Is There Still an “Eastern Europe”?

On September 4, 2014, Professor Carol Leff gave a lecture entitled “Is There Still an ‘Eastern Europe’?” With the advancement of democracy and the capitalist developments taking place in Eastern Europe following communism, the countries of the region are continually acquiring characteristics which make them more like their Western European neighbors, which raises the question of the importance and necessity of defining Europe by East and West today. Her lecture investigated this important question from a political science standpoint. Professor Leff is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is a specialist in Czech and Slovak politics and the communist and post-communist period in Eastern Europe.

Professor Leff began her lecture by providing an overview of Eastern Europe. She explained the complexity of the term itself, what it means, and the difficulty in determining the borders that define it. She noted that these questions are still debatable today, and they pose a challenge for political scientists who study the region. Professor Leff highlighted this fact by presenting a series of maps which are not all in agreement as to where the boundaries between East Europe and West Europe are located. Thus, there is no standard geographical definition of Eastern Europe. Professor Leff then moved to a discussion of how political scientists have attempted to address this ambiguity and try to understand where the East/West division exists. Political scientists have many methods at their disposal to investigate this problem. She explained that they can detect a separation between East and West when considering the “World Value Survey.” By examining the data for this survey for former communist countries, one can observe trends that place them in relation and hence, expose a division between East and West. The “Atlas of European Values” is another tool that can demonstrate that an East/West divide can be created. According to Professor Leff, with the “Atlas of European Values,” one “can make East Europe appear and disappear based on the question.” Thus, the answers some Eastern European respondents give share a similarity which separates them from Western Europeans.

Additionally, the “Mainwaring Volatility Study” also provides insight into a common trend in East European politics. Through it, political scientists can observe a fundamental difference between East European and West European politics. The percentage of voters who changed party affiliations following an election has been significantly higher in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Professor Leff stressed how the people in this region are seeking an end to corruption in politics after communism. Therefore, we see a distinct trend in new parties originating in Eastern Europe which largely define themselves by “promises” to end corruption which is “seen as chronic in the post-communist state.” The concept of “Biographical Credentialing” has also aided political scientists in dealing with the question of East Europe. Essentially, a political issue of tremendous importance in Eastern Europe is the past activity of a politician during the Cold War. I found it fascinating that this issue is raised in politics and campaigns throughout the region; it is very important in contemporary politics. Professor Leff stated that the communist era is considered a “sensitive period” and also mentioned
the “question of moral legitimacy.” I was very surprised to learn that the last Slovak election witnessed the first election of a president who was not a former communist. I found Professor Leff’s lecture to be very enlightening. I am always interested to see how different academic disciplines approach issues and problems in vastly different ways. It was fascinating to see and be exposed to the methods employed by political scientists who study the post-communist region. In addition, Prof. Leff’s lecture demonstrated to me that one cannot simply define Europe in regional terms by an East and a West, and that so many factors need to be taken into account when trying to understand this region.

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