

“Mafias as a form of State”

Interview with Federico Varese, new researcher at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE)

Tell us about your academic career

I spent most of my career at the University of Oxford where I did my doctoral work. I was then a postdoctoral fellow at Nuffield College, then I became a university lecturer and then a professor of criminology. And I finished my career there as the Director of the Department of Sociology. Before going to Oxford, I studied at the University of Cambridge, at King's College and before that at the University of Bologna, in Italy, where I did a degree in political science.

What is your research about?

My research has always been mostly about organised crime and mafias. I did my doctoral thesis on the Russian mafia and how the Russian mafia emerged as a consequence of the transition to the market economy in the former Soviet Union and especially in Russia. And after that I continued to study mafias: I wrote a book on how mafias migrate. And now I have a new large project funded by the European Research Council on the extent to which organised crime is a form of governance. I find the concept of organised crime very vague and too general and I want to unpack the various elements that we find underneath it. One is the production of goods. Another one is that goods, once they are produced, have to be moved around so they are transported and traded. And thirdly, we find that in illegal markets, organisations such as the mafias that actually govern the markets as opposed to being involved in production and trade. So this project is very comparative: it covers production of cocaine in Columbia, gangs in the UK, we study cybercrime and also we study the former Soviet Union and particularly a criminal fraternity I have been working on for many years, called the “vory-v-zakone”.

Why did you choose to come to Sciences Po and to the CEE for this research?

I have always been an admirer of Sciences Po and the intellectual community it has created around the study of societies, politics and economics. And I am particularly excited to be in the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics. I think my work can really benefit from a dialogue with political scientists, especially those who work on issues related to the State, because I see my own research on mafias and organised crime as part of a research on the nature of the State and I see mafias as a form of State. So I am really looking forward to synergies, collaborations, and also teaching at Sciences Po.

Interview by Véronique Etienne, Knowledge Exchange Officer at the CEE.