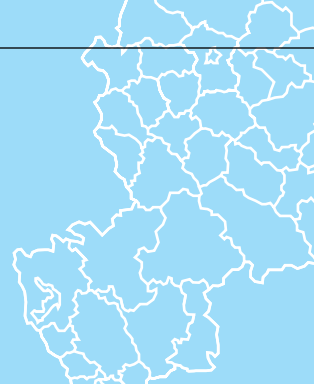


Student Perspectives on CSID



As a beginning scholar, working with the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (CSID) has been a rare and highly valuable academic opportunity. I've built phenomenal connections with colleagues at HSE and worked with a talented and dynamic team at CSID. Whether it be theory-building, data analysis, data collection and management, or management of a large and, at times, unwieldy group of headstrong academics, each contribution has been critical to our success.

Our first concrete output—a set of interrelated databases containing detailed information on Russian elite political actors—was the most fundamental. We began by sketching out plans for analysis and data collection. Then we found, trained, coordinated, and managed the HSE research assistants, who did most of the coding and data collection. Finally, we began cleaning up and working with these datasets, exploring the resulting insights. Even if the work at the time seemed a bit sprawling, each stage was instructive and valuable in its own right. As we continue to analyze data, present our works-in-progress at forums at HSE, Columbia, and around the world, I continue to realize the great deal I've learned from this project about the nuts and bolts of data collection and analysis—skills that are not taught or emphasized enough in graduate school.

—Noah Buckley, Ph.D. Candidate,
Department of Political Science

Before I joined the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (CSID) in 2011, my only experience living in Russia was a two-month summer research trip to Moscow at the peak of the 2010 wildfire season—not exactly representative of regular Russian life. The CSID position was a great chance to spend time in the country, and I welcomed the opportunity to see Russia beyond gauze masks and tropical heat. Since I had just begun to write my dissertation full time, I was invited to stay at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow for the entire period of our three-year grant. At first, I was unsure what to expect from our Russian colleagues, aside from a mutual interest in the study of institutions, political appointments, and the outcomes they shape. To my delight, I discovered a group of economists working on issues closely related to my dissertation research—how businesses and workers support and shape welfare states. This discovery led to several collaborations on the nature of business lobbying, and I found myself quickly immersed in the academic life of HSE beyond the walls of CSID. It was this camaraderie that led me to one of the most striking experiences of my two years in Russia thus far.

Stories about the horrors of Russian bureaucracy are terribly clichéd, but what we oftentimes forget is the extent to which mutual experiences with it can build strong common bonds. To give a single example, part of my dissertation fieldwork involved collecting annual reports and policy documents—ostensibly publicly accessible documents—from a large number of Russian business associations. After a few months of phone calls and letters, however, I was having no luck. Messages were lost,

phones went unanswered, and key members of some associations seemed to be on perpetual vacation. Discussions with some of my Russian colleagues suggested these were relatively normal tactics, and one colleague of mine even won a free dinner from me by predicting perfectly which associations would give which excuses!

What surprised me, however, was the extent to which this battle with Russian bureaucracy served to galvanize people to aid one another. One of my colleagues, seeing my frustration, volunteered to help me by acquiring an official letter from the Higher School of Economics that asked the associations to assist me. While not guaranteed, such official correspondence minimally requires official rejection. About 400 letters and two weeks through HSE's own apparatus later, we mailed everything and, once again, called the associations. My colleagues schooled me in the art of repeated phone calls, shameless and insistent resends, and constant reminders to officials that official letters required official responses. Our daily calling sessions became a rather light-hearted affair, as we tried to predict which groups would stonewall us and brainstormed novel techniques for extracting information. Surprisingly, we even developed relationships with several of the secretaries in charge of correspondence and public relations, who commiserated with us about their bosses' recalcitrance and the need for constant calling. After three months, we finally did hear from most of the associations. Few of the managers were willing to release their records, but we did get good tips on interview opportunities and public archives.

—Israel Marques, Ph.D. Candidate,
Department of Political Science

When I was first invited to participate in the Center more than two years ago, the idea of bringing together eminent senior Russian and American scholars to engage in joint research made perfect sense. The Center's directors, Timothy Frye and Andrei Yakovlev, had established a strong rapport over years of collaboration and coauthoring; the project was a natural extension of their past successes and compatibility. What intrigued me more was how the rest of the team would replicate that same level of cooperation.

After all, the ten or so younger scholars (half Russian and half American, mainly grad students) would be primarily responsible for managing an army of research assistants and helping turn that data into polished pieces. Initially, the two sides had never worked together, much less even met in person. I still remember vividly the first few weeks of the project—the timid introductions, clumsy dinner gatherings, and rambling e-mail chains. Our approaches to academic (and work) life reflected, more generally, many of the same cultural divides

at work in Russian-American relations. I think our Russian colleagues were as initially shocked by our constant levels of sarcasm, as we Americans were by the fact that they, without hesitation or exception, answered their cell phones in the middle of public presentations.

Another early, if not trivial, obstacle to overcome was our markedly different approaches to lunch! For Russians (and much of the world outside the U.S.), lunch is a slow, multicourse meal to be enjoyed in the company of the work collective. For an American crop of grad students, constantly overwhelmed by work and short on time, lunch is just a small daily task, best completed behind a desk, perhaps over some light reading material or e-mail. It took a bit for the two sides to find the proper compromise: three days a week for three-course “biznes laynches” and community building, two days for U.S.-style efficient office eating.

The results of meeting each other half way have been clear. The team has been both especially collaborative and jovial. Together we designed an open office set-up

(complete with proverbial water cooler and couch) that encourages productivity and socializing. We also make a point of celebrating every American and Russian holiday (from carving pumpkins on Halloween to bountiful bouquets and cakes on International Women's Day) and arrange regular staff outings like ice-skating or watching terrible American movies dubbed into Russian. When the working hours extend into the late evenings or weekends, it's been a relief to spend them in this environment.

In all, I can safely speak for the entire American cohort in expressing our sincere gratitude to our Russian colleagues for their wonderful assistance and hospitality over the past three years. They have truly helped us build a home away from home. Someday I hope we can return the favor properly on the other side of the Atlantic.

—David Szakonyi, *Ph.D. Candidate,*
Department of Political Science



From left to right: Participants of a three-day workshop organized by the Columbia Center for the Study of Development Strategies and the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. The workshop was part of the joint project of the Higher School of Economics and the Harriman Institute for the establishment of the International Centre for the Study of Institutions and Development at the HSE, New York, May 18–20, 2011. The Higher School of Economics building in Moscow.