Freeman faculty discuss economic impact of war in Ukraine

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Oberlin College’s Veljko Vujacic discusses the historical context of the Ukraine-Russia war during the April 4 seminar at the Freeman School. (Photo courtesy of Brian Edwards)

Freeman School faculty members Oleg Gredil, Pierre Conner and Eric Smith discussed the economic impact of the war in Ukraine as part of a special seminar to help students and faculty better understand recent geopolitical developments in the region.

Co-hosted by Xianjun Geng, senior associate dean for academic affairs at the Freeman School, Brian Horowitz, Sizeler Family Chair in Jewish Studies in the School of Liberal Arts, and Lee Skinner, dean of Newcomb-Tulane College, the presentation took place at the Freeman School on April 4 and attracted students and faculty from across the university.

For their panel presentation, Gredil, an assistant professor of finance, and Conner and Smith, professors of practice with the Tulane Energy Institute, reviewed the impact of the war on the global energy business, discussing near-term impacts on consumers in the U.S. Gredil, a Russian citizen, also described the long-term negative impact on Russia caused by the withdrawal of nearly 500 Western companies from participation in the Russian economy.

Conner, executive director of the Tulane Energy Institute, and Smith, associate director, spoke about America's ability to replace imports of Russian petroleum and refined products as well as potential imports of Russian liquified natural gas. They also highlighted an ominous lack of participation by major countries in sanctions on Russia.

Veljko Vujacic, a professor of sociology at Oberlin College, led off the seminar with his perspective, rooted in his Serbian heritage as well as in his role as a professor in St. Petersburg, Russia. He highlighted a deliberate effort, following the breakup of Yugoslavia, by Russia, to avoid the fragmentation witnessed during the demise of Yugoslavia. He then compared the earlier Yugoslavian experience with Ukraine and its somber thousand-year history of bouts of partition and reconstitution beginning in the ninth century.

Multiple players, including Polish, Lithuanian and Holy Roman Empire forces, contended with Slavic Christian, Mongol, Ottoman, and ultimately Cossack, forces as they all contended for control of this rich agricultural region.

Tulane Professor of Practice Lidia Zhigunova then spoke on "The Politics of Memory in Russia and Ukraine." A faculty member in the Department of German and Slavic Studies and a Circassian native, her presentation focused on national memory and the importance of both fact and mythology to the peoples of the region.

The Russian perspective begins with their very name. The "Rus" were the original, primarily Swedish, Viking founders of a trading post/fortress that became Kiev. Originally that city served as the main source of troops for the "Varangian" palace

guard for the Byzantine Emperors. Sited on the Dnieper River and accessible by water to a variety of trading locations, Kiev served as a bridgehead for the earliest efforts at Christianizing Ukraine.

Later, during periods of Lithuanian, Polish and Holy Roman Empire rule, Roman Catholicism gained a significant position. Moslem Cossacks also gained a cultural foothold in the Southeast of Ukraine, in what is now the Crimean Peninsula, during the Khanate. This was a result of the decline of Constantinople and its replacement by Moslem/Ottoman rule

With the rise of the Ottomans, the nexus of Eastern rite Christianity shifts, from Constantinople to Kiev and then to Moscow.

Ultimately, Ukraine evolves its own variants with an Orthodox sect, based in Kiev, but loyal to the Patriarch in Moscow, a national Orthodox church led from Kiev, and a Ukrainian Catholic church, aligned with the Pope in Rome.

Zhigunova points out that the 2013/14 invasion of Chechnya and Georgia served as an antecedent for the current invasion of Ukraine, for many of the same cultural reasons. In each case independent, nominally neutral, states, albeit with strong cultural ties to Russia, are invaded and ultimately suppressed.

The seminar raised numerous questions but also provided much new and relevant information for the Tulane community.