

30 July, 2020

Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

European University at St. Petersburg

Imares-program of Russian and Eurasian studies, academic year 2019–2020

The academic year 2019–2020 at the European University at Saint-Petersburg started in a positive and anticipatory atmosphere. In the autumn of 2019, the university was starting its first complete academic year after Roobrnodzor, the supervising authority for education, had revoked the teaching license of the university in 2017 for over a year, citing alleged building code violations. The international programs for foreign students at the university were starting for the first year since the closure of the university.

Descriptive of the atmosphere was a statement by Vadim Volkov, the rector of the university, at the opening ceremony of the academic year: “We have all conditions for this to become a good year”. His prediction might have become reality had the coronavirus pandemic not cluttered up the plans at about halfway of the spring semester. Because of the pandemic, the university had once again to be emptied of students in the middle of a semester. Nevertheless, the university managed to fulfill the academic year was brought to conclusion in distance learning.

Most of the teaching at the European University at Saint-Petersburg is in Russian and most of the students are Russian, but there are two so-called international programs at the university, where the teaching is in English and the students from abroad. The Imares program is focused on examining the political and social features of Russian and the rest of the former Soviet Union. The Enerpo program examines the same area from the standpoint of energy politics. Both programs include a compulsory, rather intensive

course of Russian language for the duration of the whole academic year. The compulsory studying of Russian is based on the idea that studying and somewhat understanding russophone areas requires familiarity with Russian language.

Of these two programs I studied at the Imares program, which gives a more general choice of viewpoints to the area than the Enerpo program which is focused on energy politics. In both programs it is possible to choose courses from the other program, and for the fall semester I ended up choosing the course Introduction to energy politics in addition to my Imares courses. I saw it necessary to know the basics of energy politics to understand actions of Russia in international relation, because the fact that Russia is a major fossil fuel producer has a strong influence in Russian economy, foreign trade and foreign policy.

I took the following courses at the university:

Fall semester

- Russian Foreign Policy (6 academic credits)
- Empire and Nationalism in Russia and the Soviet Union (6 credits)
- Conflict and Cooperation in Eurasia (3 credits)
- Introduction to Energy Politics (3 credits)
- Russian Language (6 credits)

Spring semester

- Russian Political and Social History(6 credits)
- Political Changes in Post-Soviet Eurasia (6 credits)
- Russia and Armed Conflicts in and beyond Eurasia (6 credits)
- Russian Language (6 credits)

I found practically all courses that were available at the university interesting, since I have for a long time been interested in the societies and development in Russia and other

former Soviet Union. Thus it was difficult to choose out courses. Still, I tried to choose a reasonable amount of courses to be able to invest enough effort in studying Russian language. Improving my Russian language skills was one of my main objectives.

I studied at the so-called Certificate of Study program which does not lead to a degree but where it is required that the student accomplishes at least 18 academic credits per semester. I ended up getting 24 academic credits on both semesters, 48 credits altogether.

I felt the studying quite intensive. Especially during the spring semester there were weeks when I did not take a single day off. At the university, the students don't so much study for exams but write a lot of texts, make presentations and take part in discussion. I saw this as meaningful way to study.

The courses at the university were very interactive. Some of them were more seminars than lectures. The amount of interaction was possible because the study groups were quite small. During the courses, there was a lot of discussion about things in the scope of the subject matter of the courses. For example, in the course of Russian foreign policy, the teacher required at every weekly meeting for every student to give a brief introduction about some current news development in connection with Russian foreign policy. After the introductions we analyzed the developments together. Connecting the course to actual developments this way was very motivating. As a journalist with a background in foreign news, I was able to directly use and develop my professional skills at some of the courses.

The studies significantly deepened my understanding of political and societal situation, developments and history of Russia and other former Soviet Union. Even though I have for years followed events in Russia from the media, and travelled in Russia, the academic year in Saint-Petersburg lifted my knowledge and understanding of the area to a new level. Following actions of Russia in the foreign and domestic fields, I am now often able to analyze why Russia acts as it does. On the other hand, the year also made me

understand how much there still is that should be learned. I believe that academic study of phenomena in Russia and other FSU made me a better journalist in a wider sense than as someone explaining phenomena of that particular geographic area. My ability to analyse events and developments improved due to the studies.

Also, rather intensive studying of the language during several months significantly improved my Russian language skills which in the beginning were not especially good. During the academic year I reached a level especially in terms of grammar where it is easy to continue studying Russian. It is a language that requires quite good knowledge of grammar to be able to be used actively.

Living in Russia had, of course, a significant role in getting acquainted with Russian culture and lifestyle. Discussing with people and taking part in various events taught me about everyday life in Russia. As a large city in the western parts of the country, Saint-Petersburg is not the most typical Russia, but during the winter break I had the opportunity to travel also elsewhere in Russia. I spent some time in Murmansk and Petrozhavodsk, for example. At the same time I had the opportunity, sometimes also necessity, to use and improve my Russian skills.

As late as in the beginning of the spring semester the studies at the university were going on normally and in good mood. At this point I was starting to be already a routined student, having had to get accustomed to studying again in the beginning of the fall semester because a quite long time had passed since I took my master's degree in social studies.

At around the middle of the spring semester, the situation with the new coronavirus was starting to seem more and more serious. Russia was initially reacting to the virus in regional level. In Saint-Petersburg, life was still going on quite normally when in Moscow there were already restrictions in place. In the middle of March, the university announced that they would be switching to distance learning. A day after that, the Finnish

government announced that they would be putting the emergency legislation in force. Also the border traffic between Russian and Finland seemed to be stopping or at least getting difficult soon, so I decided to leave Russia for Finland. Continuing the studies seemed to be possible also from there.

The university did not have systems for distance learning ready in advance, but the university was able to choose and put in operation such systems in a matter of a couple of weeks. Some of the courses were delayed with a couple of weeks, because the lectures were on hold during the practical arrangements of the distance learning. I was able to advance some course papers during the delay.

The distance studies were carried out with a distance meeting software, which after a short period of initial stumbling showed to be quite functional. The lectures went on largely in the same form they had been at the university building, but now over the internet. Also giving presentations and discussing worked out quite well, regarding the circumstances. What was left out were informal discussions with the professors and fellow students, which was of course a loss. Now also the connection to Russian everyday life was missing that the living in Saint-Petersburg had given.

Nevertheless, I managed to stay in Saint-Petersburg for several months, and I was able to complete all my courses at the university. All things considered, I regard myself as having survived the corona crisis during the stipendiate period with relatively small losses.