The EU’s Big Bang and Beyond: A Decade After Eastern Enlargement

On February 26, 2014, the Consuls General from Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania visited the University of Illinois campus from Chicago to participate in the roundtable “The EU’s Big Bang and Beyond: A Decade After Eastern Enlargement,” an event organized by the European Union Center and the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center. Prior to the roundtable, they met informally with students to introduce themselves, discuss foreign service careers, and answer any questions about their countries or about the European Union in general. Robert Rusiecki, Deputy Consul General of Poland, has been in Chicago for three years. He is not a career diplomat, but started out in banking. In 2008, he began a foreign service career. Marijus Gudynas is the Consul General of Lithuania. His consulate encompasses 28 states, more than half the United States. He calls Chicago the “second largest Lithuanian city.”

George Predescu, Consul General of Romania, joined the foreign service in 1990. His first diplomatic posting was in Washington, D.C. One of the highlights of his career was helping Romania become a member of NATO. Not only does his office serve the 60,000-100,000 Romanians in Chicago and others who live in the 12-state area that his consulate covers, but it also tries to promote Romania in the region. Simeon Stoilov is the Consul General of Bulgaria. He joined the foreign service 2.5 years ago from the private sector. He calls Chicago “the third-largest Bulgarian city.” In his work, he finds opportunities for cooperation and partnership between the U.S. and Bulgaria. The visit was his second to the University. During the meeting, the Consuls General and students engaged in conversation on a wide variety of topics such as EU agricultural policy and foreign service careers. Each of the Consuls General agreed that it is a “great honor to serve your country” and encouraged students who are interested in embarking on such careers to do so. To succeed in the foreign service, they emphasized the importance of knowing one’s country well, but also understanding the needs and demands of the host country. From personal experience, they stressed that a person must really have passion to pursue a foreign service career because diplomats and consuls are “nomads,” though “well-paid.”

Shortly after the meeting with graduate students, the Consuls General gathered for the roundtable. Anna Stenport, Director of the European Union Center, gave the introduction. Following her remarks were those of Bryan Endres, Interim Associate Provost for International Affairs and Director of International Programs and Studies, and those of Carol Leff, Associate Professor of Political Science, who was the moderator.

Marius Gudynas gave the first presentation. He began with a brief history of Lithuania, highlighting its ties to Europe. He mentioned that Lithuania was the first of the former Soviet republics to separate from the Soviet Union. In 1991, the country became a part of the United Nations. It applied for EU membership in 1995, and became a member of the EU and NATO in 2004. Most recently, it held the EU presidency in 2013. Gudynas noted Lithuania’s highly educated and multilingual population, and its strong economic growth as an EU member. At the conclusion of his presentation, he encouraged the audience to follow him on social media and
visit Lithuania.

Next was George Predescu, who spoke about Romania. He emphasized that Romania’s EU experience has been very important. EU membership had been a “national goal.” In 2007, Romania joined the EU, along with Bulgaria. Predescu described EU enlargement as a “key factor in the democratization of Europe.” Enlargement is a “significant pillar” to a free and hopeful Europe. Although he acknowledged that EU membership is difficult to attain, it pays in the end because it is a “stimulus for economic reform.” He wholeheartedly showed support for the integration of the western Balkans and solidarity among European states.

Following Predescu was Simeon Stoilov of Bulgaria. He opened with the comment that EU integration was “not a big bang” for any of the countries represented at the roundtable. Rather, joining the EU was a long process that affected a country’s “total environment, its industry, culture.” Like Gudynas’ presentation on Lithuania, Stoilov began with a brief history of Bulgaria. The country was established in 681 A.D. and had always been called Bulgaria. Though the country is at a crossroads between diverse cultures, he asserted that Bulgarians have “always believed our place is in Europe.” Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. Stoilov expressed Bulgarians’ pride in standing firm with the policies of NATO and the EU, and in Bulgarian becoming an official language of the EU. In conclusion, Stoilov affirmed how the EU values of freedom, respect for human rights, equality, democracy, and rule of law are essentially Bulgarian values. Different ethnic and religious groups peacefully live together. To Bulgarians, equality means uniting because of similarities. Like Predescu, Stoilov promotes EU expansion as a way to overwhelm economic and cultural crises. To those who believe that the EU will fail, Stoilov asserts that “everyone is sure the EU will survive and expand further.”

The final presenter was Robert Rusiecki. He began with a brief history of Poland, noting how Poland and Lithuania formed a commonwealth in 1569 which had the first written constitution. In 1989, Poland became a democracy; in 1999, it became a member of NATO. Rusiecki called the big bang the “biggest single enlargement of the EU,” when 10 countries joined the organization, in comparison to the average admission of 3 to 4 countries. According to him, the objective of the EU is to “ensure peace and political stability, secure greater prosperity, further democracy, and reinforce Europe’s role internationally.” Speaking specifically about the Polish case, Poland has made a “great leap forward” with EU membership. Economically, it has experienced fast growth and was the only country to avoid a recession in 2008. The relationship between Poland and the EU is a “success story.” However, Poland still has problems that it needs to address, specifically its population decline, which is also a challenge for other EU member states. After 10 years in the EU, Rusiecki proclaimed that 78 percent of Poles support EU membership and 74 percent consider themselves European as well as Polish.

After all the Consuls General presented, they answered questions from the audience. Since the crisis in Ukraine was on many people’s minds, the Consuls General addressed that topic. Marijus Gudynas called Ukraine’s integration into the EU “stolen at the very last moment” by former president Victor Yanukovych’s refusal to sign the Association Agreement. Other questions audience members asked were about nationalism and far-right parties in Europe, EU funds and economic aid, and further EU expansion. All three
Consuls General advocated for full EU membership for countries who meet all admission criteria. They agreed that EU membership is “work,” but it is certainly worth the effort.

Stephanie Chung is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests are in Soviet literature and culture, Russian women’s writing, and Czech literature. She received her B.A. in Plan II Honors, and Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies in 2007; and her M.A. in Slavic Languages and Literatures in 2009 at the University of Texas at Austin. She plans to write a dissertation on Soviet women’s memoirs, with a particular focus on the writer and translator Lilianna Lungina.