

MY TWO EDUCATIONS

BY TIMOTHY FRYE

On the creation of the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development.

I never thought that the largest grant I would ever receive would come from the Russian government. But in April 2010, my old colleague and friend Andrei Yakovlev and I received a three-year grant of roughly \$1.8 million to establish the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (CSID) at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. This grant is part of a larger program to bring foreign scholars to create research centers within universities in Russia, with the larger goal of building human capital and raising the academic profile of universities and research institutes in Russia. What made this project most attractive was the final product. In return for its considerable largesse, the Russian government wanted scholars from our Center to have at least six articles accepted for publication in international peer-reviewed journals by the end of the grant.

Andrei and I quickly gathered a team of Russian- and U.S.-based scholars. In line with the terms of the grant, we focused on younger researchers and invited three superb graduate students, Noah Buckley, Israel Marques, and David Szakonyi, from the Columbia Ph.D. program in political science; a recent Harriman postdoctoral student; and two professors from other

universities in the U.S. We added an equal number of Russian graduate students and academics and set to work on two broad topics: regional politics and police reform.

We have just begun the third and final year of the grant, and I've learned a lot about these topics as a researcher. But I have learned even more by working with the large bureaucracies of the Russian state from the vantage point of the director of the Center.

The Higher School of Economics (HSE) has proven to be a wonderful host. The school offered modest rooms in a guesthouse on Leninskii Prospekt just off Gagarin Square—a prime location and easy commute to work. In addition, HSE provided two large offices on Staraya Ploschad, right at the bottom of the hill at the Kitai-Gorod metro stop in central Moscow. (Upon entering the building, I sometimes laugh because the first interviews that I conducted as a graduate student in December 1992 took place in the same building on the same floor.)

Another gratifying aspect of the program has been the relative academic freedom. We haven't experienced pressure



Photo by Eileen Barroso,
Columbia University.



Andrey Yakovlev and Timothy Frye. Photo by Masha Udensiva-Brenner.

to avoid sensitive topics, although we didn't go searching for topics that would raise hackles either. Our research projects have been designed with an academic audience in mind, rather than with the intent to change policy, which helps keep us out of the headlines unnecessarily.

One primary research project takes advantage of the great diversity of Russia's more than 80 regional governments. At the broadest level, we wanted to understand why some regional governments in Russia worked better than others. Other scholars have pursued this topic, and individual researchers have gathered data about regional governments, but the field lacked a comprehensive and exhaustive database of regional political elites in Russia. Using a small army of research assistants from the HSE, we created a database of the personal characteristics and career trajectories of all governors from 1991 to 2012 and of all vice governors from 2000 to 2012. In addition, we collected similar data on all mayors of cities of more than 75,000 residents. On condition of the grant, we will make all these data available to researchers at the end of 2013.

This source of data has been a gold mine. One paper examines whether appointed and elected governors have different personal characteristics and career paths. Others explore why transfer payments and foreign investment differed so dramatically across regions in Russia over the last twenty years. Still another examines

the impact of the introduction of drunk-driving laws across regions in Russia, and there are more papers on the way.

Our efforts to study police reform have been more frustrating in part because of bureaucratic resistance and red tape. From the start of the project, we viewed our research on policing in Moscow as a "high risk, high reward." One of our CSID experts who

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had studied the police in Russia for many years reminded us continually that while there were individuals within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) who shared our goals, on the whole the organization was highly "militarized, commercialized, and corrupt."

To begin, we aimed high. As part of the "Law on Police" passed in February 2010, police precincts are required to report on their activities to the public every six months. Moreover, public opinion is supposed to account for some portion of the salary of police officers in Russia. To take advantage of this opportunity,

we designed a study that would monitor these public meetings in randomly selected police precincts and then measure whether perceptions of the police improved in precincts that held these meetings relative to those that did not. We signed an agreement

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with the Research Academy of the MVD to share data and work together on this project. We even hired a former MVD colonel to help us navigate the bureaucracy.

For more than a year CSID and HSE representatives met with officials from the MVD and Moscow city government, and while in fact some individuals within the latter organizations supported our idea in principle, the slow grind of bureaucratic resistance wore us down. Our task was also complicated by the simple fact that, with few exceptions, police precincts were ignoring the law and not holding meetings with the public. Studying nonevents is rarely productive. The mass protests of December 2011 killed off any enthusiasm in the MVD for the project, and we changed course.

Yet not all was lost. In preparation for our grand experiment, we conducted a survey of 1,600 Muscovites in December 2011 that examined cooperation with the police and the frequency of bribery. Using a very sneaky survey technique, we estimated that each fifth encounter with a local beat cop in Russia resulted in a bribe. Moreover, thanks to our ties with the Research Academy of the MVD, we received data on crimes against entrepreneurs in all of Russia's regions from 2000 to 2010, a unique source of information that we are currently mining.

Working with other bureaucracies in Russia has been easier, although not always by a great degree. As a state organization, CSID must run all purchases above \$3,000 through the much-

dreaded State Procurement System, also known as *Goszakaz*. Originally designed to increase transparency and reduce corruption in state purchasing, *Goszakaz* has become famous in Russia thanks to the work of Alexei Navalny and his team of researchers who scour the Internet for suspect state purchases and bring them to the public's attention.

For those of us on the other end of the process, *Goszakaz* is tremendously complicated, time consuming, and unpredictable. It took three months for the bid to conduct our largest survey to work its way through the *Goszakaz* process. Combined with a requirement from the government that all budget funds allocated in a given calendar year be spent in the same calendar year, the time pressures to complete the survey in a single year were intense. Apparently, good ideas must come in the first six months of the year or wait until the calendar turns over. In the end, three firms bid to conduct our survey. Our two preferred firms were disqualified for technical reasons, and we were left to work with our least preferred polling firm. Predictably, it botched part of the survey but was paid handsomely nonetheless.

In a word, I now have a much better appreciation of the difficulties of running a transparent and honest research institution in contemporary Russia. The rules put in place to catch cheaters can make life miserable for everyone else. With just under a year remaining on the grant, we are busily writing up our research results, but I've already received an education in Russian-style bureaucratic politics.

The future of CSID is uncertain. Our grant will end formally in April 2014, and there is no possibility of renewing it at its current level of funding, but if oil prices remain high, and our work is well received, there may be a way to keep the Center going in some form. Whatever CSID's fate in the coming years, the relations between scholars at CSID and Harriman's ties with HSE will survive, even without the help of the Russian bureaucracy. At least I hope so.

HARRIMAN AND CSID

Although no formal relationship exists, the Harriman Institute has been a very useful partner for the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development. In May 2010, the Harriman Institute hosted a workshop that brought together Russian and American researchers from CSID and outside experts to learn new research techniques. In September 2011, more than a dozen scholars from Russia and the United States held a workshop for CSID scholars to present work in progress.

Harriman has also been instrumental in the teaching component of CSID. Each year, the U.S. scholars teach one course on comparative political economy to HSE graduate students. About half the lectures are given in person in Moscow, but the rest take place via videoconference equipment recently purchased by the Harriman Institute to grace the new Marshall Shulman Seminar Room. Teaching courses via videoconferencing would have been impossible without this new equipment. Finally, Harriman has also hosted four CSID researchers in the last two years as visiting scholars, and more are on the way.