„Post-Panslavism“ at the 43rd Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

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Six members of the Post-Panslavism research group at the GWZO Leipzig convened in Washington on November 17 for a panel at the annual conference of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. The panel explored different conceptions of Slavic unity from the early twentieth century to the present day. After a short introduction by STEFAN TROEBST, four papers presented case studies of the Panslavic idea in history, art history, and anthropology. A synthetic comment from LARS KARL wrapped up the panel and paved the way for a lively discussion.

AGNIESZKA GĄSIOR discussed the role of Panslavism in the life and work of the Czech painter Alphonse Mucha. Mucha arrived in the United States in 1904, determined to promote the cause of Czech independence and Slavic unity. Over the next half-decade he painted numerous portraits for wealthy clients, refining his characteristic style and acquiring financial security. It was this American experience, Gąsior argues, that paved the way for Mucha's landmark „Slav Epic,“ a twenty-painting series completed in 1928. Mucha intended this work as a celebration of Slavic brotherhood, but this sentiment found little traction in an independent and increasingly nationalist Czechoslovakia. Born in America, Mucha's dream of Slavic unity had no place in the political reality of postwar Eastern Europe.

In ADAMANTIOS SKORDOS's paper, the Slavic dream turned into a nightmare. Skordos described the anti-Slavic rhetoric of the Greek Civil War in the late 1940s, in which the nationalists tarred the communists with the broad brush of Panslavism. Though the communist National Liberation Front received only minimal assistance from the Soviet Union, it was widely portrayed as a group of Slavic invaders hostile to the Greek nation. In this way, the communist threat was assimilated into a longstanding tradition of anti-Slavic sentiment. Not only was this rhetorical strategy successful during the Civil War, Skordos argues, but it became an important ideological foundation for the postwar Greek state.

JENNY ALWART focused on a much more recent case of Pan- and anti-Slavism: Slavic Bloc voting in the Eurovision Song Contest. Since joining Eurovision in the 1990s and 2000s, East European countries have tended to vote for their Slavic neighbors. Among some Western observers, this has provoked fears of a Slavic takeover of Europe – often expressed in the very same language that Skordos described. For the new member countries themselves, however, Eurovision serves as a way to assert their European identity. Alwart showed how two recent Eurovision hosts, Ukraine and Serbia, used the contest to describe themselves as being „in the heart of Europe.“ For Eastern European countries, she concluded, transnational identities like „Slavic“ and „European“ often overlap and intersect in surprising ways.

The final presenter, RUŽA TOKIĆ, provided a useful rejoinder to the other three papers by looking at a case of non-Slavic unity: contemporary ideas of the „Greco-Serbian friendship.“ In both Greece and Serbia, this friendship is often portrayed as timeless and primordial, the product of an essential Orthodox brotherhood. As Tokić argued, however, the „friendship“ was in fact a rhetorical device rooted in recent political insecurity. The two countries began to emphasize their common heritage in opposition to what they saw as Western hegemony and Islamic advance. Tokić's paper offered an important reminder that pan-Slavism is just one of many visions of transnational unity in Eastern Europe. It also drew an interesting contrast with the earlier Greek anti-Slavism that Skordos described, showing just how impermanent pro- or anti-Slavic sentiments can be.

LARS KARL's comments highlighted the fraught relationship between Panslavism and nationalism. In each of the panel's papers, Karl noted, the idea of Slavic unity was driven at least in part by nationalist ambitions.

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Czech, Greek, Ukrainian, and Serbian politicians all looked at Panslavism through the prism of their national goals, portraying it as either conduit or threat. Conversely, national objectives were often framed in Panslavic terms – even when such Panslavism was more imagined than real. The national and the transnational were thus closely intertwined, and Karl concluded by asking whether any vision of Slavic unity could avoid taking on national forms.

As a whole, the panel showcased the immense variety of visions of „Slavicity," as well as their enduring power. A major theme was Panslavism's ability to co-opt other transnational identities – not just nationalism, but also (anti)communism, Orthodoxy, and Europeanness. That is its greatest strength, and also its greatest weakness. By associating itself with other ideologies, Panslavism can be perpetuated and overshadowed simultaneously. Its most permanent association, however, remains with the notion of Eastern Europe. As this panel demonstrated, the Slavic idea has long been inseparable from Eastern European affairs, and will likely continue to inform them in the future.

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