

Experts in Transition: Political Epistemologies of 1980s–2000s East Central Europe

July 9–10, 2026, Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana

Deadline: March 15, 2026.

Research on experts and expertise in state socialism has developed, in recent years, from national case studies embedded in overarching accounts of “Cold War expertise,” to transnational histories of knowledge production, to a renewed appreciation for thick descriptions of the political, social, and epistemological contexts of expertise as developed in and for the purposes of socialism. In particular, work in social history and the history of labor, the history of science, and intellectual history has been addressing the role of experts in the political economy and class structure of socialist countries in the region. This has also inspired efforts to revisit the conceptual and theoretical approaches to expertise with the insight of the historical legacies of anti-capitalist political epistemologies from East Central Europe. At the same time, new research has focused on the 1980s and 1990s as part of broader processes of transformation, combining perspectives on the shifts in global capitalism and the development of international expertise with accounts of political, economic, and social change on the semi-peripheries and theories of elite transformation. Taking stock of this scholarship and uniting approaches developed by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project “Trans/Socio: Transnational Sociology and Concepts of Social Expertise in Eastern Europe, 1970s–2000s” (Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana) and the project “Political Epistemologies of Central and Eastern Europe” (PECEE), the “Experts in Transition” conference explores expertise at the end of state socialism in East Central Europe from three interconnected perspectives. Focusing on socialist experts, the experts of transition, and expertise after the end of socialism, we examine different understandings of the expert and the role of expertise through periods of transformation.

1. Who were the socialist experts and what were they experts of?

The workshop will inquire into what types of experts and kinds of expertise were engendered by socialism specifically, whether or not historical actors would have described the particular configuration of material determinations, social relations, and images of science that they were engaged in as “socialist expertise.” This involves reconstructing the political epistemologies of the 1980s from a historically grounded understanding of the functioning of socialism at the level of institutions and practices, including in terms of processes of class formation among the intelligentsia. We are interested in how the very role of the expert and the concept of expertise were developed from socialist positions and in relation to Marxist epistemology, and ask what were the state supported, socially recognized, as well as informal types of expertise stemming from the context of state socialism—its economy, politics, and society.

2. Who were the experts of transition?

The workshop aims to revisit the debate over the role of experts in the late socialist and postsocialist periods by looking beyond economic expertise in the context of the global consolidation of neoliberalism, which has largely dominated research on experts in transition, and turning to social expertise in particular, but not exclusively. By looking at how expertise about social transformations has been constructed in socialism from as early as the 1950s and how it developed politically into the 1980s, the workshop aims to tease out the divergent understandings of social change, social inequality, and social justice already present before the transitions to liberal democracy and market economy in the

region. We ask what was the accumulated knowledge regarding the “social costs” of economic and political transformation, and how this knowledge was mobilized over the 1980s and 1990s. This includes discussions about limited social mobility, lack of political engagement among the youth, poverty and social exclusion, or gender inequality, among others. We explore the extent to which these informed policy making in the late socialist and postsocialist periods, and how state expertise was established, challenged, and reconstituted in the process.

3. What happened to expertise on socialism since 1989?

Finally, the workshop is concerned with what became of the expertise specific to socialism after 1989—in terms of individual biographies of experts, the shifting “geographies of expertise” from centers to peripheries, the institutional and non-institutional continuities in cultures of expertise, and the ebb and flow of critical expertise, particularly Marxist. At the same time, it looks at the kind of expertise developed in and for transition. On the one hand, this means recognizing how the political epistemologies engendered by the decades-long practice of socialism endured and were repurposed after socialism, in different configurations, with different framings, and at different speeds across disciplines and topics of expertise. On the other hand, it involves asking how radical rupture was instrumentalized in the 1990s to establish new fields and networks of expertise, in explicit opposition to the political epistemologies of socialism. This includes questions about the transnational embeddedness of experts from the late socialist and postsocialist periods, how epistemic inequality was perceived and negotiated beyond the national contexts, in regional, transregional, and global contexts, and the beginnings of long-standing debates about the role of local and foreign expertise in East Central Europe.

The workshop aims to bring together early career scholars (including PhD students) and established researchers interested in exploring the questions of experts and expertise in transition in East Central Europe along these broadly defined lines. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- case studies of individual experts in all areas of science;
- specific debates around concepts, theory, social, and scientific practice;
- inequality research during and after socialism.
- the role of experts and expertise in policy making;
- the interplay between local, transnational, and international expertise;
- perspectives on transition as a concept and process up to the early 2000s.

The workshop will take place on July 9–10, 2026, at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana. To apply, please send the title and abstract (up to 500 words) of your proposed presentation, together with a short bio, to adela.hincu@inz.si and pecee.initiative@gmail.com. The deadline for submissions is March 15 and the program will be finalized at the beginning of April. Participants without institutional resources will be offered support within the limit of available funding.

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