
IARCEES Annual Conference

Russian-East European Relations: From Tsarism to Gazprom

The Irish Association for Russian, Central and East European Studies (IARCEES) organized their Annual Conference on May 4th and 5th, 2012. For the occasion, the IARCEES returned to Cork, as the conference was hosted by the University College of Cork. The theme was "Russian-East European Relations: From Tsarism to Gazprom" and over twenty scholars and researchers presented their works to many more interested attendees.

The highlight of the event was a guest lecture by UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies Dr. Peter Duncan, who singled out four constants of Moscow's policy towards Eastern Europe from the sunset of the Soviet regime to the onset of the Russian Federation. Ideology, be it justified through Marxist or neo-imperialistic terms, has been a peculiar factor for defining Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin's foreign policy. The need for a buffer against the West, perceived as a threat since the Soviet revolution, enhanced a "security constant" in Moscow's foreign policy decision-making. Furthermore, since Gorbachev came to power, the reduction of the cost paid for the maintenance of a political influence in neighboring countries has been a pillar of the Kremlin's foreign economic policy. A much stronger and traditional constant has been the cultural component of Soviet and Russian foreign policy abroad. Briefly touching upon the most important examples of these constant patterns, Dr. Duncan highlighted the present day importance of energy prices for Russia's continuation as a hegemon in its own neighborhood.

Prior to Duncan's lecture and during the following day, a series of panels addressed past and present interactions between Russia and Eastern Europe from many different perspectives. The zeal and capacity shown by the organizers, Jonathan Murphy, Richard McMahon, and James Ryan, made for a rich schedule and a smooth transition between topics. Soviet geopolitics, with an emphasis on the role of leaders and memories, and cultural and intellectual history were the central themes for day one. The second day was dedicated to Soviet-Romanian relations, the political and historical discourse around the Polish road to independence, and the most recent issues in energy relations.

Within the framework of the Energy in Eastern Europe panel, Paolo Sorbello presented a paper written together with Ludovico Grandi on the power dynamic between the Kremlin and Gazprom. Both affiliate researchers at PECOB's Energy Policy Studies group, Sorbello and Grandi argue that, although mainstream literature considers Russia and Gazprom's interests to be shared (notwithstanding the fact that the Kremlin is a majority stakeholder of the energy company), examples of diverging strategies denote the existence of distinct concerns that lead to power conflicts and political shifts in the Kremlin's foreign policy decision making process. The paper was received with great appreciation, as well as with illuminating remarks and criticisms by Dr. Duncan and Hon. Marcin Nawrot, Polish ambassador to Ireland, among others.

The interest shown towards the most recent activity by PECOB's contributors is a sign of the growing need for accountable and solid research in the field of energy relations between Russia and its neighbors. Such intellectually inspiring symposia as the IARCEES conference represent the perfect venue for high-level exchange of academic knowledge, which encourages cogent analyses of the most recent events to be rooted in profound historical grounds.

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