

**Report to the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation**  
**My Studies in the European university at St Petersburg**  
**(2016/2017 academic year)**

I was studying in the European university at St Petersburg from September 2016 to May 2017 after receiving the first Russian scholarship from the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.

The academic year was to a certain extent marred by the struggle for survival of the European university at large, which I have described extensively in my texts to the scholarship blog ([www.stipendiblogi.fi](http://www.stipendiblogi.fi)). This is why I will focus in this report only on my academic studies and describe what I gained from them.

I took the same courses and wrote the same course papers as my other fellow students from the several foreign countries, but I did not write the MA thesis, because it was not required by the rules of the scholarship.

During the autumn semester I took the following major courses (the names of the courses are formulated by me in a slightly freer form, to reflect better their main content):

- 1) Russian Foreign Policy and Russia's Foreign Relations.
- 2) Violence and Security in Eurasia: Conflicts and Terrorism in the former USSR.
- 3) Conflict and Cooperation in Eurasia: International Conflicts and their Prevention.
- 4) Russian Orientalism: How the Soviet Government Subordinated the Islamic Nations Located in the Borderlands.

During the spring semester I attended the following courses:

- 1) Russian Political and Social History: The Last Period of the Tsarist power in Russia and the Beginning of the Soviet Era.
- 2) Political Changes in the Post-Soviet Eurasia: The Emergence and Development of Political Systems of post-Soviet Countries.
- 3) Jewish Life under Bolshevik's Rule: The Fate of the Jews in the USSR.
- 4) Introduction to the Soviet Civilization: The Everyday Life and Culture of the Soviet People.

Almost all courses included some kind of reports and term papers, which we had to write. I was allowed to choose the subjects of my papers very freely, depending on what might be more useful for me in my profession as a journalist.

I wrote, for example, a short essay about the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which is used by researchers worldwide as their open data bank. It proved to be very useful,

because just now, after returning to my work as a journalist I can use my own course paper as a basis for the future article which I am going to write for my newspaper.

Another course paper I wrote about the alleged “symbiosis” between terrorists and media, where I tried to find practical means for journalists who want to avoid letting terrorists to use media as their own tool and weapon. This is a problem faced increasingly also by the Finnish media and we all know that it has no easy solutions. The Internet and smartphones have changed the editors’ work and journalists cannot any more act as sole “gatekeepers” for the information, disinformation, rumours and terrorist’s messages. But this was also a very interesting paper to write and I am sure I can use some ideas I got while writing it also in my future work.

As part of the course "Orientalism in USSR," I explored a propagandistic film of the 1980s which made an attempt to prove that all the Muslims were treated well and friendly in the USSR. Although in reality everything was much more complicated: the Soviet regime treated Islam with prejudice and sought to subordinate Muslims in several ways.

As part of the course about international conflicts I wrote an essay on why the relations between Russia and the West are now so tense and to what consequences this confrontation might lead to. Russia is claiming that the West has “betrayed Russia”, when making and then breaking a promise to Mikhail Gorbachev (in connection with collapse of DDR and the reunification process of Germany in 1989-1990) that NATO would not expand to the East. In my essay I criticized this approach, for example, on the basis that even if any oral “promise” was made, it was made to the Soviet Union, which no one knew would cease to exist after about two years since those negotiations.

During the spring semester I wrote a paper about the life of Ilya Repin in the independent Finland, using the documents of the “Repin file” from the National Archives of Finland – they revealed the details of the behind-the-scenes struggle waged between the independent Finland and USSR. The Central investigation police of Finland spied on Repin and kept an eye on the Soviet delegates that visited him and tried to convince him to return to Leningrad. Meanwhile there was a propaganda campaign in the USSR claiming that Repin stayed in Finland almost as a prisoner of the Whites after the closure of the borders, and that he was suffering from hunger during his last years of life in Finland.

It turned out that there is very little independent and unbiased research about Repin’s Finnish period (1917-1930) and I recommended to my professor that maybe this could be a theme for a proper academic research for some of his Russian students, or maybe it could be a good joint research project for some Finnish and Russian researchers. He agreed with this, so maybe he will recommend this theme for his scholars in the future.

As part of a course on the fate of the Soviet Jews I researched two propagandistic films advertising Birobidzhan (a capital of the autonomous Jewish area located in the Russian Far East) as a real paradise for the Russian Jews. One of them is a legendary film of the 1930s "Seekers of Happiness", telling about the life of Jews who moved to Birobidzhan from abroad and found there a new happy life. The second is a documentary film released only in 2014, telling about the Russia’s ongoing presidential programme aimed at persuading Russians

who live abroad to move back to Russia. The new documentary film also featured Birobidzhan, and it was interesting to compare how the same propagandistic technologies are used in both films in order to convince and manipulate people.

Within the framework of the course exploring the political processes in the former USSR, I wrote an essay tracing Vladimir Putin's "transformation" from a former KGB agent to a democratic politician and an assistant to the governor Anatoly Sobchak in the early 1990s. I wanted to clarify how the different sources described the first steps of Putin's political career and the possible role of KGB behind all this. Although we all know that no one can get a definite answer to this question, because the archives of the KGB/FSB will never be open. But I came to a conclusion that it seems clear that Putin never really departed from the KGB and his political career was always either tolerated or even facilitated by KGB. But this does not anyhow mean that Putin as a president of Russia was a pure KGB plan from the beginning: even they could not have planned all this beforehand.

During the course about Soviet people's everyday life and culture I made a presentation about my work as an editor, concentrating mainly on my work in the former USSR and Russia since the year 1990. I gathered some of my old articles and photos and used them as an illustration to show how the society has changed since 1990's.

Generally speaking the year was very useful and interesting but also quite intense, so there was not much time left for the "joys of the free student life". In parallel with my studies I was invited several times to the "Fontanka" news agency as a radio and video commentator, which I did for free, just to keep up with the news.

But I am sure this academic year will help me in many ways in the future: new information, new ideas and new connections. In particular, it will be much easier for me to find good Russian commentators from the academic world in the future since as I can now always ask help from my previous teachers and professors.

Arja Paananen