

UnSSEESing

THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE FROM THE UCL
SCHOOL OF SLAVONIC AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES



Season's Greetings and a warm welcome to the 2022 edition of UnSSEESing.

The past two years were defined by the pandemic and in this issue the Director of SSEES, Professor Diane Koenker, recalls the effect this had on the school. If we thought that life would return to normal after the pandemic, we could not have been more wrong. February 2022 saw the invasion of Ukraine and SSEES thrust into the spotlight. Students, led by Freya Proudman, immediately set up a highly efficient convoy of lorries taking food and medical supplies to the region. Lecturers became widely sought after by the media. Taviton Street set up a website with a feed of information, insights and commentary.

In this issue we report on the talk given by Professor Andrew Wilson on Ukraine at our first in-person event for many months, in June . In the autumn we were finally able to invite Professor Slavo Radošević to speak about technology in Eastern Europe, an event which had been postponed since before Covid.

The committee has for many years been a small band of people, but we would like to broaden our interests and ages to include many more of you in our activities and events. To that end we welcome three new recruits – Natia Seskuria, Gideon Dewhurst and Ed Emerson and you can read about them below.

We do hope you will enjoy reading this and we look forward to seeing you in 2023.

With our best regards and a Happy New Year

SSEES Alumni Committee

Katya Kocourek, Angela Garrett, Pete Duncan, Hugo Allen, Jon Browning, Natia Seskuria, Gideon Dewhurst and Ed Emerson and, as ever, many thanks to Lisa Walters

We start with a message to the ‘Pandemic Cohorts’ from Professor Diane Koenker, Director of UCL SSEES

You are the class of three scourges: Brexit, Covid-19, and now the Russian government’s criminal war on Ukraine. They have had and they will continue to have an enormous impact on your current lives and on your plans for the future. You can take some solace in knowing how together we responded to the need for distance learning during Covid-19 and how we managed to compensate for isolation and alienation and fear of the pandemic. The current war creates new challenges and poses an unknowable future. But we will face them together as a community.

In July Professor Andrew Wilson came to speak on Ukraine

Report by Dr Pete Duncan, Honorary Associate Professor

Professor Andrew Wilson’s talk to SSEES alumni on 5 July 2022, ‘The War against Ukraine’, was a great success. Our Professor of Ukrainian Studies gave an excellent talk, which was followed by a number of well-informed questions from the 50-strong audience. Dr Katya Kocourek kept order in the chair.



Andrew argued that Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine was a product of the Russian ‘propaganda state’. Since 2005 (when Andrew published his book *Virtual Politics*), political technology has expanded from the political sphere into all areas of society. Before 2012, there was no real threat to Putin; the regime took a whack-a-mole approach to potential challengers. Since then, Putin has been more and more ruling by fear. There is no public politics anymore. In the future, Andrew predicted, the Kremlin would fix elections online.

The regime's political technologists produce a (false) narrative and try to get the people hooked on it. Former president Dmitrii Medvedev is forced to say the toughest things to the West, to please his boss and maintain his position within the regime. Russian television looks crazy from the outside, but makes sense on the inside. A fake civil war is shown on television, with fake Ukrainians, some 'good' and some 'bad'. The political technologists, using the technique of montage, portray Ukraine as an artificial, anti-Russian state, working with Nazis.

Putin, living in the virtual world he has created for Russia, expected a quick victory against Ukraine and to make propaganda gains. His decision not to withdraw from Ukraine but to continue the war has terrible consequences. Gleb Pavlovskii, the political technologist who worked with Putin in the past (and is well informed), holds that waging the war is entirely Putin's personal decision; he is maniacally obsessed with Ukraine, arising from his obsession with his own propaganda. Putin's propaganda has grown into 'groupthink', where, as public opinion polls show, people show their loyalty to Putin. No permanent peace with Ukraine will be possible until people stop believing the propaganda.

Andrew also said some interesting things about Ukraine. It has political technology; Volodymyr Zelens'kiy himself is a product of that. His campaign was entirely online. His advisers tried to repeat in real life what his character had done in his television series *Servant of the People* (which became the name of his party).

But Ukraine is not a propaganda state. In the war, it has become a consensus society, where substantial majorities think that the country is going in the right direction, are themselves prepared to fight, and believe that Ukraine should fight until victory – up to the degradation of Russia. Ukraine's oligarchs have seen some of their assets destroyed in the war. Their former links with Russia are now untenable. Zelens'kiy is now much less dependent on the oligarchs, including on his original sponsor Ihor Kolomoys'kiy. In the future, the oligarchs may or may not regain their influence.



The long-term favours Ukraine in the war, Andrew said, if the people can survive and if Western countries support them enough. It will depend on Western public opinion. Putin calculates that he can outlast changes in Western sentiment as we begin to worry more about energy, inflation and hunger in the Middle East than about resisting Russia.

In September Professor Slavo Radošević challenged us with a talk on Technology Upgrading of Eastern Europe



On 17 November at 16 Taviton Street, Slavo Radošević, who is Professor of Industry and Innovation Studies at SSEES, delivered a talk entitled 'Technology upgrading of Eastern Europe: past and present'.

The lecture addressed the technology upgrading of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union economies from a long-term perspective. As explained by Professor Radošević, socialist and post-socialist transformations across the region represented a rare 'natural experiment' in social sciences. For 100 years, the area was ruled by two radically different political and policy philosophies, and Professor Radošević explored their impact on technology upgrading as a technological, economic, social and political process.

The talk revisited the legacies of the socialist period and how they conditioned post-socialist transformation. Professor Radošević went on to outline key transformation processes in the innovation systems of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union in transition and post-transition periods at the firm, sectoral and national levels.

Professor Radošević noted increasing differentiation within the area on countries that followed foreign-led modernisations (in the CEE region) vs domestic-led modernisations (post-Soviet states), with significant impact on their prospects for technological 'catching-up'. The talk addressed several current challenges (digitalisation, 'greening', war in Ukraine) from a technology upgrading perspective.

Finally, Professor Radošević discussed how the concept of 'transition' has developed, with reference to the definitions provided by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Transition was now seen as an open-ended process, instead of as a predetermined shift to a liberal market economy. The earliest definition of transition involved the reduction in the role of the state and the increase in the role of the market. The second definition shifted to redefining the role of the state, instead of reducing it, and emphasizing the quality of the activity of the state. The third definition advocated multiple solutions to achieve an effective market economy. The latest definition adds the importance of a sustainable market economy.

The talk was followed by a reception for all present in the Masaryk Senior Common Room.

The United Ukrainian Ballet

In September Belka Productions arranged for the United Ukrainian Ballet to perform Giselle at the London Coliseum. A small group of alumni enjoyed a spectacular and moving evening performance in support of Ukraine.

If you would like to join us on our cultural visits, please watch out for invitations in your inbox and let us know if you spot anything which might be of interest.

The Alumni Prize

The SSEES Alumni prize was awarded in summer 2022 to an outstanding dissertation entitled *How did Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) sell-side institutional traders behave during the Covid-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020* by an HPE student, Dheevesh Mungroo. The dissertation received a mark of 86.

We are pleased to introduce three new members of the Committee ...

Natia Seskuria

Natia came from Georgia to study Politics at SSEES. Since she returned to Georgia, she has taught at Georgian universities and opened her own think tank in Tbilisi.

SSEES has played a very important role in shaping my interests and career choices. Looking back, I have fond memories of my time as a BA student and later MA student at the School. Most importantly, I found some of my most precious, life-long friendships during my university years. The UK does not lack great universities and departments, and yet I think that SSEES creates a special atmosphere where students, academics and staff members can connect and exchange their interests and experiences.

Since I left SSEES, I have worked in government and non-government sectors, and in academia. I am currently an Associate Professor teaching Russian politics and foreign policy. I am often asked by students, who do not know what career path to take, when and how I knew what I wanted to do in life. Like most young students, when I applied to SSEES UCL, I knew little about my future career choices. It was really during my studies that I was able to develop a life-long interest in Russia and Eastern Europe, with a focus on security and defence issues. The luxury of being able to conduct academic experiments and choose modules from literature to philosophy and security studies helped in widening the scope of my research and shaping my interests.

When I was about to graduate with my MA degree, one of my tutors recommended that I apply for an internship at one of the world's leading think tanks, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Back then, I could not have imagined that seven years' later

I would still be with RUSI and launch my own think tank in partnership with the British Institute. My think tank, the Regional Institute for Security Studies (RISS), which is focused on Russia, Caucasus and the Black Sea region, was launched in November 2022 and I look forward to engaging with the SSEES community within this new framework.

When I was offered the chance to become a Committee Member of the SSEES Alumni Association I had no hesitation in accepting as I think this will be my attempt to make a little contribution to the place that has been an important part of my life.

Gideon Dewhirst

I have a keen interest in the SSEES region and I am pleased to be joining the Committee at a time when parts of the SSEES region have come back into geopolitical fashion – though sadly for all the wrong reasons. I'm a SSEES alumnus from 1997 and work at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). I am looking forward to helping the Committee create a range of events and activities to facilitate connections within what I think is a very special alumni community.

When I graduated from SSEES in 1997 with a BA in History, the School was still based on Russell Square and in Senate House. SSEES created a strong bond in its students which lasts to this day. I remember a real feeling of academic and social community, borne of working on a fascinating, vibrant but sometimes troubled region, which was then just emerging from the shadow of communism. I will never forget my first travels into Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary – and Russia, then fairly undiscovered and pretty misunderstood by people in 'the West'.

After graduating, some short-term work in the Balkans with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) whetted my appetite for international relations. A conversation with SSEES academic Dr Martin Rady encouraged me to join the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I was lucky to be able to put my knowledge from SSEES quickly to use when I joined the Russia Desk, at a point when Putin had recently become Russian President and was then seen as a reformer after the chaos of the Yeltsin years. From there I went on a posting in the Caucasus, in the British Embassy in Yerevan, Armenia. Living in and travelling around the Caucasus region I was able to observe at first hand (and sometimes influence) the historical trends and issues which I had studied at SSEES. After then my career went on to other things, but I recently returned to the region for a short stint at our Embassy in Prague, Czech Republic, much developed since my visits in the 1990s (and Golden Prague itself deservedly one of the tourist capitals of Europe).

When the Russia/Ukraine crisis broke, a call went out for volunteers across the FCDO to join the effort. I immediately seized the opportunity to return to working on a region

where I had always maintained an interest and expertise. I now work in a new FCDO unit focused on countering and undermining Russia's well-resourced disinformation operation. This operation has been in overdrive since the invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin uses a number of techniques to spread disinformation: the 'four Ds'. Firstly, distract from the truth with outlandish claims about anything and everything. Secondly, deny responsibility for actions and events, and dismiss the credibility of any evidence to the contrary. Thirdly, create dismay with unsubstantiated accusations and threatening rhetoric. And finally, dismiss the credibility of the messengers and any individuals exposing information operations. This effort is not only to spread untruths – it is also aimed at confusing the individual so that they don't know what or who to believe, become cynical about all the actors involved – or simply lose interest and turn off.

We work to expose the Kremlin playbook, calling out the outlandish lies and contrasting them to verified facts. Intelligence has been declassified to put Russia's plans in the public domain in advance, to deny them the strategic initiative and raise global awareness. The UK has put targeted sanctions in place against media organisations spreading Russian disinformation. We also put support directly to Ukraine's Government, helping them to tackle disinformation. Working on the Russia/Ukraine war can be harrowing at times, but it is incredibly motivating to feel you are trying to help a country defend its independence and lives from external aggression.

I'm hoping to use some of my contacts through work to help arrange some interesting events, and I am always fascinated to meet members of the SSEES alumni community. Finally, I'll look forward to giving a little back to SSEES, which started me on a journey that has taken me around Eastern Europe and the world.

Ed Emerson

The events of the last year have once again placed SSEES, and its alumni, at the heart of debate. The shift caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine will have made many of us look back to our time at SSEES. It feels as if we must, somehow, have something intelligent or insightful to say, though no one can explain the unexplainable, nor make sense of senseless violence.

There is a temptation too to look back upon our own time at SSEES, even as a relatively recent (2019) graduate, with a sense of Weimar Germany naivete. Whilst at SSEES, I remember looking at photographs of the streets of Prague, filled with normal citizens going about their days, even as the annexation of the Sudetenland was agreed. A blissful ignorance of sorts of the horrors to come. Looking back at my own memories, walking through the streets of Kyiv now elicits similar feelings.

Many will have felt the urge to reach out to friends and colleagues in the past year, and many of us will be glad we did. Whilst the Hammer and Sickle was long closed by the time I arrived at SSEES, I have fond memories of laughing with my friends in the Masaryk Room, in the back of UCL lecture halls, or in Phineas bar. In these same spaces, current SSEES students have fundraised, collected donations, and organised aid deliveries to Ukraine. We can be exceptionally proud of their efforts.

As an alumni network, we too have tried to come together where we can. I'm glad to have reconnected with friends and former SSEES students also trying to make sense of the world, though it hasn't always been easy to stay in touch. Covid has hampered social engagements over the past years and has had the unfortunate impact of stifling our network's ability to expand and grow. Not least, of course, because an entire cohort of students will now have passed through SSEES having barely met or socialised with their fellow students.

As a network, we must therefore redouble our efforts to include these students in our events and activities and provide a valuable community to those trying to support each other through unsettled times, learning from each other and exchanging experiences. In the worst way possible, the events of the past year have served to highlight the importance of strong networks throughout the East European region and underscore the important and unique place SSEES has in the UK's academic landscape.

The Alumni Committee has continued its sterling work to bridge these gaps, though barriers remain. Hopefully, those reading this newsletter are equally willing to be a part of the alumni network's future activities. We are lucky to be connected to each other and, despite the extraordinary upheaval of the past few years, we should not allow ourselves to lose the bonds we once had – be they with our own friends, current students, or the wider network.

We can only hope that 2023 will bring further opportunities to build these bridges, and I can only encourage you to join the Alumni Committee for an excellent programme of events planned. Hopefully we can continue to meet each other, swap stories, and ultimately support our friends and colleagues through what will likely be another difficult year.

News from SSEES

Sadly, this year saw the early deaths of Dr Philippa Hetherington, Lecturer in Modern Eurasian History, and Kenric Singhakowin, SSEES alumnus.

Dr Philippa Hetherington

Dr Philippa Hetherington, Lecturer in Modern Eurasian History, sadly passed away on Saturday 5 November after a long and courageous struggle with illness.



In Philippa, the world has lost not only one of the most promising scholars of her own generation, but one of the most life-enhancing people of any generation. Within its tragically short compass, her own life traversed several continents: Australia, where she graduated with distinction from the University of Sydney in 2006; North America, where she took her PhD at Harvard in 2014; and Europe, where she spent part of her childhood and where she has lived and worked at UCL SSEES since September 2015.

Her scholarly vision was similarly broad, encompassing a global view of Russian and Caucasian history and a methodological approach as sensitive to the links between legal history and feminist theory as it was to those between migration and imperial government. Such interdisciplinary expertise made her an ideal appointment at SSEES, where she immediately devoted her energies not only to her own inspirational teaching, but to the development of the new degree programme in History, Politics and Economics.

If few historians could match such a daunting intellectual range, fewer still could do so with Philippa's enviably relaxed ease and enthusiasm. Committed to the very last to colleagues and students alike, Philippa cast a warm glow over everyone she met. We shall never forget her.

The following tribute to Dr Hetherington was published on the SSEES website:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/news/2022/nov/tribute-dr-philippa-hetherington>

Remembering Kenric Singhakowin



It was with great sadness that the SSEES Alumni community learnt of the death of Kenric Singhakowin earlier this year. After gaining a BA in History in 1999, Kenric went on to work in the world of finance in East & Southeast Asia. Having started his career first in the property business in China (Beijing and Shanghai), Kenric later held various positions at well-known banks across the region - his last was as a relationship manager with Deutsche Bank in Hong Kong.

Looking back to life at SSEES, a keen interest in art and literature became a mainstay of Kenric's university experience, both inside and outside tutorials. Kenric's favourite history courses included Lindsey Hughes' Russian art and architecture and Roger Bartlett's history of Russia since 1856; and after-academic-hours, besides countless happy moments in the Hammer and Sickle, Kenric was actively involved in the SSEES undergraduate Drama Society. Their 1997 production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* attracted a large crowd of students and academics.

Personal charm coupled with a wonderful sense of humour and generous spirit earned Kenric many friends at university and at school, where he was also a popular figure. Writing in The Shirburnian's Squash report for Sherborne's Trinity Term 1994, just two years before Kenric came to SSEES, 'H.H.D.P' asked: "*But where was Kenric Singhakowin? I hope he returns to the squad next year - with or without his colours!*"

Farewell my friend, you are much missed.

Written by Katya Kocourek

Photo published with thanks to Kenric's wife, Charlene

Careers Advice and Development:

SSEES Alumni work closely with Dr Ben Noble who is responsible for Careers advice at Taviton Street as mentors and advisors. The annual careers event is always well attended and offers a chance for students to come together with alumni to ask what their job really entails. Our [LinkedIn website](#) posts opportunities which may appeal to both SSEES students and graduates alike. For information on how to post a role or become a mentor please contact Patricia Gabalova at Taviton Street.

UCL SSEES Research Excellence Framework for 2021

UCL SSEES came third in research power among Area Studies units under the 'REF' for 2021. The following statistics are provided on the UCL SSEES website:

- 84.5.% of our research was graded 4* and 3* and our research received a 'grade point average' of 3.44 (out of 4).
- 50% of SSEES research was graded 4* 'world leading' (up from 24.3% in 2014).
- 34.5% of SSEES research was graded 3* 'internationally excellent' (up from 25.7% in 2014).
- Coming third in research power in Area Studies is an impressive achievement for SSEES, in view of its relatively small size. Research power essentially means the number of researchers multiplied by the average quality of the submitted pieces of research. First place was held by the University of Oxford, and second by the University of Portsmouth. SSEES came ahead of the University of East Anglia, in fourth place, the University of Cambridge in fifth, and SOAS in twentieth.

For more details, please see: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/ref-2021>

A Message from the Committee:

Do please keep in touch and if you have any suggestions for events, we would love to hear from you. We look forward to welcoming you to our events in 2023 so please look out for invitations in your inbox.

From the Editor

How have you been affected by the war In Ukraine?

Please write for *UnSSEESing* about any activities you have been involved in to help Ukraine or refugees from the country.

Contact SSEES Alumni Association:

For enquiries please contact: Patricia Gabalova SSEES Alumni Association,
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Committee Members: Angela Garrett, Peter Duncan, Hugo Allen, Katya Kocourek,
Jon Browning, Natia Seskuria, Gideon Dewhirst and Ed Emerson.

Our invaluable admin support: Patricia Gabalova and Lisa Walters

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UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

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