

Wider Europe Seminar in Bratislava

On 12 and 13 June 2009, the Wider Europe network held a seminar in Bratislava in collaboration with Comenius University, CEELBAS, the Economic and Social Research Council and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. The principal focus of the conference was the impact of the new Member States on the making of the European Union's policy towards its eastern neighbours and, in particular, their preferences for the Eastern Partnership.

Before tackling this issue, however, the conference opened with a panel on the impact of the global economic crisis on the region. Three presentations were made during the panel, which began with an overview of the global economic crisis, which was provided by Professor Jim Rollo from Sussex European Institute. He argued that origins of the crisis lay in the loose monetary policy that had been operated by the United States (and the United Kingdom) since around 1995 that had allowed large imbalances between surplus and deficit countries to build up. Richard Connolly, CEELBAS research fellow at the University of Birmingham, followed this presentation with an overview of the crisis' impact on the Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, and highlighted that the depth of the economic recession in those states can best be attributed to a failure to undertake structural reforms in the period of the economic boom, which meant that – despite lower levels of debt – these economies were very exposed. Zsolt Gal concluded the panel with a discussion of the impact of the crisis on central Europe, looking especially at the trade dependency of the central European states.

The second panel looked at the Eastern Partnership, with presentations from Derek Averre of the University of Birmingham, who analysed Russia's reaction to the Eastern Partnership arguing that the Russian foreign policy elite lacks a coherent vision of what it seeks to achieve in the region. Peter Mišík from the Slovak foreign ministry gave a practitioner perspective on Slovak policy towards its eastern neighbours. Alan Mayhew, Sussex European Institute, and Alexander Duleba, Slovak Foreign Policy Association, commented on these two presentations reflecting on both energy policy concerns and the profusion of regional cooperation initiatives that the EU has produced in recent years – from the Black Sea Synergy project to the Northern Dimension to the Danube regional cooperation initiative – making the point that whilst some of these projects do add value, the Eastern Partnership is of an altogether different nature, aiming at integration of the Eastern European states with the EU. The third, fourth and fifth conference panels looked at the new Member States' impact on the making of policy towards the eastern neighbours and was opened with an insightful analysis from Jarosław Pietras, Director General in the Secretariat of the EU Council of Ministers, on the impact of the new Member States on the European Union since 2004, that was complemented by a paper from Erik Lastic, Comenius University. His analysis was upbeat although he did indicate that it would be another five years until the 2004/07 Member States began to play as significant a role as the old EU-15. He also made the point that the term EU-15 continues to be used for academic analyses five years after the Big Bang enlargement of 2004, an indicator of the way in which the Union is still perceived by some analysts.

The following presentations from Vladimír Bilčík, Comenius University, Attila Ágh, Corvinus University, Vít Beneš, Institute of International Relations in Prague, Nathaniel Copey, CEELBAS research fellow at the University of Birmingham, Laurynas Jonavičius, University of Vilnius, and Sorin Denca from the University of Birmingham, looked respectively at the national preferences of a range of central European states: Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania and Romania. The position of Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary could be summarized in Attila Ágh's memorable expression as 'full support but no effort' for the Eastern Dimension. Hungary is preoccupied with the Western Balkans, Slovakia is still coming to terms with the notion of having an independent foreign policy and the Czech Republic, whilst suspicious of Russia, does not know what it seeks to achieve. Lithuania and Poland have a near-identical foreign policy agenda for the region with a focus on Belarus and Ukraine. Romania is most concerned about Moldova and takes an interest in the Black Sea Synergy – although whether that regional initiative is of any real value remains to be seen.

This regional seminar attracted a wide local audience from academia and policy-making circles. We are particularly grateful to our sponsors: CEELBAS, the ESRC, the SFPA and the Comenius University, without whose support this event would not have been possible.