

**Title VIII Research Scholar/Combined Research and Language Training Program/
Special Initiatives Fellowship Program**

Final Report

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Country visited: RUSSIA

- *What were your specific research goals during your stay in Eurasia? How did these specific goals relate to your overall research project? How fully were you able to complete these goals? What hindered and/or aided you in completing these goals?*

The goals of my research trip to Russia in the fall of 2008 were twofold. On the one hand, I wanted to follow up on my prior fieldwork on de-professionalization of Russian journalists, resulting from the simultaneous privatization of mass media and the “mediatization” of politics throughout the 1990s. I wanted to know whether the de-professionalization trends in journalism I detected in the late 1990s and early 2000s continued into the late 2000s, especially given the new pressures and limitations on press freedom introduced under Putin’s government. Parallel to that, my second goal was to explore possible new avenues along which Russian citizens’ trust in journalism might be slowly restoring, after a collapse of that trust in the late 1990s and early 2000s. What kinds of attempts, I was asking, are contemporary Russian journalists making to re-connect with their readers, listeners, and viewers? And are members of the public “buying” those efforts?

I revisited the three media outlets in the city of Nizhny Novgorod where I conducted fieldwork in 2001-2002. I sat in on editorial meetings, observed the distribution of tasks, followed journalists on assignments, and conducted repeat interviews with key informants across the city from my previous trip. I found that, on the one hand, there is, indeed, a sense of greater unity among journalists across media outlets in Nizhny Novgorod, compared to the early 2000s. The treatment of journalists by government officials has indeed worsened, with many officials routinely treating journalists as their “servants.” In these new circumstances journalists across media outlets are beginning to develop a greater sense of unity, if only around their subordinate position vis-à-vis powers that be. But I also detected greater enthusiasm on the part of journalists, compared to the early 2000s, around helping citizens to assert their social and economic rights. “Rule of law” talk has been central to Putin’s administration, so there has been little to no censorship when it comes to reporting on social and economic rights. This has become even more relevant during the ongoing economic crisis, with media outlets taking the lead in reporting on, offering legal advice to, and to some extent mobilizing citizens who are losing their income due to the ongoing economic recession. These efforts by journalists have been well received by media outlets’ audiences, judging by readers’ phone calls and letters to the editor.

Toward my second goal (exploring new avenues along which citizens' trust in journalism might begin to be restored), I had a unique opportunity to conduct research among editors and journalists working for a new (and currently the only) talk radio station in Nizhny Novgorod—a station funded by the local eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Again, I sat in on editorial meetings, observed the distribution of tasks and the setting of editorial goals, followed reporters on assignments, answered phone calls from listeners, conducted phone interviews with listeners, and even co-hosted several live call-in shows featuring discussions with Orthodox priests and prominent members of the secular public about aspects of contemporary church-state relations in Russia. I found a very high level of listener support for, and trust in “their” radio station there, perhaps higher than any other media outlet I have worked with in Nizhny Novgorod. Significantly, I did not encounter any censorship of political topics at this radio station: my own on-air critical remarks about contemporary Russian politics, as well as critical remarks by listeners calling into the shows I co-hosted, were well received both by the management of the station.

I find this turn in my research into questions of mass media and public trust extremely interesting. Over the past two decades, the Russian Orthodox Church has been steadily gaining moral authority in Russian society, and over the last several years the Church has embarked on a greater campaign of public visibility, of which the establishment of Orthodox radio stations in several Russian cities is a part. Yet, I witnessed, the Church values its newfound freedom from the Russian authorities and is interested in building lasting connections with the Russian *public* rather than with the Russian *state*. This opens up space for claims to moral leadership of the nation, a task that used to be at the heart of Soviet journalism. So, in effect, one can observe at a religious radio station a process that is at once similar to and different from what was going on in Soviet journalism. What becomes particularly interesting in this process is a comparison in the mechanisms of trust-building between “compassionate journalism” of the Church today, on the one hand, and Soviet journalism of the bygone era, on the other.

Lastly, there was a set of tasks I had planned to undertake during this trip but was unable to complete due to a medical condition I developed in the field that prevented me from doing a lot of reading. My plan was to explore the formation of trust between Soviet journalists and their publics by studying the letters to the editor sent in the early-to-mid 1980s to *Leninskaya Smena*, a popular Soviet era newspaper that was produced and distributed in Nizhny Novgorod region. The letters are kept in one of the region's state archives, and I plan to return to Nizhny Novgorod in the summer of 2009 to work through that data.

- *How can U.S. analysts and decision makers use the research you completed to develop more effective policies in the region?*

For the U.S. policy-making community, the implications of my research are the following. Freedom of the press is viewed as a critical component of democratic governance, and promoting it is central to any Western government's policy agenda. Western policy-makers have equated the problem of press freedom in Russia with Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule. My research, however, shows that the Russian press faces an even greater problem—that of journalism's thorough de-professionalization over the last decade and a half, and a concomitant collapse of trust in journalism on the part of the reading and viewing public. The assumption in

Western policy-making circles has been that journalistic professionalism emerges when media outlets are independent, self-sustaining, profitable capitalist enterprises; and efforts have been put by U.S. policy-makers to support Russian media entrepreneurship. My research emphasizes that professionalism also requires the maintenance of peer control over the definitions of professional excellence and public good (something that has been lost through the “marketization” of journalism in Russia in the 1990s), and a willingness on the part of the public to *recognize* what journalists do as public service (the question of trust). This means that along with diplomatic pressure on the Russian government and the continuing support for Russian media entrepreneurship, U.S. policy-makers would be well advised to support programs that help to restore Russian journalists’ peer solidarity and control over the standards of their field.

- *Did you give any talks, briefs, lectures, and/or held meetings with Embassies, NGOs, or Government officials about your research?*

During my stay, I was a discussant at a Frontline Club documentary screening about grass-roots blogging campaigns during U.S. Congressional primaries, which took place at the Birzha Plus publishing house (one of my fieldsites) during my stay in Nizhny Novgorod. The discussion after the screening focused on the importance of blogger journalism as a resource for democratization and its prospects in Russia. I also participated in a conference convened by the Journalism and Sociology Department of Kazan State University in Kazan, Russia, titled “Multimedia Journalism of Eurasia 2008: Information Wars, Partisan Marketing, and Crisis Communications of East and West.” I also participated in a professional media festival for independent regional radio stations, which took place in Nizhny Novgorod in November 2008. At this festival I shared my preliminary research findings with participants. Many participants expressed considerable interest and I was invited to conduct future research at the “Echo of Perm” radio station (a regional partner of the well-known Moscow radio station “Echo of Moscow”).

- *In retrospect, how important was your time in Eurasia for the completion of your overall research project?*

During the 2008-2009 academic year, I am just beginning my first tenure-track appointment as an assistant professor at the Department of Communication at UC San Diego. I will have substantial teaching and administrative duties in this position, but it is essential for me to be able to draw on a deep and up-to-date body of on-the-ground fieldwork research for my academic publications over the next several years, including journal articles and books. The grant awarded to me for the Fall 2008 has allowed me to conduct field research in Russia that is critical for these future publications, and has put me in a qualitatively better professional position as a beginning assistant professor than would otherwise have been the case. More generally, I believe that it is essential for organizations such as American Councils to continue funding qualitative fieldwork research in countries such as Russia where further democratization is needed but faces obstacles. Qualitative, ethnographic field research is crucial in order for US scholarship to achieve a more detailed, thorough understanding of these countries, through establishing and maintaining deep, lasting professional and human relationships with agents of change in the host countries.

American Councils for International Education: How effectively did American Councils assist you in the following areas:

- A. *Pre-departure preparations: travel, stipend, university affiliation, visa, home stay, pre-departure information.*
- B. *In-Country Support: finalizing arrangements at your university, assisting with archive access, arranging support services (medical care, etc.) as needed.*

American Councils staff in Washington, D.C. have been exemplary in assisting me throughout all pre-departure preparations. Ms. Sarah Krueger in particular has been an excellent, indispensable resource. I did not have a chance to interact with Mr. Oleg Akimov, who is the coordinator of the ACTR/ACCELS scholar program in Moscow. Upon arrival, I left him one voice message but did not hear back from him; but because I ended up not needing support letters for archival work after all, I did not pursue his contact further. Therefore I am unable to comment on his work for ACCELS/ACTR.

Your Future Plans: What is the timeline for the remainder of your research? What are your plans for the immediate future? Do you have plans to publish articles, give lectures, briefs, presentations, and/or meet with Embassies, NGOs, or Government officials about your research in the near future?

The research completed this fall is part of the larger book project I have been working on, which will be submitted to an academic publisher in the next two to three years. I plan to make an additional field trip in the summer of 2009 to collect more data on the Soviet period before finalizing the text of the manuscript. In addition, I plan to publish an article on the phenomenon of Christian radio in Russia and on the fluid nature of church-society relations there in one of major scholarly journals in the field of international mass communication, such as *Media, Culture, and Society* or *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.