

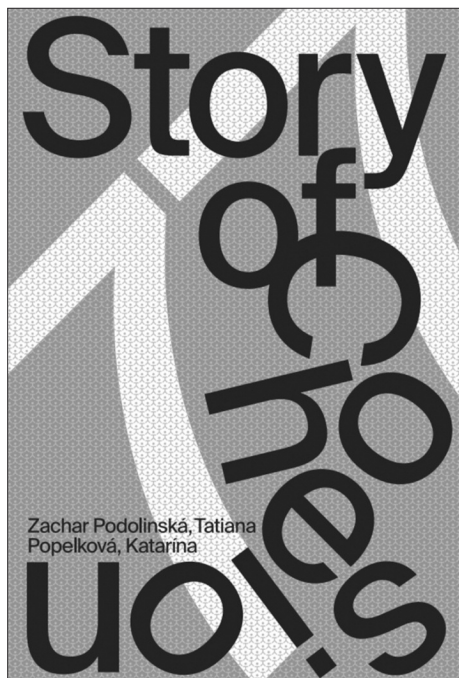


TATIANA ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, KATARÍNA POPELKOVÁ:
Story of Cohesion. On the History of an Academic institution
Bratislava: The Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, 2023, 432 p.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2025.2.24> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i.
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Tatiana Zachar Podolinská and Katarína Popelková took on the large task of mapping the history of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Originally intended as a Laudatio on the 75th anniversary of the Institute, the project grew into a full-length manuscript published two years later to celebrate the Institute's 77th anniversary. *Story of Cohesion. On the History of an Academic Institution* thus spans seventy-seven years of institutional history and illustrates the development of the disciplines of ethnology, ethnography and anthropology in Slovakia. The authors' focus is on paradigmatic changes reflected in the name of the institution, which is the subject of their analysis – from the Ethnographic Institute within the Academy of Sciences and Arts founded in 1946 (later renamed to Slovak Academy of Sciences SAS in 1953), to the Institute of Institute of Ethnology of SAS (1994) and most recently the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of SAS (2018). They aim to show the connection between the changing “internal scientific and organizational paradigms and structures” and external legal, political and economic ecosystems.

The book is divided into four sections that describe what authors see as historically distinct generations of institution builders. The Generation of Founders (Part I) focuses on the Institute's post-WWII beginnings from 1946 through the 1950s and 1960s. It points out the leadership role of Andrej Melicherčík in advancing ethnography as a social scientific method for the study of contemporary societies (not limited to rural populations) in the structural functionalism tradition. At the same time, the Institute framed ethnography as the exploration of people and folk traditions, enabling ethnography's “fluent harmonization with the Communist regime's ecosystem” by pursuing “politically promoted *folkishness*” important in the “legitimization of the existence and autonomy of the Slovak nation” (p. 15). The authors capture the gradual politicization of the institution after 1948 characterized by ideological dominance of Marxism Leninism. After a short-term dissolution in 1951, the Institute was revived during the post-Stalinist thaw and significantly expanded in the 1960s under the leadership of Božena Filová who led the institution until 1989. Despite ideological pressures and a certain dominance of socialist realism and historical materialism, the authors argue that the Institute was well funded during this time and allowed for some degree of freedom for those interested in pursuing other conceptual and research



traditions. During this time, for example, the Institute's staff carried out ethnographic research on traditional peasant culture and folklore as well as the indigenous Roma population in Slovakia. The authors conclude by pointing out the role of the Generation of Founders in opening a "period of syntheses" which produced atlas/encyclopaedic-types of knowledge and expert monographs on Slovak folk culture.

In the second chapter, the authors refer to the Generation of Builders, who led and worked in the institutions during the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period of normalization following the political clampdown after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The authors ascribe the Institute's Director, B. Filová and her diplomatic skills with preventing the attempts to close the Institute during this time and hypothesize (after P. Slavkovský)

about the possible role of Soviet colleagues from the Moscow based Academy in supporting the Institute's *raison d'être*. In the 1970s, the institute pursued both historical research of traditional culture and contemporary studies of culture and cultural change. While they identify the impact of political pressures on the Institute's direction, they also stress the plurality of the staff's interests and their explicit drawing on Western theoretical and methodological traditions during this time. They point to the role of the journal, *Slovenský národopis* (established in 1953) in providing a platform for high quality, often unorthodox articles, some of them by Czech ethnologists who were unable to publish in Czechia for reasons of political censorship. The synthesizing ambitions of the Generation of Founders found expression in the ambitious long-term team research projects that led first and foremost to the publication of the *Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia* (1969 -1990) awarded with both Slovak and international recognitions. Another synthesizing project started in the 1980s and finished in 1995 resulted in the publication of the two-volume *Encyclopaedia of the Folk Culture of Slovakia* (Botik, Slavkovský, Eds., 1995). Both large-scale projects were located in the folkloristic research tradition in the Institute which "reported a boom in the 1970s and particular in the 1980s" (p. 57) and were supported through state structural funds (Ibid.).

The authors include a valuable section on the establishment and functioning of the Basic Communist Party Organization within the Institute, a topic on which other publications of a similar kind remain largely silent. From witness reports, which the authors include, we get a picture of the international Communist Party organization not particularly disruptive of the Institute's functioning. In fact, some comment on its role in protecting the Institute and its employees vis-à-vis outside pressures. The overall good

relationships among employees and positive climate of the Institute seem not to have been particularly disrupted by ideological differences and even though tensions existed, “the atmosphere at the Institute had a friendly-informal, yet critical-reflective nature” (p. 65). The authors stress that the Generation of Builders prioritized teamwork, but they also include some valuable testimonies, which speak to the existence of internal tensions that were effectively managed by the leadership. Finally, they comment on how the Generation of Builders continued their research and publishing work also during the period immediately following the geopolitical transformations of 1989.

The third section of the book describes The Transformation Generation of the post-socialist period of the 1990s and 2000s, a period characterized by changed legislative framework, liberalisation of topics, de-politicisation of research methods, fundamental change in the funding of science and a new system of evaluation of research achievements (p. 81). The 1990s, the authors say, is still characterized by the leading role of the Generation of Builders, and while the post-revolutionary moment in the institute had some tensions, overall, the organization “maintained its cohesion based on humanity, solidarity, mutual respect, gratefulness, and esteem across several generations” (p. 87). In terms of research agenda, the authors speak of both continuation of the study of traditional folk cultures, urban and environmental ethnography as well as opening toward new themes – including previously silenced research on the minorities, faith and religion. They describe multifaceted changes to the Institute’s work – the establishing of new international cooperation, project writing, adaptation to new system of grants, or digitalization. Despite substantial cuts in personnel numbers during the 1990s, the authors stress the internal synchronic and diachronic cohesion of the organization, enabled through rituals that strengthened relationality within the Institute – most of them inherited from the previous era (celebrations of anniversaries, International Women’s Day, masquerade balls, etc.).

While in the 1990s the Generation of Builders and the Transformation Generation largely co-existed, the latter took over the leadership and changed the general direction of the Institute in the 2000s. The authors refer to this period as one of “anthropologisation and internationalisation” and observe that the Institute’s strategic focus shifted to two dominant themes of basic research – post-socialist transition and cultural heritage (p. 166). During this period the Institute also placed a strong emphasis on developing its flagship journal, *Slovenský národopis*, which on the one hand maintained its character as a community building journal, while at the same time expanded its international position (not exclusively) in the Central European context (p. 181). The new areas of focus that came to distinguish the Institute going forward was the strengthening of Romani studies and the establishment and rise of religious studies and engaged anthropology. These according to the authors brought the Institute to the attention of the broader public. The authors do not shy away from describing contentious moments, including the difficult period following the publication of *Rómsky dejepis*, a textbook on Roma history for school teachers (2000) by Arne Mann. The Institute supported Mann through a process following unfair accusations, managing the crisis as well as other challenges during the period of intensive change, “strengthening the internal story of inherent solidarity and cohesion” (p. 249).

The final chapter, The Generation of Innovators, covers the decade starting in 2010s, characterized by the marginalisation of science in Slovakia, reduced public funding, as

well as increased accountability based on sociometric research indicators and introduction of performance funding. Under the new directorship of Tatiana Zachar Podolinská (since 2012), the Institute was impacted by the repeated attempts at the legal transformations of the Slovak Academy of Sciences into separate public research institutions (completed in 2022). The strategic focus of the Institute centred on the development of ethnology, social and cultural anthropology, and religious studies and included four research areas – social and cultural change, social diversification, cultural heritage and the theory, methodology and history of the discipline. Special attention during the period of Innovation was on internationalization (including the journal *Slovenský národopis*), infrastructural reconstruction, digitalization, as well as the re-evaluation of teaching activities (move from undergraduate to PhD education), personnel changes (active recruitment of excellent researchers). During this time of yet another large change, the Institute underwent two successful international accreditations (2016 and 2022) and based on the first one, changed its name from the Institute of Ethnology SAS to the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS. The authors again stress the importance of teamwork and social cohesion for the successful management of externally (and internally) initiated transformations during this period.

The publication by Tatiana Zachar Podolinská and Katarína Popelková is rich in detail and provides an invaluable resource for ethnographers, ethnologists and anthropologists, but also for anybody interested in the transformation of scientific institutions (not only) in post-socialist Europe. The publication is particularly useful for managers of scientific institutes as it describes the dilemmas of management within a transforming social context. It is unique in its openness – people are referred to by their names, there are extensive quotations and key historical moments of conflict are exposed. And while I admit to being initially sceptical of the central somewhat normative argument reflected in the title-history of an institution as a story of cohesion – after reading the book, I find it compelling. In the face of external changes in legal, political and economic ecosystems (Communist, post-Communist, neoliberal) – the primacy of human relationality and solidarity within a workplace as exemplified by the Institute's history is deeply inspirational.

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