

10th European Skeptics Congress: Rise and Development of Paranormal Beliefs in Eastern Europe

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Skeptics from sixteen countries gathered at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague September 7–9, 2001, to attend the 10th European Skeptics Congress. This congress of the European Council of Skeptical Organizations (ECSO), which unites and represents skeptical organizations from fourteen European countries, was organized by the Czech skeptics.

The conference was devoted to examining the rise and development of

as well as talks on the UFO phenomenon, the role of Rupert Sheldrake's alleged morphogenetic fields in crystal formation, the scandal around the French astrologer Elisabeth Teissier (who recently got a Ph.D. in sociology from the reputable Sorbonne university), and many, many more.

Although it is true and well known that a wave of paranormal belief systems swept into the Eastern European countries after the breakdown of their communist regimes, it is also true, though

research was fine when sufficiently disguised or cloaked in Marxist terms, or when reference could be made to Russian scientists engaging in such research. Thus, parapsychology was called "psychotronics," and Kirlian photography was after all supported by the Soviets.

The situation was similar in the former Soviet Union, where there had also been a long tradition of parapsychological research, as Professor Eduard Kruglyakov from the Budker Institute of Nuclear Physics told the audience. Another prominent field had been pseudophysics, such as research on anti-gravitation. Nevertheless, the big "outburst of the paranormal" occurred only after 1989—and it was sometimes supported by high representatives of the government, in particular the former president Boris Yeltsin, who relied on astrology among other dubious things.

Kruglyakov was happy to report that back in 1998 the Russian Academy of Sciences established a twelve-person committee devoted to fighting pseudoscience. The committee has shown early successes. Astrological columns have disappeared from some newspapers, for example, and other papers have reinstalled a science section.

As for alternative medicine, Professor Jiri Hert from the department of

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the paranormal scene, and especially alternative medicine, in the Eastern European countries since the downfall of the communist regimes. The status of alternative medicine in some Western European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, was also explored,

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lesser known, that many paranormal belief systems had been present before, in some cases even enjoying state support.

In the Czech Republic, for example, there had existed a long tradition of parapsychological research, as Professor Vojtech Mornstein from the biophysics department of Brno University reported. Although the official "scientific" Marxist doctrine did not allow for mysticism and parapsychology, such

anatomy of Plzen University explained that acupuncture, magnetic therapy, and herbal medicine had been in use in the Czech Republic before 1989. After 1989, the main Western imports were homeopathy and cluster medicine. By contrast, chiropractic and anthroposophic medicine play no important role, although an increased tolerance of the use of mistletoe extract in oncology departments can be observed, as Dr. Leme deplored. As anthroposophic medicine is perhaps most widespread in Germany, it was of particular interest to learn from Dr. Barbara Burkhard that there now are studies indicating that the use of mistletoe extracts in fact accelerates tumor growth in patients with lymph node metastases, and moreover leads to a significant increase in brain metastases and a decrease in overall survival time.

The situation in Bulgaria was described by Professor Tchoudomir Nachev, president of the Bulgarian National Academy of Medicine. In Bulgaria, people were driven into the hands of alternative healers not so much by gullibility as by the capitalist overhaul of the country's health system. Thus, normal science-based health care as well as most drugs simply could no longer be afforded by many people. No surprise, then, that alternative practitioners were able to thrive by opening offices and clinics all over the country offering affordable and, truly in the two senses of the expression, "alternative" health care.

The European skeptics were especially pleased that the conference was hosted by the Czech Academy of Sciences, and that among the participants there were representatives from various scientific academies. One of the speakers was Professor Pieter Drenth, the president of ALLEA (All European Academies), which is the Federation of

National Academies of Sciences and Humanities, representing thirty-eight academies from Europe as well as Turkey and the United States. Drenth

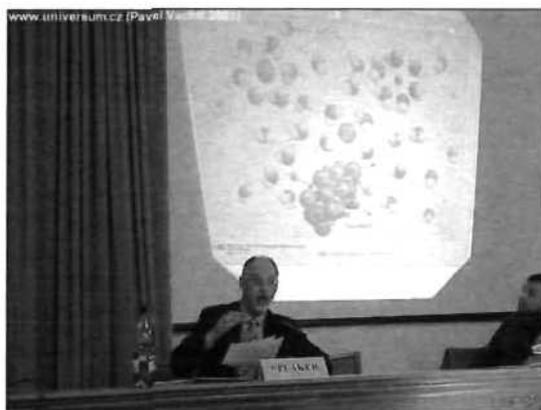
mies of science. This is an encouraging sign that in the future the skeptical movement may expect more support by leading scientific organizations. Although the skeptical movement is lucky to count quite a number of outstanding scientists among their members and supporters, too many scientists are still reluctant to join in, usually believing that it is a waste of time to deal with pseudoscience. This may even be true from a narrow research point of view, but certainly not from the wider perspective of educational and societal responsibility.

Finally, some important results of the ECSO board meeting, which always takes place at the occasion of the European conferences, should be mentioned. The long-time chairman of ECSO, Professor Cornelis de Jager, asked to be replaced by a younger person, for, being in his eightieth year, he wishes to reduce his workload. Thus Amardeo Sarma (Germany) was unanimously elected as the new chairman; so was Professor Jiri Grygar (Czech Republic) as vice-chairman. Further board members are Tim Trachet (Belgium), Massimo Polidoro (Italy), Michael Heap (U.K.), and Cornelis de Jager (Netherlands). The Center for Inquiry—Europe in Rossdorf (Germany) will henceforth take over the general administrative and financial business of ECSO. A new directory of the European Council of Skeptical Organizations will be published by the Center in early 2002.

After this successful and well-organized conference in the picturesque city of Prague, the participants now look forward to the next European skeptics congress, which will be organized by ASKE (Association for Skeptical Enquiry, U.K.) and held in London from September 5–7, 2003. □



CSICOP Executive Director Barry Karr talks with fellow skeptics during conference break. Photos from <http://universum.150m.com/esc2001/>.



Jan Willem Nienhuys of the Netherlands addresses the conference as Amardeo Sarma moderates the panel.



Left to right: Jiri Grygar (Czech Republic), Amardeo Sarma (Germany), Monique Wonner (France), and Jan Zahradil (Czech Republic) participate on a conference panel.

informed ECSO that concern about the rise and spread of pseudoscience has finally reached the various acad-