

# ALFA FELLOW PROGRAM

INSIDE THE



Photos by Lydia Hamilton

It's not often that a fully funded opportunity to spend nearly a year abroad studying a foreign language, attending high-level seminars and going on regional trips, and then working in that country at a prominent organization presents itself. Even rarer is to find such an opportunity in Russia. As the "R" in BRIC, Russia is an essential player on the world's political stage and an increasingly important economic force, especially when considering its wealth of natural resources like oil and gas. Russia is of strategic interest to the United States; having specialists with first-hand knowledge of how the country functions, and what its cultural norms and business practices are, is critically important to maintaining productive working relations between the countries. Luckily, there is such an opportunity—the Alfa Fellowship Program, funded by Alfa-Bank and administered in the United States and the UK by Cultural Vistas.

The fellowship provides the opportunity for 15 American and British citizens per year to take part in this 11-month-long program, the main emphasis of which is the seven-month-long work placement at prominent organizations in Russia, including major corporations, media outlets, think tanks, and foundations. Fellows generally come from the fields of business, economics, journalism, law, and public policy. They begin their fellowship in the spring with private Russian tutoring in the U.S. or U.K., followed by a language course in Moscow starting in mid-June. Throughout the summer, Alfa Fellows attend a seminar program with key public and private sector officials to discuss current issues facing Russia. Fellows then commence their work assignments. The fellowship includes a generous monthly stipend, language training, program-related travel costs, housing, and insurance.

The Alfa Fellowship Program is a competitive program. Eligible candidates from the U.S. and U.K. apply for one of fifteen available slots and undergo a rigorous selection process. We are pleased to note that in the ten years the Alfa Fellowship Program has been in existence, six Harriman Institute graduates were awarded Alfa fellowships and now join the nearly 100 individuals who have experienced Russia through this initiative. The six Harriman graduates are Ilona Tservil, Michael Kreidler, Michael Hendley, Mark Mozur, Virginia Wilkinson, and Hilary Hemmings, who is currently an Alfa Fellow. Each has a unique story about how they came to be interested in Russia and what they did during their fellowship. Their work assignments and experiences are as varied as their backgrounds. For example, Hilary is currently working at Focus Humanitarian Assistance's Russian Representative Office in Moscow, providing labor migrants from Tajikistan and their families with medical consultations, vocational training, and financial assistance to help them navigate the challenging work environment in Moscow. Michael Kreidler was an Alfa Fellow during 2008–2009 and came to the program after completing his graduate work at SIPA, prior to which he had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine. As a Fellow, Michael worked for a Russian lobbying firm, European Public Policy Advisors, and following the fellowship, became a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State. Please read on about the experiences of some of our fellows from the Harriman Institute.

*Alfa Fellowship Program Office  
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### **Hilary Hemmings, SIPA and Harriman Certificate 2013, Current Alfa Fellow**

I knew I wanted to apply for the Alfa Fellowship after meeting up with 2012–2013 Alfa Fellow and Harriman Institute alumna Ginger (Virginia) Wilkinson in Moscow last summer and discussing the program. I was in Moscow at that time, volunteering at FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance, Russian Representative Office, an affiliate of the Aga Khan Foundation, which helps Tajik migrant workers receive access to affordable medical care. As a Human Rights concentrator at SIPA with a focus on the rights of Central Asian migrants in Russia, my work at FOCUS touched upon all of my professional and academic interests. However, FOCUS being a small NGO with a limited budget, there was little chance I could be hired there. The Alfa Fellowship, which provides housing, a monthly stipend, and the opportunity to work wherever you choose in Moscow, was the perfect opportunity for me to return to the Tajik migrant community that I cared so much about.

Initially, I was really doubtful that a program sponsored by a well-known Russian bank and supported by the Russian government would take on the “liability” of accepting someone working in the field of human rights and with migrants, both hot topic issues in Russia right now. I think the fact that the program choose me really shows its unbiased, sincere commitment to the professional development of its fellows, regardless of their field. While I have only been in Moscow for three months, I am already seeing the benefits of being in the program. It’s an incredibly interesting and precarious time to be a human rights professional in Russia, particularly regarding migration issues. The Alfa Fellowship is allowing me to work with a small, grass-roots organization that acutely feels every

change in Russian migration legislation, every law enforcement crackdown on migrants, and every surge in nationalist sentiment. I know this work experience in Moscow will serve as an invaluable basis for my future human rights career, and I’m really grateful that I heard about the program through the Harriman Institute.

### **Mark Mozur, SIPA and Harriman Certificate 2010, Alfa Fellow 2010–2011**

With its army of expressionless birches and its highly favorable winter weather, who wouldn’t want to spend a year in Moscow? If you’re at the Harriman Institute and you have a love-hate relationship with Russia (love: vodka and Nabokov; hate: *grechka* and Grishkovets), then I highly encourage you to apply for the Alfa Fellowship, a one-year professional exchange that gives you the chance to take language classes, explore Russia, and gain work experience in Moscow. What’s not to love?

I spent my year in Moscow as an Alfa, working in the oil and gas business as a consultant to major Russian energy companies. Clients such as Gazprom Export, TNK-BP (RIP), and NOVATEK were thrilled at the opportunity to work with a Harriman Institute grad with exceptional Microsoft Office skills.

The lessons learned in Moscow, both personal and professional, have stuck with me to this day.

Professional: I still work in oil and gas and have applied my experience to a number of projects throughout Eurasia, including places such as Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iraq. I can honestly say that the Alfa program was an integral step in my post-Harriman career path.

Personal: Long johns are essential in Moscow, and the Russian virtue of hospitality extends even to amateurs like myself.

### **Michael Hendley, SIPA 2010, Alfa Fellow 2010–2011**

With its combination of language training, professional development, and exposure to a range of business, political, and academic figures, the Alfa Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for any Harriman Institute student interested in gaining real on-the-ground experience in Russia. As someone who had relatively limited experience traveling in Russia, the fact that the Fellowship dealt with all visa issues and living arrangements was invaluable. Additionally, having a few months to settle in while taking language courses allowed us to adjust to the pace of life in Moscow—a huge plus! Moscow is a relatively small city in terms of foreign-oriented professional life, so having access to the Alfa alumni network was very useful for reaching out to people to get a more nuanced understanding of current developments. Of course, being a Harriman Institute alumnus was also very helpful in this respect.

For my job placement, I worked in the equity research department for an investment bank. The work itself was interesting, and being placed in a Russian-speaking office was quite useful in strengthening my Russian. I currently research economic growth and financial stability issues related to emerging markets at the New York Fed; my experience on the Fellowship was absolutely critical to gaining the insights that allow me to understand Russia-specific as well as broader regional issues. In my opinion, the Fellowship is an ideal next step for graduate students who want to further develop their understanding of a chronically misunderstood part of the world while gaining valuable professional experience.

