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Cultural Spaces and the Formation of Liberal Identity in the 1990s

Reflection on the past after 1989 in Slovakia and Central Europe shaped new political identities. Cultural initiatives, institutions, communities, and informal associations operated outside party politics, yet they participated in constructing a liberal identity in the post-socialist countries of Central Europe. The subject of this research is cultural and intellectual communities active since the early 1990s in Bratislava around the Stoka Theatre, including Radio Ragtime, the Artforum bookstore, U-club, and the publishing house KK Bagala.

In my previous research, focused on the case of the Stoka Theatre and Radio Ragtime, I examined the emergence of cultural spaces operating under the Socialist Youth Union while creating autonomous value-based communities. Stoka and Ragtime represented an alternative to the “bureaucratic regime,” to managed culture and symbolic uniformity. Their activities, expressing forms of liberal thinking and cultural emancipation, continued even after 1989. The research also examines the way society constructs its past through the reinterpretation of the activities of these autonomous spaces and selects “stories of resistance” that shape the image of Slovakia’s liberal identity after 1989. This concerns the phenomenon of so-called independent culture, which is typical of post-socialist Slovakia yet remains insufficiently reflected upon. In order to precisely define what “independent culture” meant after 1989, it is necessary to understand what the normative model of culture was and what ideas about its role and functioning were promoted by the state. Independent initiatives defined themselves in opposition to this model and gradually formed their own identity, value foundations, and modes of operation. Through cultural practices, we can analyze the emergence of a specific liberal identity whose value anchoring in culture and public debate remains relevant to this day.

The aim of the research is to analyze how, through symbolic politics and cultural production, these autonomous communities contributed to the formation of Slovakia's liberal identity after 1989, and to examine how cultural initiatives were reinterpreted as actors of resistance and became part of a post-dissident narrative in Slovak public discourse. By comparing the situation in the Czech Republic and Slovenia, the research contributes to the further elaboration of the concept of post-dissident identity and symbolic politics under the conditions of post-socialist societies.

From this perspective, the Slovak case is specific in terms of the degree of institutionalization and networking of alternative culture during late socialism. While in Slovenia democratic principles were formed within an already established network of autonomous cultural institutions (Neue Slowenische Kunst), Slovakia lacked a comparable infrastructure. Alternative initiatives functioned more as fragmented "islands of freedom" without mutual connections and with minimal links to political dissent. As a result, democratic practice in Slovakia during the 1990s had to be newly "negotiated" and learned precisely through cultural communities, which gradually assumed the role of the missing political elites. In contrast, in the Czech Republic alternative culture formed a more interconnected network of underground, samizdat, and dissent. Differences in the degree of continuity and institutionalization of the alternative cultural scene thus influenced not only the pace but also the character of liberal-democratic culture in individual countries.

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