

VITA ACADEMICA

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Workshop Report: Risk, Health, and State Socialism: Central and Eastern Europe, 1950s-1980s¹

On 5 May 2025, a one-day workshop was held at the Institute for the History of Medicine and Ethics in Medicine at Charité in Berlin. Organized within the framework of the ERC project *Taming the European Leviathan*, the workshop brought together scholars to explore how the concept of “risk” can be applied to the history of medicine and healthcare under state socialism. The event was prompted by the observation that much of the existing literature on the history of medicine and health has focused primarily on liberal democracies in Western Europe and North America – contexts in which risk thinking and preventive strategies have played a central role in shaping modern health systems. In these settings, “risk” emerged as a key medical category in the post-war decades, initially in relation to the epidemiology of cardiovascular diseases. Risk has come to present a strategy for “dealing with uncertainty based on calculations of probabilities” (Schlich, 2004: 211). Building on this insight, sociologists such as François Ewald, Thomas Lemke, Nikolas Rose and others have shown that risk functions not only as a clinical concept, but also as a broader mode of governance,

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one that redefined various forms of danger as calculable, and, therefore, manageable (Cf. Ewald, 1991; Lemke, 2000; Rose, 1998).

The workshop sought to situate these debates within the distinct political and institutional contexts of state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. It explored how health and social problems were conceptualized as “risks” under communism, and what strategies, practices, and expert knowledges were developed to address them (Cf. Balz, 2020; Madarász-Lebenhagen, 2013; Offermann, 2019; Timmermann, 2012). Like their liberal-democratic counterparts, communist states grappled with the complex challenges of industrial and post-industrial modernity – including rising rates of lifestyle diseases, advances in medical science, growing concerns about environmental degradation, and the regulation of new pharmaceuticals. By addressing a range of topics – from occupational health, neurology, health statistics, and nutrition, to HIV/AIDS, legal history, and media representations – the workshop aimed to broaden existing historiographies on the history of risk and health in state socialism and foster comparative dialogue between research on Eastern and Western medical histories.

In her paper, Denitsa Nencheva (Sofia) explored how the Bulgarian socialist state promoted “creative longevity” by applying ergonomics and occupational health knowledge to manage workers’ ageing and productivity. She examined how scientific methods shaped workplace safety and health practices while also fostering individual responsibility. Similarly, Gergana Mircheva (Sofia), in her presentation on “Minimal Brain Dysfunction”, analyzed the state-sponsored “brain programme” focused on managing so-called “deviant” behaviour in children during the 1980s. She argued that the expert management of “Minimal Brain Dysfunction” could be seen as a form of risk optimization, raising broader questions about how discourses on health and risk were operationalized in late socialism. The role of statistics and quantification methods in state socialist medicine and healthcare also gained importance, as noted by Jakub Střelec (Berlin) in his paper on healthcare planning. He studied how health statistics, supported by new computer technologies, were envisioned as a tool for improving healthcare planning in late socialist Czechoslovakia. Mara Marginean (Cluj-Napoca) examined Romania’s 1980s Scientific Feeding Program as both a public health initiative and a mechanism of state regulation to manage food scarcity. She analyzed the intersection of scientific discourses on nutrition, the political instrumentation of health programs, and the risks related to lifestyle diseases in the context of economic

constrains in late socialist Romania. Katarzyna Szarla (Warsaw) analyzed how the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in 1980s Poland exposed systemic fragilities within the healthcare system and highlighted how marginalized groups initiated their own forms of self-protection. Her presentation underscored the importance of bottom-up health practices within state socialist healthcare. In his paper, Jakub Machek (Prague) studied representations of health and risk in Czechoslovak television and cinema during the 1970s and 1980s. He pointed out a shift in the portrayal of risk in communist media – from the glorification of heroic labour common in the 1950s toward a more nuanced recognition of the adverse effects of excessive work and the psychological pressures of modern life. The importance of international comparison and differing understandings of risk across East and West was emphasized by Mária Éva Földes (Rotterdam). In her paper on the legal tolerance of risk, she explored unofficially tolerated reproductive health practices in post-war Hungary and the Netherlands. Her analysis revealed that, despite contrasting ideological systems, both nations moved from criminalization toward increasing tolerance, though through different logics: Hungary followed a materialist, state-centred approach, while the Netherlands was guided by secular and individualist ideals.

The workshop primarily served to outline potential avenues for future research and collaboration, but it also highlighted several key issues that will require further clarification. In particular, this concerns the conceptual framing of the term *risk*, which often fluctuated during the discussions between an analytical category and a heuristic tool; the need for a more nuanced analysis of the “crisis” in state-socialist healthcare systems; and the role of health prevention in late socialism.

Workshop Overview

Denitsa Nencheva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia): In Preserving Creative Longevity: Health Hazards, Ergonomics, and Occupational Safety during Late State Socialism in Bulgaria

Gergana Mircheva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia): “Minimal Brain Dysfunction” in Socialist Bulgaria and the Minimization of Psycho-Social Risks

Jakub Střelec (Charité-Berlin): Socialist Automated Healthcare Utopia: Medical Statistics, Risk, and Planning in Late Socialist Czech Republic

Mara Marginean (Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca): Nutrition and Health Risk Management in Times of Economic Recession:

The Case of the Rational Scientific Nutrition Program in 1980s Romania

Katarzyna Szarla (University of Warsaw): Risks and Resistance: Prevention and Self-Prevention Practices Related to HIV/AIDS under Late State Socialism in Poland

Mária Éva Földes (Erasmus School of Health Policy and Management, Rotterdam): Legal Tolerance of “Risky” Reproductive Health Practices: A Comparative Analysis of Post-War Hungary and the Netherlands

Jakub Machek (Metropolitan University, Prague): The Representation of Risk and Health in Films and Television Series of the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia

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