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Verzija publikacije / Document Version: Recenzirani rokopis / Author Accepted Manuscript

Tipologija / Typology: 1.01 - Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original Scientific Article

Gradivo je del revije / Record is a part of a journal: Journal of the History of Sexuality

DOI: [10.1353/sex.00022](https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.00022)

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AIDS-related gay activism in socialist Slovenia and its transnational context, 1984–1991

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Abstract: The article examines grassroots AIDS-related gay activism in socialist Slovenia in the mid-to-late 1980s, a period marked by the lack of relevant official initiatives. It argues that gay activists played a crucial role in disseminating important information to curb HIV transmission within their community. Simultaneously, their advocacy for safer sex and a comprehensive socio-political approach to AIDS, aimed at reducing stigmas, also had a broader social impact. The article illustrates how the content and language of these grassroots campaigns were shaped by a selective and reflective reception of transnational transfers of ideas tailored to the Slovenian context. The article helps diversify the history of AIDS activism in Europe by highlighting the understudied synergies between socialist youth structures, gay activism, and AIDS campaigning. It also highlights the importance of hitherto understudied cross-border transfers for political and media reactions to AIDS in Slovenia, Yugoslavia in general, as well as gay and lesbian movements in the former.

Keywords: AIDS, gay activism, Slovenia, socialism

“It seems to me that somehow, in the midst of all that collective paranoia, we have managed to react properly to the emergence of AIDS. Without panic but also without ignorance of the problem. We had no other option but to make people aware.”¹ With these words, Aldo

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* This article is a result of the research program P6-0281 Political History funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). I extend my deep gratitude to Dr. Bogdan Lešnik, Aldo Ivančič, Brane Mozetič, Suzana Tratnik, Miran Šolinc, Dr. Dunja Piškur Kosmač, and Evita Leskovšek for sharing their invaluable experiences in combating the AIDS crisis with me. I am also thankful to the editors of this special issue for their patient guidance and insightful advice, which significantly enhanced the clarity and strength of the article's arguments.

¹ Aldo Ivančič, interview with the author, February 15, 2023.

Ivančič, co-founder of the first Slovenian and, more broadly, Yugoslav gay group Magnus, reflected on the early response of gay activists to the AIDS crisis. Magnus was established in late 1984, when the number of AIDS cases in Yugoslavia's neighboring countries was increasing. At that point, the Slovenian and the wider Yugoslav public anxiously awaited the appearance of the first case in the federation, which eventually occurred in September 1985.² The Slovenian health authorities reacted to the emergence of AIDS quite efficiently in the medical field: a virus detection laboratory was set up in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, to carry out confirmatory tests for the entire Yugoslavia. Moreover, an AIDS clinic for testing and counseling was established in Ljubljana, and by the end of 1985, Slovenian health experts reached a consensus to test every dose of donated blood.³ However, the health authorities were initially far less effective in the field of prevention. The first large-scale official AIDS awareness campaign was not launched until 1989.⁴ For several years, raising AIDS awareness among the Slovenian public and key populations thus fell upon individual health experts, journalists, and, as this article will demonstrate, Magnus activists.

The article explores grassroots AIDS-related gay activism in socialist Slovenia in the absence of relevant official initiatives in the mid-to-late 1980s. Its main argument is that gay activists played a pivotal role in disseminating critical information to reduce HIV transmission within the gay community. Simultaneously, their advocacy for safer sex and a comprehensive socio-political understanding of AIDS, intended to mitigate stigmatization, extended beyond the confines of the gay community and influenced the broader public sphere. As the article demonstrates, the content and language of these grassroots campaigns rested upon a selective and reflective reception of cross-border transfers of ideas filtered by the domestic context. Transnational flows originating from various directions of the Western world, including the

² "Prvi primer AIDS pri nas," *Delo*, September 20, 1985, 23.

³ Maja Lukanc, "Aids po jugoslovansko? Začetni odziv na aids v Sloveniji in Jugoslaviji (1984–1987)," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 61, no. 3 (2021): 22, 27–29.

⁴ National Institute of Public Health, Uncategorized Materials (NIJZ), "Brošura 'Ustavite AIDS!'" 1989.

United States, France, Germany, and Austria, furnished Slovenian gay activists with vital knowledge and materials for their awareness-raising efforts. These transfers also served as an emancipatory tool, helping to combat the homophobia reinforced by AIDS-related stereotypes. On the other hand, the alternative cultural scene that thrived in Ljubljana since the late 1970s, supported by state-sponsored youth organizations, provided gay activists space to develop their HIV prevention initiatives. Thus, grassroots AIDS activism was firmly rooted in and supported by a domestic liberalizing political, social, and cultural environment. In turn, it played an important role in amplifying liberal voices within Slovenian society and the regime.

The article's focus on Slovenia pluralizes the history of AIDS activism in Europe by highlighting the understudied synergies between socialist youth structures, gay activism, and AIDS campaigning. Whether such intersections were unique to Slovenia or appeared elsewhere in East Central Europe requires further study, as does the examination of responses to HIV and AIDS in this region in the 1980s in general.⁵ Considering the significance of transnational flows for HIV prevention campaigns and gay activism in Slovenia also helps to nuance the existing research, which has so far focused on developments within national confines. This is especially true for recent historiography investigating the political and media reactions to AIDS in Slovenia and Yugoslavia⁶, as well as for social science works that deal

⁵ One of the few exceptions is the following work: Justyna Struzik, "Disentangling the 1980s and 1990s in Poland. Milestones and Framework of HIV/AIDS Policies." Disentangling European HIV/AIDS Policies: Activism, Citizenship and Health (EUROPACH), Working Paper No. 17-001/5 (2017). Available at: europach.phils.uj.edu.pl/projectoutcomes/library/workingpapers.

⁶ Lukanc, "Aids po jugoslovansko?" 15–42; Marko Zajc, "Od Magnusa do Planine: Aids v Sloveniji od 1987 do 1992 med politiko, javnim zdravjem in družbo," Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino 61, no. 3 (2021): 43–74; Jurij Hadalin, "Stvari, ki so pomembnejše od politike: Družbena kritika in formacija družbenega diskurza o aidsu skozi popularni tisk na primeru revije Jana," Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino 61, no. 3 (2021): 75–92; Nikola Anušić and Vinko Kovač, "The Impact of Moral Panic on Morbidity of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in SR Croatia at the Beginning of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic," Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest 53, no. 1 (2021): 267–304.

with Slovenian gay and lesbian movements.⁷ The transnational perspective also helps to diversify the emerging tendency in studies of transnational activism, subcultures, and the history of sexuality to explore transfers across the Cold War blocs and the complex interactions between transnational and domestic factors.⁸

The analysis draws on various sources, including interviews with (former) gay and lesbian activists, the Slovenian LGBT documentary collection, the Slovenian and Western European LGBT press, and publications by Slovenian LGBT organizations about their own history. However, each of these sources has its limitations, especially when it comes to tracing transnational transfers of ideas and campaign patterns. Interviewees provide valuable insights into domestic events and some interactions with the West. While they do recall extensively reading and utilizing various Western materials in their activism, they mostly cannot specify which materials and how they influenced them.⁹ Moreover, the documentary collection from the 1980s is highly fragmented, and although it does contain some evidence of international correspondence, it mostly lacks records of materials sent by foreign LGBT and AIDS organizations to Slovenian activists. Additionally, AIDS-related texts in the Slovenian gay and lesbian press frequently lack references to their sources. The structure of the available sources thus often impedes a systematic analysis of the transfer and impact of Western ideas and campaign patterns within Slovenian AIDS-related gay activism, making it challenging to

⁷ Nataša Velikonja, "Lezbična in geyevska scena," in *Urbana plemena: Subkulture v Sloveniji v devetdesetih*, eds. Peter Stankovič, Gregor Tomc, and Mitja Velikonja (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 1999), 65–74; Bogdan Lešnik, "Melting the Iron Curtain: The beginning of the LGBT movement in Slovenia," in *New Social Movements and Sexuality*, ed. Melinda Chateauvert (Sophia: Bilitis Resource Center, 2005), 86–96; Roman Kuhar, "Ljubljana: The tales from the queer margins of the city," in *Queer cities, Queer cultures: Europe since 1945*, eds. Matt Cook, and Jennifer V. Evans (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 136–150.

⁸ "Special Section: Between Decolonization and the Cold War: Transnational Activism and its Limits in Europe, 1950s–90s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 3 (2015); Juliane Füst and Josie McLellan, eds., *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017); Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Samuel Clowes Huneke, *States of Liberation. Gay Men between Dictatorship and Democracy in Cold War Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); Łukasz Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017), 116; Siobhán Hearne, this special issue.

⁹ On this methodological challenge, see also Papadogiannis, this special issue.

determine which foreign influences might have held greater sway. Despite these shortcomings, a thorough examination of all available materials still unveils a complex network of interactions among Slovenian gay and lesbian activists that extended beyond national borders.

The first section of the article introduces the context in which the Slovenian gay and lesbian movement was shaped and highlights how activists employed contacts with the West to create their own community and identity. The second section delves into the early Magnus's response to AIDS, showcasing how gay activists utilized transnational AIDS-related resources to counter the inaction of Slovenian health authorities in the field of HIV prevention. The third section explores the scaling up of AIDS-related gay activism in the late 1980s and how it increased pressure on governmental bodies.

The emergence of gay and lesbian activism in socialist Slovenia

The history of grassroots AIDS activism in Slovenia is indelibly linked to domestic and transnational factors that shaped the development of the Slovenian gay and lesbian movement. Yugoslavia was a profoundly decentralized federal state, characterized by its distinctive brand of socialism and a policy of open borders, which facilitated transnational exchanges spanning all sides of the Cold War and thereby exposed Yugoslav society to liberal currents of the Western world.¹⁰ Slovenia was its westernmost and most industrialized federal unit, attaining the highest standard of living and fostering the most liberal society in the region. Crucially, Slovenian public life was marked by minimal constraints on freedom of speech and a tolerant

¹⁰ Ljubica Spaskovska, The last Yugoslav generation: The rethinking of youth politics and cultures in late socialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 59.

approach toward modernist cultural and lifestyle trends.¹¹ Moreover, a gradual liberalization of attitudes toward sexuality began in the 1960s and continued in the following decades. While comprehensive historical research on the history of sexuality in Slovenia remains scarce, sociological studies suggest that popular attitudes toward sexuality in the last decades of socialism underwent similar changes to those observed in the liberal democracies of the West and, as recent scholarship has shown, also in the socialist East.¹² Slovenians became sexually active at a younger age than before the 1960s, extramarital sex increased, and the growing availability of reliable birth control and the legalization of abortion facilitated family planning.¹³

Nevertheless, in contrast to the prevailing trend of liberalizing attitudes toward sexuality, prejudice against homosexuality was widespread in late socialist Slovenia. In 1977, Slovenian authorities decriminalized male same-sex activity, along with Croatia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina, while it remained illegal in other federal units until the country's dissolution. Conversely, lesbian sex was decriminalized in the Yugoslav Criminal Code as early as 1951.¹⁴ Contrary to what these legal milestones might suggest, homophobia was widespread among the Slovenian population and remained high in the following decades: when a journalist asked some randomly selected people what they thought of the first gay festival in Ljubljana in 1984, she received mostly negative reactions.¹⁵ Furthermore, surveys in the early 1990s showed that around 60 percent of Slovenians had an aversion to having a homosexual

¹¹ Marko Zajc, "When the Slovenian Spring turned into a hot summer," in From Revolution to Uncertainty: The Year 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, eds. Joachim von Puttkamer, Stanislav Holubec, and Włodzimierz Borodziej (London; New York: Routledge, 2020), 144–147.

¹² Ivan Bernik, Tjaša Kogovšek, Roman Kuhar, and Alenka Švab, Intimni stili študentov in študentk v Sloveniji (Ljubljana: Založba FDV, 2018), 17–20. For East Central European comparisons, see footnote no. 8.

¹³ Ivan Bernik, "Na predvečer seksualne revolucije," in Družba in družbena gibanja 50 let po 1968, eds. Miroljub Ignjatović, Aleksandra Kanjuo Mrčela, and Roman Kuhar (Ljubljana: Slovensko sociološko društvo, 2018), 20; Ivana Dobrivojević, "Planiranje porodice u Jugoslaviji 1945–1974," Istorija 20. veka 34, no. 2 (2016): 85–87.

¹⁴ Lešnik, "Melting the Iron Curtain," 83–84; Franko Dota, Javna i politička povijest muške homoseksualnosti u socijalističkoj Hrvatskoj (1945.–1989.), Doctoral Thesis (University of Zagreb, 2017), 125, 286–237.

¹⁵ Katarina Lavš, "Pedri me ne zanimajo, jaz sem normalen!" Telex, May 10, 1984, 15.

neighbor.¹⁶ Change in popular attitudes toward homosexuality was hindered by the absence of civil society movements that would advocate for change through public debate.¹⁷

This situation began to shift in the mid-1980s, when, despite the prevailing homophobia, the general loosening of sexual mores sufficiently empowered sexual minorities to assert their identities and establish the first gay and lesbian organizations in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. An important factor contributing to the development of gay and lesbian activism was the emergence of an alternative cultural scene in Ljubljana during the late 1970s. This vibrant milieu not only provided opportunities for alternative lifestyles but also gave rise to new social movements, including gay and lesbian activism.¹⁸ Many students, young artists, and intellectuals who formed the core of the alternative circles found inspiration in Western forms of issue-oriented activism and thus converged around issues of sexuality, feminism, peace, and environmentalism in order to challenge certain prescribed norms of the regime.¹⁹ The boundaries between different groups within the alternative scene were highly fluid. People, ideas, and practices were constantly in motion, not only within Slovenia and Yugoslavia but also beyond.²⁰ It is important to note that the majority of alternative youngsters, including gay and lesbian activists, did not aim to dismantle the Yugoslav socialist project but rather to redefine it.²¹ In response, communist authorities, recognizing various dysfunctions within the regime, recognized certain initiatives of the new social movements as legitimate and allowed

¹⁶ Roman Kuhar, Neža Kogovšek Šalamon, Živa Humer, and Simon Maljevac, *Obrazi homofobije* (Ljubljana: Mirovni inštitut, 2011), 46.

¹⁷ Bernik, *Intimni stili*, 21.

¹⁸ Lešnik, "Melting the Iron Curtain," 85–87.

¹⁹ Spaskovska, *The last Yugoslav generation*, 125–126.

²⁰ Bogdan Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023.

²¹ Spaskovska, *The last Yugoslav generation*, 3, 9; Bogdan Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023; Suzana Tratnik, interview with the author, March 1, 2023.

for a degree of liberalization. However, when this liberalization exceeded a certain arbitrary threshold, they suppressed it.²²

A core component of Slovenia's alternative scene was the Student Cultural Center of the University of Ljubljana (ŠKUC), which provided the necessary institutional space for sexual minorities and enabled the foundation of gay and lesbian groups.²³ Another important organization that provided support for many initiatives on the alternative scene was the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (LSYS), which embraced liberal tendencies earlier than its parent organization, the League of the Communists of Slovenia (LCY). As Roman Kuhar pointed out, support for homosexual rights within the liberal section of Slovenian politics was perceived as an expression of progressiveness.²⁴ Therefore, by the late 1980s, the LSYS had incorporated various civic appeals of the new social movements into its program, encompassing advocacy for gay and lesbian equal rights and more effective response to AIDS.²⁵ On the other hand, the attitude of the LCY toward gay and lesbian initiatives appeared to be one of passive tolerance or disregard. Gay and lesbian appeals to communist authorities were consistently met with silence, raising questions about the underlying reasons for this attitude that warrant further investigation.²⁶

While the domestic institutional framework was crucial in facilitating many aspects of gay, lesbian, and AIDS-related activism, Slovenian gays and lesbians relied not only on domestic but also transnational resources to shape their activist work. Many early activists first

²² Stefano Lusa, "Slovenska demokratizacija v osemdesetih letih," in Slovenija-Jugoslavija, krize in reforme 1968/1988, ed. Zdenko Čepič (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2010), 345; Božo Repe, ed., "Viri o demokratizaciji in osamosvojitvi Slovenije (I. del: opozicija in oblast), Arhivi 25, no. 2 (2002): 49, 91–93.

²³ Velikonja, "Lezbična in geyevska scena," 66; "Viva la difference!" Gayzine, March 30, 1985, 6.

²⁴ Kuhar, "Ljubljana," 142.

²⁵ Blaž Vurnik, "Nova družbena gibanja v objemu Zveze socialistične mladine Slovenije," in Slovenija-Jugoslavija, krize in reforme 1968/1988, ed. Zdenko Čepič (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2010), 355.

²⁶ ŠKUC Documentation, kept by the Institute of Contemporary History (ŠKUC), "Magnus arhiv 1988," 6–8, 17, 22.

experienced the developed gay and lesbian scene on their travels to Western Europe.²⁷ They found this to be a liberating and formative experience that helped them overcome some personal frustrations and prejudices. Aldo Ivančič visited a gay pub for the first time in London in 1979. “Full of false stereotypes, I had no idea what a gay man should look like – I had never met one. I ordered a beer and waited for someone to rape me. And there was nothing,” he recalled with a laugh, describing how he countered the prejudices ingrained in him by his heteronormative environment.²⁸ For Brane Mozetič, a later coordinator of Magnus, a pivotal moment came when he encountered the Paris gay scene during his studies in 1984/85. This experience liberated him to such an extent that, upon returning to Ljubljana, he no longer concealed his sexual identity in public – a rarity among Slovenian gays and lesbians of the 1980s.²⁹ Exposure to the Western European gay and lesbian scene not only provided the budding Slovenian activists with a strong identity anchor but also sparked in them the agency to carry this experience into their home environment. After Bogdan Lešnik, co-founder of Magnus, returned from West Berlin in 1983, where the exhibition Schwule und Faschismus by Heinz-Dieter Schilling made a great impression on him, he approached Ivančič and suggested organizing a gay-themed event in Ljubljana. Lešnik and Ivančič, with the help of the ŠKUC team to which they both belonged, organized a gay festival in April 1984 and named it Magnus, after the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.³⁰

The Magnus gay festival brought the issue of homosexuality to the Slovenian and Yugoslav public sphere for the first time. The festival drew inspiration from both the domestic alternative scene and the transnational gay and lesbian community. It was conceived as a

²⁷ Wendy Bracewell, “Adventures in the marketplace: Yugoslav travel writing and tourism in the 1950s- 1960s,” in Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism, eds. Anne E. Gorsuch, and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 248–265.

²⁸ Ivančič, interview with the author, February 15, 2023.

²⁹ Brane Mozetič, interview with the author, March 9, 2023.

³⁰ Bogdan Lešnik, “Magnus je prispeval k razpadu Jugoslavije,” interview by Gušti Leben, Revolver, March-May, 1993, 13.

multimedia venture with a strong cultural dimension, sourcing its content from Western LGBT production and hosting French and Italian gay activists.³¹ As Lešnik explained, the festival aimed to ground homosexual subculture historically and globally and foster a community capable of transitioning from the private into the public sphere without compromising its identity.³² The event was successful, and the mobilization among gay men was sufficient to establish the gay section ŠKUC-Magnus in December 1984. This was an important stimulus also for the mobilization of women, and in the spring of 1985, a feminist section, ŠKUC-Lilit (ŠKUC-Lilith), was founded. Individual lesbians participated in both Magnus and Lilit until they established their own section, ŠKUC-Lezbična Lilit (ŠKUC-Lesbian Lilith – LL), in January 1988. But even after that, the activities of the gay and lesbian sections were often intertwined, and activists met and worked together, including in raising AIDS awareness.³³ Similar to the East German case, the small size of the Slovenian gay and lesbian scene, coupled with the lack of available meeting spaces, hindered the emergence of separate gay and lesbian spheres.³⁴

Both Magnus and LL developed a small organizational core of six to ten activists. They were mainly from a working or middle-class background, originating from different regions of Slovenia and other Yugoslav republics. However, they all came to Ljubljana for their studies and became engaged in the alternative scene. Bogdan Lešnik, a psychologist, grew up in Maribor, Slovenia's second-largest city. In the mid-1980s, he worked at the Centre for Mental Health and was also president of ŠKUC.³⁵ Originally from the Croatian coast, Aldo Ivančič decided to study sociology in Ljubljana due to its vibrant alternative scene. As part of ŠKUC,

³¹ "Magnus: Homoseksualnost in kultura," *Viks*, April, 1984, 36–38.

³² Bogdan Lešnik, "Pač, so razlogi za vznemirjenje," *Viks*, April, 1984, 4–9.

³³ Nataša Velikonja, *Dvajset let gejevskega in lezbičnega gibanja* (Ljubljana: Društvo Škuc, 2004), 9–19; Gudrun Hauer, "Ljubljana – (nich nur) ein Reisebericht," *Lambda Nachrichten*, 1985, 24–28.

³⁴ Josie McLellan, "Lesbians, gay men and the production of scale in East Germany," *Cultural and Social History* 14, no. 1 (2017): 93.

³⁵ Bogdan Lešnik, "Gej in povzpeticnik," afterword to *Vrnitev v Reims* by Didier Eribon (Ljubljana: Založba /cf, 2022), 192–193.

he co-founded the musical-performative band Borghesia, which gained international recognition for its provocative and homoerotic image.³⁶ Brane Mozetič, on the other hand, was born and raised in Ljubljana. In the late 1980s, he gained prominence in Slovenian cultural circles for his poetry, which was distinctly homoerotic.³⁷ Both Ivančič and Mozetič acted as coordinators of Magnus and played a central role as organizers of the gay movement, while Lešnik's theoretical and ideational contributions were crucial in connecting the movement to the broader intellectual, political, and public spheres in Slovenia.³⁸

The agenda set at the first Magnus festival, namely socialization through cultural production, had a significant impact on the further development of Slovenian gay and lesbian activism. Magnus and LL hosted exhibitions and cultural events organized a gay and lesbian disco at the student club, which attracted visitors not only from other parts of Yugoslavia but also from neighboring Austria and Italy; and they published gay and lesbian fanzines and later magazines, which were distributed in Zagreb and Belgrade as well. The activists also organized two further multimedia Magnus festivals in 1985 and 1986, which developed into a gay and lesbian film festival after 1988.³⁹ Transnational cooperation was another important component of Magnus and LL activism. Between 1984 and 1991, Slovenian gays and lesbians participated in several international gay and lesbian conferences and attended various events, mainly in the Netherlands and Germany. In Ljubljana, they hosted individuals and delegations from France, Italy, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ivančič, interview with the author, February 15, 2023.

³⁷ Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

³⁸ Lešnik, interview by Leben, 14.

³⁹ Velikonja, *Dvajset let*, 11–12; Suzana Tratnik, *20. festival lezbičnega in gejevskega filma* (Ljubljana: Društvo Škuc, 2004), 28–30; HOSI Wien Auslandsgruppe, “Yugoslavia: Magnus 1985,” *East European Information Pool Report*, 1985, 19–23.

⁴⁰ Velikonja, *Dvajset let*, 11–29; HOSI Wien Auslandsgruppe, “Yugoslavia,” 19–23; “Jugoslavien oraniserar sig,” *Reporter*, September, 1987; David Levie, “Homoseksualiteit is een taboe in Joegoslavië,” *MAC*, June 26, 1987; Suzana Tratnik, *Lezbični aktivizem po korakih* (Ljubljana: Založba /*cf., 2013), 79.

Slovenian activists were well aware of the manifold significance of the transnational transfer of ideas, knowledge, and practices. As Aldo Ivančič pointed out during one of his visits to the Netherlands: “We will soon take the socio-cultural experiences we gain here to Yugoslavia. We can learn something here that we can use at home.”⁴¹ However, seeking inspiration from the West did not involve idealization or blind adoption of foreign practices.⁴² Early gay and lesbian activists, often young intellectuals and artists, viewed sexual liberation as part of cultural liberation and, therefore, chose to hold cultural events as their primary mode of action, socialization, and public performance.⁴³ Their choice was also a pragmatic one, shaped by the resources available within the ŠKUC and the socio-political context in which they lived. Many gays and lesbians in 1980s Slovenia refrained from openly expressing their sexual identity due to prevalent homophobia, hindering widespread activism.⁴⁴ When Bogdan Lešnik asked Brane Mozetič in the early 1990s about organizing militant actions akin to those in New York led by figures like Larry Kramer and David Wojnarowicz, Mozetič was skeptical. He doubted the feasibility of forming such a group and questioned the possible outcomes, fearing that it could undermine broader activism efforts.⁴⁵

Recognizing the possible drawbacks of an unreflective transfer of (radical) foreign activist approaches, Slovenian gays and lesbians rather based their activist practices on those already established within the alternative scene. However, it is crucial to note that many of these practices, such as disco parties, fanzines, video production, or multimedia festivals, were of Western origin but had already been tailored to the Slovenian socialist context.⁴⁶ Magnus and

⁴¹ Levie, “Homoseksualiteit is een taboe in Joegoslavië.”

⁴² Lešnik, interview by Leben, 13; Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023; Suzana Tratnik, “Lesben im Ostblock: Jugoslawien,” *Lesbenstich*, 1988, 7–9.

⁴³ “Zapisnik izredne skupščine Škuc-Foruma,” *Tribuna*, May 25, 1987, 20–21.

⁴⁴ “Viva la difference!” *Gayzine*, March 30, 1985, 6–7; HOSI Wien Auslandsgruppe, “Yugoslavia,” 22.

⁴⁵ Brane Mozetič, “Intervju Brane Mozetič,” interview by Bogdan Lešnik, *Revolver*, January, 1994, 6–9.

⁴⁶ Oskar Mulej, “A Place Called Johnny Rotten Square: The Ljubljana Punk Scene and the Subversion of Socialist Yugoslavia,” in *A European Youth Revolt: European Perspectives on Youth Protest and Social Movements in the 1980s*, eds. Knud Andresen, and Bart Steen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 189–202; Marta Rendla, “Alternativna kulturna gibanja in »konglomerat FV« v osemdesetih letih v Sloveniji,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 58, no. 2 (2018), 139–159.

LL activists thus further enriched them with Western gay and lesbian cultural production and related materials. Both groups organized exhibitions featuring Western photography and cartoons, translated Western theoretical and literary texts, and screened Western films. Moreover, in certain areas, such as self-published magazines or video production, they skillfully intertwined material of Western origin with artwork created in Ljubljana's alternative circles.⁴⁷

The Slovenian activists not only relied on Western patterns and ideas for identity formation and entertainment, but the transfer from the West also played a decisive role in saving lives. Contacts established during the 1984 Magnus festival facilitated the flow of material about AIDS to Ljubljana and provided accurate and up-to-date information about the new disease.⁴⁸ Western organizations provided various materials to support the newly founded gay group in a socialist country, which Slovenian activists proficient in multiple languages such as English, German, Italian, and French effectively utilized.⁴⁹ Unlike their Soviet counterparts, as detailed by Siobhán Hearne in this special issue⁵⁰, Magnus activists did not need to seek transnational sourcing for medical equipment, as Slovenian health authorities effectively managed the medical aspects of the AIDS crisis. However, official prevention efforts lagged behind. Therefore, knowledge obtained by Magnus activists from transnational information resources significantly contributed to raising AIDS awareness among Slovenian gay men in the mid-1980s, a focal point of the upcoming section.

Early Magnus's response to AIDS, 1984–1989

⁴⁷ Velikonja, *Dvajset let*, 9–29; Tratnik, *20. festival*, 28–30.

⁴⁸ Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁴⁹ Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023; Mozetič, interview with the author, March 9, 2023; Tratnik, interview with the author, March 1, 2023; ŠKUC, "Magnus arhiv 1986," 2–24, 35.

⁵⁰ See Siobhán Hearne, this special issue.

While raising AIDS awareness was integral to Slovene gay activism from its inception, it was never the primary focus of Magnus's activities. This was largely due to the low prevalence of the virus in the Slovenian (gay) population, with only twenty-one cases reported by the end of 1991 in a population of about two million.⁵¹ The limited numbers were not a result of underreporting. Although there was confusion and a lack of transparency in reporting infections at the federal level in 1985/86, a consensus on transparency in public information had been established in Yugoslavia by mid-1987.⁵² For most Slovenian gay men, AIDS thus never became a "defining political demand or life experience," borrowing words from Samuel Clowes Huneke's analysis of the East German case, characterized by similarly low infection rates.⁵³ Slovenian gay activists recognized the threat of AIDS but prioritized community building as a fundamental aspect of their activism, understanding that fostering a strong community would also facilitate HIV prevention efforts. In the mid-1980s, AIDS-related gay activism in Slovenia was thus rather sporadic and occasion-based, reflecting the constraints of limited financial resources, manpower, and facilities.

The key features of Magnus's response to AIDS were formed during the early days of Slovenian gay activism and were significantly influenced by transnational resources.

Slovenian gay activists closely followed Western (e.g., US, German, French) and domestic discussions on the spread of AIDS, as indicated by an article featured in a publication released on the occasion of the 1984 Magnus festival.⁵⁴ Drawing upon the analogy of French writer Jean-Paul Aron, who likened public perception of gays and Jews as "carriers of the plague," the article explored the dangers of stigmatization experienced by minority communities. It extended Aron's analogy by showcasing the consequences of the radical stigmatization of

⁵¹ NIJZ, "AIDS in HIV infekcija v Sloveniji, četrtno poročilo," March 31, 1993.

⁵² Lukanc, "Aids po jugoslovansko?" 21–37.

⁵³ Huneke, *States of Liberation*, 213.

⁵⁴ Gorazd S., "Aids – borba proti seksualnemu boljševizmu," *Viks*, May, 1984, 14–6.

Jews in Nazi Germany but did not draw a direct parallel between the AIDS crisis and the persecution of gays in the Holocaust, as the later established AIDS-Holocaust metaphor would.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the article sharply criticized the discriminatory attitude of the US government toward AIDS patients and expressed concern about the potentially repressive reaction of Slovenian and Yugoslav health authorities to the emergence of the first AIDS cases.⁵⁶ By highlighting the dangers of AIDS-related stigmatization for the gay community, the article embodied the first feature of Magnus's response to AIDS: a call for a broader socio-political understanding of the disease that went beyond its exclusively medical dimension in order to avoid stigmatization.

Another feature of Magnus's AIDS activism involved disseminating accurate and up-to-date information about the disease. In February 1985, just two months after Magnus was officially founded, activists released an AIDS information brochure based on materials obtained from Western organizations.⁵⁷ This is particularly evident from the cover of the brochure, which was a direct copy of a Canadian leaflet on "safe sex practices" published by the AIDS Committee of Toronto. The cover leaflet spoke in clear and explicit language, using colloquial expressions such as "sucking," "rimming," and "fisting." However, it remained untranslated, raising the question of the extent to which Slovenian readers could grasp its intended message. In contrast, the Slovenian section of the brochure provided highly condensed global statistics and medical information on AIDS, while the content of the cover was briefly summarized toward the end of the brochure, using less explicit language. The recommendations on safer sex were built upon (presumably) existing knowledge about hepatitis transmission, highlighting the risks associated with frequent partner changes

⁵⁵ John Charles Goshert, "The Aporia of AIDS and/as Holocaust," *Shofar* 23, no. 3 (2005): 48–70.

⁵⁶ Gorazd S., "Aids," 14–6.

⁵⁷ ŠKUC, "ACT AIDS," February, 1985, 1–6.

regardless of sexual orientation and promoting the use of condoms. In this vein, the brochure illustrated another feature of Magnus's response to AIDS: promoting safer sex.

In the following years, Magnus activists intensified their HIV prevention efforts. They produced two additional AIDS information leaflets, which, along with the initial brochure, were distributed at various Magnus events, particularly at gay disco parties that occasionally featured foreign-produced films and videos about AIDS.⁵⁸ During the 1986 Magnus festival, activists distributed condoms imported from abroad. This initiative was significant as condoms were not widely advertised in Slovenia at the time as an effective means of protection against sexually transmitted diseases and were often of poor quality and difficult to obtain.⁵⁹ An important development in Magnus's AIDS campaigning was the organization of AIDS Days in December 1986. In contrast to their earlier HIV prevention activities, which primarily targeted the gay community, this four-day event was aimed at the general public. It was conceived as a cultural event and drew on a diverse mix of transnational resources. The program included two films on AIDS from US and Canadian productions, provided by Manfred Salzgeber from Berlin, and a local production of the play "As Is" by William M. Hoffman. The event concluded with a roundtable discussion on AIDS, attended by leading members of the Republican Committee for AIDS, a governmental body responsible for coordinating state AIDS response, sociologists, a journalist, and Kurt Krickler, a member of Homosexuelle Initiative (HOSI) Vienna, and representative of Austrian AIDS-Hilfe.⁶⁰ The roundtable discussion held in December 1986 marked the first gathering of gay activists and health experts. Among the participants were prominent health authorities like Jože Vidmar, Deputy Minister of Health and head of the Republican Committee for AIDS; Miha Likar, a microbiologist leading the Institute of Microbiology at Ljubljana Medical Faculty;

⁵⁸ "Nevarna razmerja," *Jana*, April 22, 1987, 18–19; Sekcija Magnus, "Stališča sekcije Magnus v boju prot aids-u," *Mladina*, November 27, 1987, 4; "Gay strani," *Telex*, February 2, 1990, 34.

⁵⁹ Zajc, "Od Magnusa do Planine," 53–54.

⁶⁰ ŠKUC, "Magnus arhiv 1986," 44–45; ŠKUC, "Magnus arhiv 1987," February 9, 1987, 12.

Ludvik Vidmar, an infectious disease specialist heading the AIDS clinic; and Dunja Piškur-Kosmač, an epidemiologist leading the Epidemiology Department at the Ljubljana University Institute for Health Care.⁶¹ Their involvement was likely facilitated by Bogdan Lešnik's connections with psychologist Jože Lokar, who was Lešnik's superior at the Center for Mental Health and a member of the Republican Committee, and who also attended the event. Lešnik moderated the discussion, emphasizing the importance of addressing "risk behaviors" rather than categorizing individuals into "risk groups." Together with Lokar, they pragmatically pointed out the limitations of advocating for sexual abstinence.⁶² Six months later, Lokar reiterated these positions in an interview, underscoring that "conversations with homosexuals made me realize that we have to think about this disease in a new way."⁶³ Of particular significance were Lokar's interactions with Lešnik, who openly disclosed his sexual orientation in the workplace. Lešnik recalls engaging in discussions about homosexuality and AIDS with his colleagues, and his unique insights as a gay activist likely influenced the perspective on AIDS within a segment of the Slovenian professional community.⁶⁴

Despite the promising start, it was not until the late 1980s that gay activists and health experts began to work together. It is difficult to explain the initial lack of such collaboration. It could be attributed to mutual mistrust, as well as poorly organized official prevention that had little to offer at the time.⁶⁵ Magnus activists sharply criticized the inadequate governmental response, recognizing that their own AIDS-related activities could only reach a limited section of the gay population. In an interview for the Saturday edition of the central Slovenian daily Delo in February 1987, an unnamed Magnus activist showcased the effective response

⁶¹ Maja Konvalinka, "Miti in dejstva," Jana, January 7, 1987, 18–19.

⁶² Konvalinka, "Miti," 18–19.

⁶³ Jože Lokar, "Ne posegajmo v temeljne človekove pravice," interview by Lidija Jurjevec and Jure Mezek, Mladina: Pogledi, May 15, 1987, 26.

⁶⁴ Lešnik, interview with the author, June 12, 2023.

⁶⁵ Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023; Ivančič, interview with the author, February 25, 2023; Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

practices from neighboring Austria, likely presented by Kurt Krickler during the aforementioned roundtable. The activist urged those in charge to cover public toilets, buses, and other public places with AIDS information posters, as he believed this was the only means to reach gay men living on the fringes of society. The urge for public and targeted information campaigns was underscored in the same interview by an anonymous gay man from Ljubljana who had never heard of Magnus: “[...] we are waiting for something to come out that is just for us, where we could find instructions on how to protect ourselves.”⁶⁶ In addition to the absence of official prevention measures, these interviews highlighted a gradual trend in Slovenian media: the amplification of voices from key populations. Several media accounts show that this shift redirected public attention from purely medical concerns to the broader social and ethical aspects of AIDS.⁶⁷ As awareness of AIDS increased, topics such as homosexuality, drug abuse, and prostitution became subjects of public discourse to an unprecedented degree.

A significant turning point for gay visibility and AIDS campaigns in Slovenia and Yugoslavia occurred with the controversy surrounding the cancellation of the Magnus festival in 1987. Originally scheduled to coincide with 25 May, Youth Day, an important Yugoslav holiday marking the official birthday of Marshal Tito, the festival became entangled in the escalating political and nationalist tensions between the Slovenian government and Yugoslav federal authorities in the spring of 1987. Belgrade officials perceived the festival, dubbed a “world congress of homosexuals” by some Yugoslav media⁶⁸, as another Slovenian provocation due to its overlap with Youth Day. Yielding to federal pressure, Slovenian authorities

⁶⁶ Tomaž Gerdina and Vesna Marinčič, “Aids je epidemija prihodnosti in zaradi nje bodo umirali samo nevedni,” *Sobotna priloga*, February 7, 1987, 21.

⁶⁷ Lukanc, “Aids po jugoslovansko?” 32–38.

⁶⁸ “Provokacija neće proći,” *Politika Express*, March 3, 1987; Vladimir Siljanović, “‘Topla’ zbrka u Ljubljani,” *Orbis*, April 7, 1987, 12–13.

refrained from outrightly banning the event based on its homosexual orientation. Instead, they recommended its cancellation, citing concerns about the potential risk of HIV transmission.⁶⁹ The festival was eventually canceled by Magnus activists themselves.⁷⁰ In an act of retaliation, they organized an “AIDS mobilization day” on 25 May, which conveniently aligned with the global AIDS candlelight memorial that year. The manifestation was conceived as a cultural event and would not have been possible without the support of the alternative scene and transnational solidarity. Magnus activists organized an exhibition of AIDS information materials at the ŠKUC Gallery, featuring materials promptly supplied by Western organizations like German AIDS-Hilfe, as well as contributions from gay and lesbian organizations in Copenhagen and Stockholm, facilitated through the intervention of Kurt Krickler. As part of this proactive initiative, the activists also distributed 1,000 condoms.⁷¹ At the same time, Magnus worked with the LSYS to publish a new AIDS information leaflet, which displayed two of the abovementioned key features in Magnus’s approach to AIDS: it provided knowledge about safer sex practices and critically examined the socio-political factors contributing to the increased risk of HIV transmission. With a print run of 50,000 copies, the leaflet was the first AIDS material aimed at the general public in Slovenia and was widely disseminated across the country through the LSYS network.⁷²

The cancellation of the festival had far-reaching consequences for Slovenian gay activism, both negative and positive. By irresponsibly equating homosexuality and AIDS, Slovenian authorities, to some extent, perpetuated a double stigma that damaged public perception of gay activism and hindered efforts to combat AIDS compassionately.⁷³ However, the affair also earned Magnus considerable support from various groups, including health experts,

⁶⁹ For more about the Magnus affair see: Kuhar, “Ljubljana,” 142.

⁷⁰ Sekcija Magnus, “Sporočilo za javnost,” *Mladina*, April 3, 1987, 4.

⁷¹ ŠKUC, “Magnus arhiv 1987,” April 7, 1987, 43; April 11, 1987, 48; April 13, 1987, 50; April 15, 1987, 51.

⁷² Odbor za mobilizacijo proti aidsu RK ZSMS, “Boj proti aidsu,” *Sobotna priloga*, June 6, 1987, 27.

⁷³ “Nevarna razmerja,” *Jana*, April 22, 1987.

social liberal intellectuals, and progressive members of the LSYS. Health experts recognized the harmfulness of the government's act and rallied behind the gay activists, stressing that the Magnus festival did not pose a threat to HIV transition but rather the opposite. The Slovenian Medical Association pointed out that there were no medical reasons for banning the event and warned against justifying political decisions on medical grounds.⁷⁴ In an interview, microbiologist Miha Likar, Slovenia's leading AIDS expert, pointed out that "homosexuals are the best-informed and, at the same time, the only group that has taken an organized stand to prevent the spread of AIDS."⁷⁵ Health experts thus publicly portrayed gay men as informed and responsible citizens, showcasing AIDS-related gay activism as a model of good practice. Magnus also received considerable support among the LSYS, which, following the affair, widely opened its press to discussion on homosexuality and AIDS. These topics were explored both by gay and lesbian activists and liberal-minded intellectuals, such as sociologists Rastko Močnik, Tomaž Mastnak, and philosopher Igor Pribac.⁷⁶ This collective effort increased the pressure on the authorities. In mid-1987, the highest Slovenian government bodies discussed the AIDS crisis for the first time, and the broadening significance of Magnus's rhetoric also found its way into one of the meetings. Ingrid Bakše, the LSYS representative and coordinator of a working group on new social movements within the LSYS, who was in close contact with gay activists, argued strongly for a distinction between risk groups and risk behaviors, emphasized the need to introduce anonymous testing and underlined the importance of sexual education and the use of condoms.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Lidija Jurjevec, "Sveta preproščina in inteligentni virus," *Mladina*, April 3, 1987, 6.

⁷⁵ "Zmaga nevednosti ali nov prispevek k slovenski blaznosti," *Jana*, April 1, 1987, 13. For similar Likar's statements see: Lidija Jurjevec and Jure Mezerk, "Bojmo se zdravnikov," *Mladina: Pogledi*, May 15, 1987, 23–25.

⁷⁶ A few examples: Lidija Jurjevec and Jure Mezerk, "Pogledi: Nekdo tam zgoraj nas bojda ne ljubi več," *Mladina*, May 15, 1987, 21–28; Peter Vezjak and Igor Pribac, "Pogledi: Pozitivna generacija," *Mladina*, May 22, 1987, 21–36; Suzana, Roni, Erika, Nataša, Marjeta, and Davorka, "Pogledi: Nekaj o ljubezni med ženskami," *Mladina*, October 20, 1987, 21–29.

⁷⁷ Vesna Marinčič, "Aids ali etika javne bolezni," *Sobotna priloga*, December 27, 1986, 21; Archives of the Republic of Slovenia (AS), 537. RK SZDL, box 533, unit 2, "74. seja Predsedstva RK SZDL," June 16, 1987.

The contrasting responses of the Slovenian authorities, marked by homophobia and the support of the professional and liberal public, compelled Magnus activists to realize the significance of communicating their proposals for addressing the AIDS crisis to a wider public. In November 1987, they published a statement in the LSYS weekly Mladina, a publication popular not only in Slovenia but in all of Yugoslavia, entitled “Positions on combating AIDS.”⁷⁸ The statement not only encompassed the key features of Magnus’s response to AIDS – advocating for comprehensive public information campaigns, promoting a broader socio-political understanding of the disease, and endorsing safer sex practices – but also introduced a new dimension pointing to the interconnectedness of homosexuality, AIDS and human rights. In this regard, the statement served as an important liberal voice aligning with a section of the emerging Slovenian civil society that prioritized human rights over national values. The statement rested on the fundamental premise that the attainment of full social and legal rights for homosexuals was essential for effectively combating AIDS. It also pointed to the structural factors that would contribute to the fight against AIDS: the importance of legalizing civil partnerships for gays and lesbians and applying non-discriminatory housing policies, which would enable same-sex partners to enter into stable relationships. It suggested the establishment of non-governmental organizations to support people living with HIV and AIDS, believing that government bodies were too quick to resort to repressive measures, and demanded anonymous and voluntary testing. The statement also called for a new attitude toward sexuality and stressed the need for an open and public discussion on safer sex as a means of pleasure.

Scaling up AIDS activism in socialist Slovenia, 1989–1991

⁷⁸ Sekcija Magnus, “Stališča sekcije Magnus v boju prot aids-u,” Mladina, November 27, 1987, 4.

In the late 1980s, AIDS campaigns intensified in Slovenia. Magnus activists scaled up their efforts by strengthening cooperation with health experts and media outlets, creating new channels to reach both the gay population and the general public, and establishing connections with international AIDS organizations. These collaborations drew on the recontextualization of safer sex practices and AIDS awareness production from various Western sources, including American, Austrian, French, and British. However, from 1986 to 1989, Magnus and LL faced limited opportunities for activism due to the absence of a permanent venue to host activities, mobilize the gay and lesbian population, and raise awareness. The situation changed in May 1989, when activists acquired regular access to freshly renovated K4 student club premises.⁷⁹ This revitalized the community, facilitated the organization of more activities, and consequently created additional opportunities to raise AIDS awareness. In mid-1989, Magnus published a pocket-sized brochure titled “Homosex&AIDS.”⁸⁰ It marked a notable departure from the one released in 1985, with considerably clearer content and language that resembled similar Western information pieces. Due to the lack of available sources, however, it is impossible to identify the foreign materials that might have served as its inspiration. The 1989 brochure covered different types of sexual practices, categorizing them as “dangerous,” “conditionally safe,” or “safe” while also briefly addressing lesbian and heterosexual sex. The text was entirely in Slovenian, and the language used was explicit, incorporating both official and colloquial terms for various sexual tools and practices, such as “sucking,” “golden shower,” and “dildo.” Additionally, it provided explanations for some lesser-known sexual terms and sometimes included the English expression in brackets for clarity.⁸¹ By incorporating colloquial language and slang to describe sexual practices, the brochure, to some extent, demystifies discussions about sexuality. Crucially, as it was mainly

⁷⁹ Velikonja, *Dvajset let*, 21.

⁸⁰ ŠKUC, “Dokumenti o AIDS 6,” 1.

⁸¹ ŠKUC, “Dokumenti o AIDS 6,” 1.

distributed at the Pink Disco, a popular Sunday night event not only among gays and lesbians but also heterosexuals, it helped spread AIDS awareness to individuals with various sexual orientations despite its primary focus on the gay community.⁸²

The contribution of Magnus activists to an open discussion on AIDS in Slovenia extended beyond the brochure. Starting in August 1989, they addressed AIDS-related discrimination by distributing badges with pink triangles featuring the slogan “Silence=Death.”⁸³ The slogan was clearly inspired by ACT UP, an organization founded in New York in 1987, renowned for its radical actions advocating for policies to combat the AIDS crisis.⁸⁴ The available sources, however, do not suggest any other inspirations that Slovenian activists may have drawn from ACT UP branches in the US or Europe. Furthermore, on World Day AIDS in 1989, Magnus organized a roundtable on AIDS, which was attended by two epidemiologists and members of the Republican Committee for AIDS.⁸⁵ This marked the first recorded cooperation between gay activists and health experts since December 1986.

Despite their increased HIV prevention efforts, Magnus activists recognized their limitations in reaching the broader gay population in Slovenia.⁸⁶ To increase the pressure on the authorities for the organization of comprehensive state-level public campaigns, they once more partnered with the LSYS and established the AIDS-Help group in November 1989.⁸⁷ The name was essentially an English translation of the Austrian and German organizations known as AIDS-Hilfe. Nevertheless, there is no documented evidence of communication between these organizations or the availability of Austrian and German informational materials in the ŠKUC records that would suggest a direct influence of the Austrian and

⁸² Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023; Tratnik, interview with the author, June 15, 2023.

⁸³ Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁸⁴ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics. Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸⁵ Brane Mozetič, “Teden pozneje,” *Telex*, December 14, 1989, 48.

⁸⁶ Brane Mozetič, “Aids med planšarji,” *M'zin*, June, 1991, 59.

⁸⁷ AS, 538. RK ZSMS, unit 334, “Zapisnik 24. seje predsedstva RK ZSMS,” November 21, 1989.

German AIDS campaigns on the Slovenian activists. The AIDS-Help group approached the Slovenian authorities with the demand to establish a governmental AIDS fund to ensure continuous and systematic financing of all HIV prevention and curative measures within the public budget. The appeal meticulously pointed out the shortcomings of the systemic response to AIDS and called for various measures, including strategic information campaigns, the professionalization of the work of the Republican Committee for AIDS, the organization of free, voluntary, and anonymous testing to provide a clear and accurate epidemiological picture, and the provision of legal, social, medical and other support for HIV-positive individuals. Additionally, in line with one of the key features of Magnus's AIDS campaigns from the outset, AIDS-Help explicitly demanded a ban on discrimination against individuals or groups based on their HIV infection.⁸⁸

The Slovenian government rejected the appeal of AIDS-Help, deeming the measures taken so far in combating AIDS sufficient.⁸⁹ Such a view, however, was not shared by some health experts. AIDS-Help activists, therefore, engaged in direct conversation with infectiologists, epidemiologists, and microbiologists about the possibility of organizing anonymous testing. While the first two groups were not supportive of the initiative, the microbiologists showed great understanding, and in March 1990, the Institute of Microbiology took over the anonymous testing and financed it from its own funds for several years.⁹⁰ Miha Likar, the head of the Institute, explained their motivations in an interview, aligning with Magnus's previous rhetoric: "We wanted to protect those infected from discrimination and thus protect their fundamental human rights."⁹¹ While the Institute supplied the necessary knowledge and equipment for the anonymous testing, gay activists promoted it within the community,

⁸⁸ AS, 538. RK ZSMS, unit 334, "AIDS-Help pri ZSMS predlaga," November 21, 1989.

⁸⁹ ŠKUC, "Dokumenti o AIDS 7," January 30, 1990, 24–29.

⁹⁰ "Anonimno in brezplačno testiranje," *Delo*, March 2, 1990, 12; Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁹¹ Miha Likar, "Delamo na up in se počutimo kot obtoženci," *Delo*, November 28, 1990, 5.

produced instructional materials and questionnaires for users, and collaborated with the Institute in monitoring the statistics.⁹² The introduction of anonymous testing proved to be a great success for AIDS-Help. It both complemented and competed with the official confidential testing at the Infectious Diseases Clinic, acting as a form of pressure on the authorities to finally recognize the importance of anonymous testing and provide adequate funding.⁹³

The AIDS-Help appeals also found support among some members of the Republican Committee for AIDS. In August 1990, the Committee issued a report on its work, including guidelines for the future. Some of these guidelines echoed the suggestions made by AIDS-Help earlier that year, such as the recommendation for the establishment of a dedicated AIDS fund and the professionalization of its staff through the recruitment of full-time staff.⁹⁴ The Committee also suggested involving representatives of the key groups in its ranks. By October 1990, the latter proposal was implemented, and Brane Mozetič, AIDS-Help representative and Magnus coordinator became a member of the Committee.⁹⁵ As a gay activist, he offered a perspective on the AIDS crisis different from that of the government officials.⁹⁶ While there was initially some mistrust between the two parties, Mozetič's involvement in the governmental body played an important role in demystifying the gay population among health experts and laying the groundwork for future collaboration. As a result, health workers were eager to attend gay and lesbian events aimed at raising AIDS awareness and vice versa.⁹⁷

⁹² ŠKUC, *Dokumenti o AIDS 3*, 1–3; Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁹³ Mitja Čosić ed., *Trideset let hiva v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Društvo informacijski center Legebitra, 2016), 48.

⁹⁴ NIJZ, "Slovenski program za preprečevanje in obvladovanje HIV/AIDS," August, 1990.

⁹⁵ ŠKUC "Dokumenti o AIDS 3," October 29, 1990, 5–6.

⁹⁶ Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁹⁷ Mozetič, "Aids med planšarji," 59.

The AIDS-Help group ceased to exist before the end of 1990 due to the transformation of the LSYS from a mass organization into a Western-type political party.⁹⁸ Despite its short existence, the group's initiatives achieved considerable success and paved the way for further HIV prevention efforts among both gay activists and health workers. In June 1990, Magnus and LL jointly founded Roza klub (Pink Club), an independent umbrella organization with its own tiny administration, which enabled the activists to expand their work and reach an ever-widening audience by increasing their presence in public. In November 1990, the radio program Roza val (Pink Wave) found its place on Val 202, Slovenia's most popular radio station.⁹⁹ Additionally, from December, the new gay and lesbian magazine Revolver graced the shelves of Slovenian newsstands several times a year.¹⁰⁰ Distinct from a mere fanzine, Revolver embodied a high-quality magazine dedicated to addressing cultural and political issues and drawing significant inspiration from renowned publications such as the French-based Gai Pied, the British-based Gay Times, and the Austrian-based Lambda Nachrichten. Moreover, texts, photographs, and slogans were also sourced from a diverse array of Western magazines, mostly lacking proper attribution.¹⁰¹

In both the magazine and the radio program, AIDS-related topics played a visible role, encompassing the promotion of anonymous testing and condom use, as well as featuring interviews with health experts. Additionally, articles in Revolver delved into depicting the impact of HIV and AIDS on people's lives and explored the influence of AIDS on pop culture, mostly drawing on US examples.¹⁰² Activists also leveraged American pop culture to heighten awareness. Mozetič recalls that at Pink Disco, they repeatedly played songs from the

⁹⁸ Mozetič, interview with the author, June 28, 2023.

⁹⁹ Velikonja, Dvajset let, 25; Niko Toš, ed., Vrednote v prehodu II. Slovensko javno mnenje 1990-1998 (Zbirka E-Vrednote, FDV CJMMK 2021), 218.

¹⁰⁰ Velikonja, Dvajset let, 25.

¹⁰¹ Brane Mozerič, email correspondence with the author, October 1, 2023.

¹⁰² Revolver, December, 1990, 19–22; Revolver, September, 1991, 14–16; ŠKUC, "Arhiv Roza klub 6," 44–60.

album “Red Hot + Blue: A Tribute to Cole Porter,” released in September 1990 and celebrated as one of the first major AIDS benefit projects in the music industry.¹⁰³ Within the Pink Club, lesbians also played a more active role in raising AIDS awareness beyond supporting gay activists in distributing materials. They contributed articles on women and AIDS to *Revolver*, benefiting from the increased attention given to the issue by World AIDS Day in 1990. Moreover, they addressed the importance of safer lesbian sex, demonstrating their commitment to promoting sexual health within the lesbian community.

The establishment of the Pink Club further increased the transnational connectivity of Slovenian activists. Connections with several European AIDS networks were established, and gay activists started to attend international training courses. For example, Brane Mozetič attended the second European workshop on AIDS service organizations in Vienna in October 1990, while a young activist, Miran Šolinc, participated in a workshop organized by the Council of European National Youth Committees in Strasbourg in December 1991.¹⁰⁴ When faced with other European AIDS organizations and activists, a particular aspect of the Slovenian gay response to AIDS became evident. Since no individuals in the Slovenian gay community had disclosed their HIV infection, Magnus and the Pink Club focused their AIDS-related efforts primarily on prevention. The initial instance of providing support and care for those infected arose in the early 1990s when the first HIV-positive gay men approached the Pink Club seeking legal assistance.¹⁰⁵ Both the increasing domestic need and the newly gained insights into foreign practices for supporting the HIV-infected might have motivated an attempt to establish a self-help group for HIV-positive individuals in the spring of 1991. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of this initiative remains unclear.¹⁰⁶ Despite the small

¹⁰³ Mozerič, email correspondence with the author, October 1, 2023; Tine Žnidaršič, “Red hot and blue,” *Revolver*, December, 1990, 18–19.

¹⁰⁴ ŠKUC, “Dokumenti o AIDS 4,” October 15, 1990; ŠKUC, “Arhiv Roza klub 5,” December, 1991, 28–31.

¹⁰⁵ Tratnik, interview with the author, June 15, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ ŠKUC, “Dokumenti o AIDS 3,” 4.

number of disclosed HIV-positive cases within the Slovenian gay community, the majority of HIV infections in Slovenia in the early 1990s were indeed among gay men. However, the prevalence still remained low.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Slovenian activists, through a combination of fortunate circumstances and diligent efforts in raising AIDS awareness, managed to avoid the feelings of despair and helplessness experienced by many gay men abroad as they witnessed the loss of loved ones to AIDS.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The gay and lesbian movement in Slovenia evolved alongside the AIDS crisis, making raising awareness of the issue an integral part of its activism from the outset. By examining the Slovenian case, the article broadens the focus of existing scholarship on grassroots AIDS activism in Western Europe. It shines a light on the understudied interfaces between socialist youth structures, gay activism, and AIDS campaigning, while the transnational perspective enriches emerging research on transnational transfers across Cold War blocs and their interaction with domestic contexts. The article reveals that AIDS-related gay activism in Slovenia primarily targeted the gay community, but its initiatives and arguments also had broader implications. Gay activists advocated for comprehensive public information campaigns to empower marginalized individuals and emphasized a broader socio-political understanding of the disease to prevent AIDS-related stigmatization of the gay community. By highlighting the crucial link between securing basic human rights for homosexuals and fighting AIDS, gay activists successfully underlined the importance of structural factors in AIDS response and contributed to discussions on human rights within the emerging Slovenian

¹⁰⁷ NIJZ, “Aids in HIV infekcija v Sloveniji, četrtno poročilo,” March 31, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Ivančič, interview with the author, February 15, 2023; Lešnik, interview with the author, February 23, 2023.

civil society during the late socialist era and the transition to democracy. Additionally, they promoted safer sex and encouraged open discussions about responsible sexuality. By including explicit language in the AIDS information materials, they helped demystify debates about sexuality and counteract the demonization of “lustful” sex. Collaborating with LSYS representatives and individual health experts, gay activists helped to introduce anonymous testing and to involve a representative of the gay community in the Republican Committee for AIDS. Thus, by the early 1990s, AIDS-related gay activism had established effective channels for raising awareness within the gay community and cooperating with health authorities that enabled activists to contribute to the development of future AIDS-related health policies.