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUrHZdeLE7g00:46–01:02> (accessed 7 October 2024).

³⁷ S. Romanenko, “Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem – SSSR i SFRJ 1985.–1991.,” in *Slovenska pot iz enopartijskega v demokratski sistem*, p. 42.

³⁸ B. Repe, *Milan Kučan, prvi predsednik*, pp. 120–123.

in the debate, including the highest-ranking ones, in a highly tolerant manner, from the position of partners and without threats of sanctions.”³⁹

Slovenian peculiarities were also noted in connection with the political upheavals in Poland, reported by foreign correspondents from Yugoslavia and American political analysts, who described the various attitudes towards supporting the Poles and Solidarity. A few months after December 1981, when Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law and banned the opposition, they reported in April 1982 that pro-Solidarity activities were led by small groups of dissidents, and the authorities tried to prevent them. Meanwhile, in Slovenia, the situation was exactly the opposite:

Placards with the Polish national colors and the Solidarity emblem decorated a sold-out rock concert sponsored by student organizations and the main shopping streets. This support for Solidarity among Catholic Slovenes reflects their desire that Yugoslavia clearly and publicly back the Polish reform movement. Without the approval of local officials, such controversial actions could not have taken place.⁴⁰

The last US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, who arrived in Belgrade at the beginning of 1989, was like Gorbachev also aware of the Slovenian particularity in Yugoslavia. He travelled to Slovenia soon afterwards, and met the most prominent Slovenian politicians. The American ambassador judged Slovenia primarily in light of its nationalism, which supposedly bore much of the responsibility for the disintegration of Yugoslavia. However, he also identified significant differences between the individual parts of Yugoslavia and often emphasized that its western part was not looking towards the East and Gorbachev but in the opposite direction instead. Regarding Slovenians, he stated that they “saw their republic as a nascent Western type democracy.” During the meeting, the president of the Slovenian government, Dušan Šinigoj, was “full of ideas and projects for economic cooperation with Western countries; never once in our meeting did he refer to Belgrade.” Zimmermann was even more enthusiastic about Slovenia establishing connections with the Western world at a meeting with the LCS leader Milan Kučan when he described the ‘Slovene spring’ as “a conscious effort by the Slovene Communist

³⁹ D. Bilandžić, *Jugoslavija poslije Tita 1980–1985*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ “Yugoslavia: Pro-Solidarity Activities in Slovenia.” CIA report of 6 April 1982. CIA FOIA Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000371994.pdf (accessed 7 October 2024).

party to turn the republic into a Western democracy, with free elections that the party was prepared to lose.” Kučan and other Slovenian politicians made it clear to Zimmermann that they still supported the unity of Yugoslavia but were no longer willing to be hostages to Milošević’s policies.⁴¹ They regarded European integration as a Slovenian goal but doubted this could be achieved via Belgrade.

When Slovenian intellectuals expressed demands for the democratization of society, they were not referring to the changes in the Soviet Union, the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, and his political reforms in the Communist world. In July 1987, Dimitrij Rupel, one of the editors of *Nova revija* and one of the leaders of the ‘cultural opposition,’ assessed the actions of the Slovenian youth organization, and the founding of the Slovenian Farmers’ Union as the nucleus of a new political party, and the actions of disobedient intellectual groups as encouraging signs of Slovenian democratisation, attributing all of it to the changed atmosphere during ‘Kučan’s *perestroika*.’⁴² Soon after, France Tomšič, the founder of the Social Democratic Party and organizer of the first major strike in December 1987, which triggered the establishment of independent trade unions, pointed out that “the formation of democratic parties and movements in Slovenia was actually made possible by the so-called Kučan’s ‘*perestroika*.’”⁴³ In the first issue of the new opposition newspaper titled *Demokracija* issued in April 1989, Janez Janša, later the leader of the right-wing political bloc, wrote that liberalization in Slovenia had begun with the politicization of cultural associations and magazines, the new social movements, and “the emergence of a new Party leadership headed by Kučan.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

As Gorbachev announced his reforms, in the westernmost part of Communist Europe – in Slovenia – the representatives of the intellectual opposition and the authorities had already faced each other and held public discussions. When

⁴¹ W. Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers – America’s Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why*, New York: Times Books, 1996, p. 30.

⁴² *Slovinci, Jugoslavija in slovenska kultura / Zbor slovenskih kulturnih delavcev (1.sklic)*, Ljubljana, 2. junij 1988, Ljubljana: Svet za kulturo pri Predsedstvu RK SZDL, 1988, p. 116.

⁴³ P. Potočnik, “Pluralizem v molčeči družbi,” *Delo*, 31 (50) (1989), p. 3.

⁴⁴ J. Janša, “Quo vadis, Jugoslavija?,” *Demokracija* 1 (1) (1989), p. 2.

Gorbachev visited Ljubljana, the *Materials for the Slovenian Constitution*, written by the 'cultural opposition,' were already in print. A few weeks later, the text was presented publicly. While elsewhere in the Communist part of Europe, manifestations and documents were still limited to the criticism of the existing regime, intellectuals in Slovenia had already taken a decisive step forward. They started looking for a way out of the old and considering how to build something new. The question of what the foundations of the new should be after the old had been torn down had already become a topical issue.

In 1987, the Slovenian 'cultural opposition' presented the ideas for a new national program, while in 1988, it published the draft of the future Slovenian Constitution, which was to replace the then existing Communist version. Elsewhere in the Communist part of Europe, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was difficult to imagine that representatives of the state authorities and the intellectual opposition would face each other in open forums, or that the demands of critics of the ruling Communists and their proposals for a new constitution would be published in magazines that received support from the state budget.

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