Letter on Inclusive Communication in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

To:
American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, Executive Council
Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Executive Committee

CC:
ASEEES Regional Affiliates
select ASEEES affiliate organizations
British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies
Slavic, East European, and Eurasian area studies centers at U.S.institutions

April 24, 2021

Dear colleagues,

The Slavic and East European field has recently observed another eruption of hateful discourse on our central listserv, SEELANGS. Sadly, this is not a singular incident. SEELANGS has been abused as a platform for racist, nationalist, sexist, misogynistic, and transphobic statements far too often. Incidents of this kind, as well as silence vis-a-vis these events are well-known, broadly discussed, and documented in our community. They have led to the harassment of marginalized colleagues on- and offline. We believe it is time for our professional organizations to step in and organize an alternative mechanism for circulating information and thereby fostering community in our field.

While established scholars may feel at ease unsubscribing from SEELANGS as they incur a lower risk from foregoing its useful information, younger and less-established scholars, including graduate students and contingent faculty, often feel they must put up with the inflammatory and hurtful content on SEELANGS so they do not miss a promising opportunity. After all, SEELANGS remains the central announcement platform for scholars of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian languages, literatures, and cultures.

No scholar should be required to enter a space where their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender identity could be attacked just so they do not miss an opportunity for advancing their work in our field. We believe that the current situation is an active impediment to our field's equity and inclusion. It creates an unwelcoming, if not hostile, atmosphere for those young scholars who are most likely to contribute to the increasingly diverse makeup of our discipline if they have a place in it. For their sake, but also because it is simply the right thing to do, we need a platform for information that does not make space for hate speech.

We feel, thus, that establishing an alternative means of sharing official job announcements, calls for papers, event announcements, etc. in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies is an urgent and essential matter for bolstering the diversity, equity, and inclusion of our field.

This letter is not to suggest an active intervention into the communicative practices of SEELANGS, which remain the prerogative (and responsibility) of its editors as much as of its subscribers. Moreover, SEELANGS has a response function and allows discussion threads of individual topics, which is not feasible for a listserv in which the content of every communication is moderated. Rather, we would like to urge your organizations to investigate potential structures and means for creating an alternative platform devoted specifically to the circulation of information on conferences, publications, jobs, events, grants, fellowships, and the like. Ideally, such a platform, whether a moderated email listserv or a website that allows one to subscribe to updates, would be open to scholars around the world and would not require membership in any particular professional organization.

We are aware that past efforts have been made to explore alternative channels of communication in our field, such as ASEEES Commons and various organizations' increased presence on social media. It is, however, clear that the listserv or email alert format remains an indispensable means of communication for a significant part of our community. We also understand that the creation of a new platform involves financial and personnel commitments, although these may be commonly overestimated. We believe that active measures to create a safe and equitable central platform endorsed by our professional organizations is worth the investment.

We also address this issue to you in light of the public statements made over the past year by AATSEEL, ASEEES, and other departments, centers, and organizations in our field with regard to systemic racism. These statements commit to the defense of diversity and the creation of safe and equitable spaces. The dedication of resources to the creation of a new channel of disciplinary communication is a concrete and actionable step in this direction, one that has an impact on the experience of underrepresented and marginalized members of our community.

As a short-term measure, we plan to create a fully moderated listserv. We anticipate that this listserv will not be a robust long-term solution of the sort that requires the support of multiple organizations. We would, however, appreciate your organization's official endorsement of this listserv and any monetary contribution for associated fees. We would be happy to share more information about this listserv for your review.

We hope that you might use the summer months to explore possibilities for an alternative channel of communication, so that our field can have a fresh start in the new academic year.

Sincerely,

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