

Željko Oset

UNIVERSITY OF
NOVA GORICA AND THE
SLOVENIAN ACADEMIC
COMMUNITY



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Dr. Željko Oset

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AThEME - Advancing the European Multilingual Experience
- AU - School of Arts
- CITIUS - Interregional Centre of Photonic Technologies for Ultrafast spectroscopy
- EPFL - École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne
- ETH Zürich - Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
- EU - European Union
- FH - School of Humanities
- FN - School of Natural Sciences
- FPŠ - Postgraduate School
- FTE - Full-time equivalent of employment (1700/annum)
- FVV - School for Viticulture and Enology
- HERA - Humanities in the European Research Area
- IJS - Institute Jožef Stefan
- InPrime - abbreviation for an initiative of innovation breakthrough of the Primorska region
- ISCED - International Standard Classification of Education
- LDS - Liberal Democrats of Slovenia
- MONG - City Municipality of Nova Gorica
- NAKVIS - Agency for quality assurance in higher education and for developing and consulting work in Slovenian higher education

- PNG - Nova Gorica Polytechnic
(in French Polytechnique de Nova Gorica)
- PRIMEX – Primorje Import Export (a company)
- PTP - Primorska Technology Park
- SAZU - Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts
- SES - School of Environmental Sciences
- SKD - Slovenian Christian Democrats
- SLS - Slovenian People's Party
- SUNGREEN - Strengthening University of Nova Gorica Research
Potential in Environmental Sciences and
Novel Nanomaterials
- SVŠ RS - Council for Higher Education of the
Republic of Slovenia
- ŠIPK - Students Innovative Projects for the Benefit of Society
- UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization
- ZLSD - United List of Social Democrats
- ZRC SAZU - Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy
of Sciences and Arts

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“PREHISTORY”: SLOVENIAN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY AND TRANSITION

Twenty-five years for a higher education institution (the School of Environmental Sciences between September 1995 and December 1998, Nova Gorica Polytechnic until March 2006, and the University of Nova Gorica since then) is a short period, but long enough for its genesis and role in Slovenian academic environment to be analysed, and, of course, for the opportunity to record the views and assessments of the generation of founders, a group that began to design its intervention in Slovenian higher education in the spring of 1993.¹

The group consisted of Danilo Zavrtanik, director of the Jožef Stefan Institute (IJS), an astrophysicist, the chemist Mladen Franko, who was a researcher at IJS (expert in the study of water pollution) and had just returned from doctoral studies in the United States (Marquette University), Boštjan Žekš, who was a physicist and an influential member of the Slovenian Academy

¹ Interview with Danilo Zavrtanik (15 June 2019), Boštjan Žekš (15 January 2020), Mladen Franko (11 July 2019); UNG Archives, Establishment of UNG; com. Franko (1997), p. 97-101.

of Sciences and arts (SAZU), especially in the research policy creation in the Republic of Slovenia and who was a chairman of the IJS board, and Mr. Borut Lavrič, a lawyer at IJS. The group's common denominator was the assessment of the necessity for structural reforms in the Slovenian academic system.² These protagonists therefore advocated the implementation of reform that would establish the conditions for broad autonomy, academic freedom and the decisive influence of researchers in the Slovenian academic system.³ For Zavrtanik and Franko, who originated from Primorska region, the establishment of a higher education institution in the domestic region was an added value and their contribution to their "home" region.

The necessity for systemic transformation was also pointed out by others, mostly those returning from study abroad, who expected that it would be possible to copy Western organisational patterns and consistently implement academic culture based on meritocracy due to ongoing political, administrative, legal and managerial breakthroughs, and last but not least Slovenia's independence.⁴

With the formal abolition of self-government and then with the adoption of the Institutions Act in 1991, the process of the status transformation of Slovenian higher education institutions began. This also included reforming higher education programmes, strengthening efforts for quality teaching and international cooperation, and establishing institutional conditions for (international) scientific cooperation. As well as, of course, the return of Slovenian scientists from studies or post-doctoral training to a newly established Slovenia.⁵ This tradition of post-doctoral training - as a kind of

² At the beginning of the 1990s, the Slovenian academic space consisted of two universities and research institutes which were established immediately after the Second World War within the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

³ Interview with Danilo Zavrtanik (15 June 2019), Boštjan Žekš (15 January 2020) and Mladen Franko (11 July 2019); UNG Archives, Establishment of UNG; see also Franko (1997), p. 97-101.

⁴ Turk (1990).

⁵ Oset (2016), p. 139-140; Oset (2017), p. 25-30.

Slovenian form of disabling the “inzucht” - was initially established among physicists and chemists, especially IJS associates.⁶

Slovenia’s academic potential was concentrated in Ljubljana (at the University of Ljubljana and the institutes established by SAZU, including the IJS, the Institute of Chemistry and the institute under the helm of the Research Centre of SAZU), and the Maribor centre was strengthened under the auspices of the University of Maribor.⁷ The general characteristics of the Slovenian community in the Yugoslav period were, initially, a reliance on established European academic standards, frequent reforms, relatively modest state investments into science, the growth of the Slovenian academic community after World War II - more dynamic only in the 1970s - and frequent threats of closure and downsizing.⁸ Above all, the latter contributed to the building of a “bunker” mentality in already established institutions, which a priori rejected “reforms” and the establishment of new institutions.⁹

Thus, the University of Ljubljana understood the establishment of higher education institutions in Maribor at the end of the 1950s as a form of pressure to implement higher education reform, resulting in the introduction of a three-tier system of higher education study. The main argument was the expectation that studies would be shortened; Aleš Gabrič calls this a Bologna reform before the Bologna reform.¹⁰ At the same time, SAZU understood the aforementioned reform, which heralded the focus of research at universities, as an attempt to take away its institutes. The reform was only partially implemented, and mistrust continued between the institutions.¹¹

⁶ Interview with Tanja Peterlin Neumaier (October 29 2019); see also Zupančič (1997), p. 73-76.

⁷ Bračič (1983), p. 247-256; Gabrič (2000), p. 55-56; Oset (2017), p. 57-148.

⁸ Oset (2017), p. 126-140.

⁹ Oset (2017), p. 113-118; Grafenauer (1969), p. 148-150; Gabrič (1994), p. 105-120.

¹⁰ Gabrič (1994), p. 105-120.

¹¹ Oset (2017), p. 113-118.

As the largest Slovenian research institute, IJS was financed from federal funds and remained outside these divisions, i.e., with substantial financial support, while maintaining its commitment to international cooperation. This was certainly a challenge after 1970, when financial maintenance was taken over from the Yugoslavian federal fund for nuclear research by the Slovenian budget, and afterward by the self-governing Research Community of Slovenia.¹²

The above-mentioned frictions, which were also the result of competition for limited funding, subsided in the early 1980s, due to stabilisation measures that drastically reduced funding for science, and severely limited the procurement of instruments and literature, as well as international cooperation. The difficult situation brought the academic community together, which resulted in a greater community investment in science.¹³ The situation improved somewhat after 1985, when science was included in the concept of the League of Communists of Slovenia under the strategy of the long-term development of Slovenia until 2000, also known under the slogan of “Europe now”. The biggest structural shift was made with a project involving 2000 young researchers and the systematic training of researchers for the rejuvenation of academic institutions and for greater academic flow. The aim was to transform the academic system and to strengthen cooperation with the economy in accordance with the Western European model.¹⁴

The 2000 Young Researchers project relaunched the discussion regarding Slovenian education and its relevance. Proposals for the structural adjustment of the Slovenian education system to modern European trends enjoyed a high degree of consensus, with less attention paid to implementation, with the exception of ensuring political support. The most sensitive question at the institutional level was whether research institutes would also be formally included in postgraduate studies. Until then, the postgraduate students of the

¹² ARS, AS_223, b. 4561, f. 69-12 / 66.

¹³ Oset (2017), p. 146-148.

¹⁴ Baškovič (2016), p. 18-23.

University of Ljubljana had only been able to undertake research work in laboratories, and some “institute people” were also lecturers at the University of Ljubljana, so they were being involved in both types of setting. However, research institutes certainly expected more, such as partnership, at least, in the implementation of postgraduate studies. Researchers led by SAZU advocated for strengthening the scope and quality of postgraduate studies and for reducing the structural development gap with the West.¹⁵

In May, 1990, after taking power, the Demos government which consisted of a wide-array of opposition figures to the communist led-governments in the late 1980s, dealt mainly with the status transformation of universities and institutes, which was a necessity after the abolition of self-governance. Governmental reforms were not always welcomed by academia, which accused the government of political bias,¹⁶ resulting in the government postponing the much-awaited reforms. The government therefore adopted the Public Research Institutions Act and the Research Activity Act and structural dilemmas had to be delayed for a couple for years.¹⁷

Already in 1991, the law on higher education had been agreed upon. Nevertheless, the University of Ljubljana then withdrew from the agreement. The rector of the University of Maribor, Alojz Križman, complained that the University of Ljubljana was withdrawing its consent to the solutions that had already been agreed upon, and that the minister was allegedly supporting this. On the other hand, the University of Ljubljana had again taken the position that the government was once again using the University of Maribor and its readiness to accept the government’s views in order to apply pressure on the University of Ljubljana concerning the reform.¹⁸

¹⁵ Oset (2017), p. 146-148.

¹⁶ Archives of SAZU, Presidency 1990-1992.

¹⁷ Interview with Borut Lavrič (14 May 2019).

¹⁸ Požar and Urh (1991), p. 26.

Representatives of Maribor's higher education have always emphasised the importance of decentralisation for the purposes of Slovenia's regional, more coherent and, above all, faster development, as the (centralist) decision-making system, in which local self-governing communities are the executors of the governmental decisions that openly favours the biggest Slovenian university in Ljubljana. The reluctance of the Slovenian government to establish a second higher education centre in Maribor in 1950s and 1960s, also linked to the rivalry between Maribor and Ljubljana representatives of higher education, was felt even decades later.¹⁹

In December 1993, the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia finally adopted the Higher Education Act. On its basis, the transformation of both state universities began, and for the first time, the establishment of independent higher education institutions was made possible. Former higher education programmes have been abandoned and, in addition to university study programmes, three-year higher professional programmes have been introduced. With the transformation of postgraduate study programmes, the possibility of obtaining a doctorate of science without an intermediate master's degree gradually began to emerge.²⁰

Pursuant to the Vocational and Professional Education Act, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia in February 1996, the possibility of studying at a tertiary level has expanded due to new vocational colleges, both in the two universities and in some other regional centres. In November 1999, the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia adopted the Amendments to the Higher Education Act, in which it implemented the amendments that resulted from the assessment of the accomplished changes and further needs of higher education. In the decrees on the transformation of both universities, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia in March 2000, in addition to broadly defined scientific research and artistic activities, the fields of study were classified

¹⁹ Ibid.; see also Kmecl (1997), p. 17.

²⁰ Higher Education Act, Legal Information System, <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregled-Predpisa?id=ZAKO172>, 12. June 2020.

in accordance with the international classification, Isced (Unesco, 1997). In accordance with the legal principle that the university is an “autonomous, scientific research, artistic and educational higher education institution with a special position”, the decree regulates only the relations between the state and the university, and all internal relations of a university are regulated by statute.²¹

The Higher Education Act remained in force despite criticism, repeated amendments and attempts to draft a new, revised Higher Education Act; some articles have otherwise been repealed, such as the retirement age of professors. The fundamental issue of the financial autonomy of higher education institutions remained unresolved. The Act therefore determined the basic conditions for the further development of Slovenian higher education on the basis of general access to higher education. Moreover, the state encouraged enrollment in higher education programmes with benefits, which on the one hand, was intended to significantly increase the proportion of highly educated people, thereby accelerating the structural adaptation of the Slovenian society and the Slovenian economy to post-industrial challenges, and, on the other hand, to reduce the pressure of the younger generation on the labour market, especially in the early years of the transition.

The law enabled the strengthening of research at higher education institutions and the introduction of competition between programmes and Slovenian institutions. The latter was enacted in January 1995 with the adoption of the National Research Programme. This was a hint to experts that encouraged the establishment of new, additional research groups within existing institutions, as well as outside of them, within new institutions, both in Ljubljana and elsewhere.²²

²¹ Oset (2016), p. 140.

²² Ibid.

The University of Ljubljana was weary of the establishment of new independent “private” institutions, however, the leading officials were overburdened by regulating relations between the Rectorate and its faculties. Nevertheless, while the establishment of a new institutions without the consent of the first university and its professors was theoretically possible, it was an almost insurmountable task. There were quite a few visible and invisible systemic barriers, among them the fulfilment of a sufficient number of habilitated professors. The habilitation procedure is much more than just meeting of the criteria as stated in the rules. The accusation of habilitating unsuitable candidates can have a devastating effect on the institution - in the academic world, quantity does not give birth to quality, it is rather the contrary.²³

Ideas of a non-governmental, even private, initiative in the field of education was regarded almost blasphemous. The state monopoly remained an axiom of the Slovenian education system, and non-state institutions were always only adjunct to the system. Systemic resistance to change was pointed out by (young) scientists who wanted to return to Slovenia after completing their education or training and continue their careers in their own country - in their home region.²⁴ In short, they pointed out the systemic rigidity, the power of informal networks in a relatively small academic community and established management patterns, which academician Miha Tišler calls the Mandarin mentality, so that established patterns were perpetuated and changes were possible with a gradualist approach - evolution takes precedence over revolution.²⁵

²³ Ivelja (1995); see also Zupančič (1997), p. 71-76.

²⁴ Turk (1990); Pelicon (1990); Zidanšek (1992).

²⁵ Tišler (2001), p. 28-45; see also Adam (1999), p. 65.

Univerzi v Novi Gorici se zahvaljujem za
visoko priznanje, ki ga sproštam in cenim.
Posebej pa me pridelitev priznanja veseli, ker
se ob tem spominjam pionirskih časov univerze,
ozvroma prej Fakultete za naroski o okolju
in Politehniko. V spominu mi ostajajo mladi,
ambiciozni ljudje, ki so bili prapranjeni v
težkih pogojih marsikaj zuturati in razvoj
Univerze in slovenskega visokega šolstva. Pri
tem so v veliki meri uspeli, in kar jim čestitam.
Na obetih teh prvotnih pače ni zmanjkalo dela,
posebej na drugem ne. Pa bomo skupaj tudi to
opravili ob boljši pomoči države in njenem
zavedanju, kaj nam manjka in kaj je treba
navediti.

Čestitam



Academic Prof. Dr. Boštjan Žekš's inscription to the Book of honorary guests on 15 October 2015, after being awarded the UNG gold plaque.²⁶

²⁶ UNG Archives, Book of honorary guests.

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