

**GUE/NGL MEPs travelled to Bratislava for the second of this year's 'Study Days' on 21-22 September to coincide with Slovakia's EU presidency**



One of the aims of the meeting was to understand the role Slovakia plays in Europe's energy security and gas supplies, and how the central European nation has had to adapt to EU regulations concerning consumer protection and food safety standards.

The group also had the opportunity to learn about the problems facing the wine industry in neighbouring Czech Republic as both nations grapple not only with adjustments resulting from EU accession, but also the potential threats facing the regional economy should the Commission-led TTIP and CETA - trade agreements with the US and Canada respectively - be adopted.

In welcoming their colleagues to the two-day seminar, Czech GUE/NGL MEPs **Kateřina Konečná** and **Jaromir Kohlíček** stressed the need for the EU to see his home country and Slovakia beyond the Cold War mentality of eastern and western Europe, pointing out that: "Czech Republic and Slovakia are in Central Europe - actually!"

## **Session 1 - ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **ENERGY SECURITY**

Given this strategic location at the heart of the continent, day one of the Study Days focussed on Slovakia's role in the European Commission's energy security policy.

In a video statement relayed to the panellists Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Energy Union, focussed on energy poverty and stressed the need for "European solutions based on European solidarity" by diversifying the continent's gas sources, a strategy for the emerging Liquid Natural Gas market plus storage solutions in light of the volatile relationship between Ukraine and Russia.

Slovakia's role in the Central East South Europe Gas Connectivity High Level Group also ranks very high as one of the priorities of the government in Bratislava during the EU Presidency.

Ján Petrovič, CEO at the Slovak Ministry of Economy's Energy Section, also cited security as one of the main pillars of the country's energy policy due to its huge dependency on imports.

Petrovič described the 2009 gas crisis as a “watershed” moment as it laid bare the pros and cons of the system at the time which led to Slovakia adopting measures to ensure that a shortage and restriction on consumption would not be repeated in future through new natural gas pipelines, nuclear power and storage facilities.

As GUE/NGL coordinator on the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, Cypriot MEP **Neoklis Sylikiotis** described the Commission's Energy Union policy as one that serves private interests at the expense of ordinary citizens:

“Energy security is a hugely important issue and the principle is that such common goods should be made available to all people.”

Sylikiotis was also highly critical of the Commission's shale gas intentions and Ondřej Bezděk from the Czech Republic's anti-fracking ‘Stop HF’ movement told the seminar that legislation must be introduced in both nations as there are so few shale deposits between them that makes drilling economically unviable.

## **CAP & TRADE**

On the discussion on the Emissions Trading System (ETS), panellists all agreed that the Commission's boast of having the world's greenest and biggest ‘cap and trade’ scheme as anything but adequate.

German MEP **Cornelia Ernst** said the ETS is full of loopholes and is biased in favour of the big emitters who could manipulate the system to their advantage by buying up credits that no one else wanted.

Meanwhile, energy and climate change expert Klára Sutlovičová from Glopolis put forward a permanent cancellation of these surpluses as she argued that the current system is flawed to begin with.

Sutlovičová did concede that the ETS has at least one positive impact: it is a money-spinner whose revenue is ploughed back into various EU funds that tackle climate change and the switch from fossil fuel to decarbonisation.

For Milan Chrenko, the Director General for Environment Policy of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, such funds are crucial for the country to tackle climate change in the EU and for Slovakia to modernise its power stations.

## **RENEWABLES**

Renewable energy resources were also discussed at length during these Study Days, with the political director from Greenpeace Slovakia, Pavol Široký, saying the country

is still below the EU average for using renewables to generate electricity and that it is far too reliant upon imports.

## **Session 2 - TROUBLED EU**

The looming CETA, TTIP and TiSA decisions were also pondered by the panel as well as what the left can do to counter the impact that these secretive and potentially devastating trade agreements might have on European SMEs and ordinary citizens. The future of the EU and how to move forward following numerous crises including Brexit were also discussed.

German MEP **Helmut Scholz** was of the opinion that a new leftist approach was needed:

“We as the left have always defined ‘Europe’ as an ‘institutional Europe’ and that is wrong. Instead, it must involve its citizens and flow through society. We need to transpose more than just the EU working together through capitals, agencies and institutions. How we cooperate and interrelate it all is something worth considering.”

## **Session 3 - FOOD SAFETY AMIDST CONCERNS ON CETA**

On the potential trans-Atlantic trade agreements, Slovak MP Dr Luboš Blaha told GUE/NGL MEPs that due to the prestige of the rotating EU presidency, Slovakia would probably prefer not to be remembered for torpedoing CETA or TTIP.

Local trade unions are, however, very much against these agreements as they constitute a massive threat to SMEs and the regional car industry - both of which stand little chance against multinationals, particularly if American firms get into Europe through the backdoor via CETA should TTIP fail.

Bratislava is acutely aware of these threats and although the national government may not wish to scupper the agreements entirely, they may apply brakes on the negotiations, added Blaha.

Czech activist Jan Májiček offered a sobering assessment, however, as he told delegates of the struggle to engage the locals with the campaigns against CETA and TTIP. Currently, there are only eight people involved in stopping CETA/TTIP in his country - and just three in neighbouring Slovakia.

In addition, any trade agreements would have massive ramifications for food safety and consumer protection in the EU due to the differing standards currently in place on both sides of the Atlantic.

MEPs were reassured by speakers from various Slovak ministries that the government in Bratislava takes health hazards and consumer protection very seriously. But they conceded that as one of 28 member states, Slovak civil servants have limited room for manoeuvre. Gabriel Csicsai from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development was particularly concerned with the spreading of diseases and epidemics from third countries, and that member states must work together to prevent widespread contamination.

His colleague, Zuzana Nouzovská, cited scientists and experts at their disposal to tackle these threats but globalisation brings with it pathogens, pests, climate change, counterfeit goods, GMOs and hygiene standards - all of which can do more harm than good.



## COUNTERFEIT AND IMITATORS

Ms Nouzovská also revealed that Slovakia has been overwhelmed by food lobbyists and the need to lower previously stringent food standards since joining the EU. Imitations and inferior versions of classic Slovakian products such as sheep's milk from other member states has also been deemed a big threat to the country's heritage.

Petra Vargová Čakovská from Consumer Protection S.O.S. however, pointed to EU accession as a boon for consumer protection. Much more work in harmonisation is needed.

The Study Days concluded with a visit to Rakvice in southern Czech Republic where Tibor Nyitray, President of the Wine Growers' Union of the Czech Republic, warned of the problems facing his country's wine producers in light of CETA and TTIP for an industry that is made up almost entirely of SMEs employing 8-10 people.

However, as far as he is concerned, a lack of border controls within Schengen has already cost the Czech wine industry and economy millions of euros in lost revenue due to a lack of border checks and tax controls. This has allowed wines from the black market and third countries like Serbia and Albania to proliferate. As is the case with tobacco smuggling, Nyitray said much stricter regulation is needed from the European Commission to stem the flow.