

Higher School of Economics – Moscow – Russia

Experience report

Semester abroad

Fall semester 2015-2016

Completed Courses

EU-Russia Relations

EU in the World

International Mechanisms of Human Rights Protection

Minority Rights: Comparative Practices

Russian Space and Russian State

Master Political Science

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1 Preparation

The most important thing that has to be taken care of is choosing the country and the university. Cologne offers quite a lot of universities, but depending on your studies and your faculty the number of places to go differs. Due to my personal focus in studies and a general interest in Russia – I had been learning Russian for over two semesters – I picked Moscow. After the confirmation of your exchange semester, the most important thing for Russia is the VISA as getting some of the documents might take some time. Considering the further preparations for Moscow, the Higher School of Economics (HSE) is very helpful as the International Students Support (ISS) takes care very well of their exchange students. They organize accommodation, the first weeks, help you with your VISA and your course selection and even organize someone to pick you up from the airport or a close-by train station upon arrival. Certainly, learning at least some Russian is an important part of preparation as most people in Moscow will not speak any English or German.

One important thing always to keep in mind before and during your stay is the VISA issue. Unfortunately I had to leave Russia for Germany three times during my exchange and especially if that occurs throughout the first weeks in Moscow, it is very important to be in close contact with the ISS. In such a special occasion as mine, but also if you don't have to leave early or at all, it is important to take care of the VISA issues right away as it takes time and can get very problematic if you don't handle it right.

2 Higher School of Economics

The Higher School of Economics is mainly located in Moscow, but also has campuses in other Russian cities e.g. St. Petersburg. As the university is quite young it does not have one single location in Moscow, but is scattered all around town so that getting to your courses might take a while, especially if you plan on taking courses from different faculties. The main buildings, however, are located in the city center around 20 minutes' walk from the red square.

The HSE has an own office with five to six people (ISS) just taking care of the huge amount of exchange students arriving there every semester. In my exchange semester they had to cope with a huge increase in comparison to the semesters before so they really had a lot to do. Nevertheless they were always exceptionally helpful, competent, good-humored and quick in their responses.

HSE offers a lot to do, like debating societies, music groups, sports and other events, though you might realize that there is little time to get involved for one semester, especially as it sometimes is hard to find information on those activities.

A great thing at HSE is the buddy program: Every exchange student can, if he or she wants, get a buddy that picks you up at the airport, helps you with all the formalities, shows you Moscow etc. etc. These buddies also organize a lot of walking tours around Moscow in the first weeks and other events throughout the semester. Even though some did not have a lot of contact with their buddies, I spend a lot of time with my buddy and we even met up for learning Russian and German respectively.

The first weeks are quite organized by the ISS and the buddies. There are plenty of introduction sessions about VISA regulation, Moscow and Russia, a lot of walking tours and other events.

3 Courses

It is important to distinguish for this part between the two alternatives of incorporating your semester in Russia into your studies in Cologne. Most people opt for the Minor “Studies Abroad in Political Science (STAP)”, whereas I wanted to pick another Minor in Cologne and use the credits of the Russian courses for my Major “Political Science”. Even though I’m happy I did it this way, I was and am still struggling with the process this choice entails. If you do not choose the STAP, you have to check thoroughly if the Russian courses you want to take are comparable to the Cologne courses considering the workload, the exam, the working hours, the content, if you already took an exam in this course in Cologne etc. Although the Prüfungsamt and the responsible person of my faculty were very helpful, this process is very time-consuming, confusing and precarious as there is no guarantee that the Russian courses will actually be accepted for your Major after the semester.

So after all the back and forth, the consultations and double-checking I took the following courses:

Russian Space and Russian State, EU-Russia relations, EU in the world, International Mechanisms of Human Rights Protection, Minority Rights: Comparative Practices and, of course, the Russian language course.

Russian Space and State is a really great course taught by Sergei Medvedev. He gives an overview over the relation between the Russian state in the centuries and its waste space

and explains how the government always tried to organize and use the space in order to govern the country. It is a very recommendable course for everyone who goes to Russia even though one might not study Political Science.

EU-Russia Relations talks about the difficult relations and the viewpoint of Russia on the EU and can give anyone new ideas about the EU and how other countries look upon it.

EU in the World basically concerns itself with the role of the EU in developing countries and development aid programs around the world.

In International Mechanisms of Human Rights Protection the students thoroughly examine documents of the International and the European Court of Human Rights and learn what instruments there are to protect the Human Rights of Individuals around the world.

My last course Minority Rights: Comparative Practices focused on the rights and problems of different minorities in different countries such as the LGBT community in Russia or the Russian minority in the neighboring countries.

The Russian language course is optional and very time-consuming as it covers around 9 academic hours a week plus the work at home. Nevertheless, I really liked the course as it was like a one-semester crash course in Russian. There are many different levels available, so everybody should be able to find his or her equivalent.

All the courses I took were held in English. There are many more available, but there also a lot of courses in Russian, where the percentage of Russian students, of course, is remarkably higher.

The online website to pick the courses was still in the making and it was the first semester since it was launched, so there were some problems and confusions about it. The ISS, however, is working on that and is very helpful with all your problems.

It is important to know that some of the courses only start in the second half of the semester, so they might not be available for choosing when you get there. Other courses are fee-based, so you should closely examine the courses before choosing.

4 Living in Moscow

Moscow is a vast city and usually one lives in the center and only rarely gets to know the outer rings. Before the oil crisis it most certainly could have been considered a very expensive city, but the – for us – convenient exchange rate made a lot of activities more

affordable. Food in supermarkets generally is not too expensive, yet the impact of the sanctions was sometimes visible in shortages of some products.

There is a lot to do in Moscow; the innumerable sights, museums, theaters, opera houses, restaurants, bars and clubs take more than a semester to explore. Many of the attractions offer student accounts, yet sometimes only for Russian or long-term students. The buddies offer a lot of trips to attractions in and around Moscow, so that is a great opportunity, if you don't want to go on your own.

The main transport system in Moscow is the Metro, which itself is an attraction due to its beauty, yet not easy to use: Everything is written in Cyrillic letters, the stations often have more than ten different exits and during rush-hour it is incredibly full, so getting around might take nearly twice the usual time. Helpful for this is the metro app of "Yandex". Also it is possible to use the micro buses that run all over town. They can save you a lot of time, but there is no map of their routes and times and it thus might be impossible to use, if you don't speak Russian. As there is absolutely no public transport after half past midnight one will – the one way or the other – end up using the cabs that are all over town. They are quite cheap and the safest options are via the taxi apps like 'Yandex' or 'Uber', but with a little Russian you can also take cabs on the street and negotiate a price.

Many students also go travelling a lot in Russia, using the opportunity of being in the country. The most favorite destinations are the Golden Ring around Moscow¹, St. Petersburg, Kazan or the trans-Siberian railway. Travelling in Russia is not too difficult as they have a lot of train and flight connections, speaking Russian, of course, is a great advantage.

Moscow is not a dangerous city. Nevertheless it is huge, and as in any big city one should always be aware of pickpockets especially during rush-hour – some of the exchange students got pickpocketed there – and at night be careful of robbers or drunken people looking for a fight.

¹ Several very old cities with monasteries and fortresses

5 Lodging

If you want, HSE offers you a place in one of their many dormitories around town. Usually the exchange students get the ones closest to the center, so the ways to university are quite short – in a Moscow perspective. The dormitories are very cheap and you get to meet a lot of other exchange students. In my dormitory there were around 90 exchange students and a few Russians. As one might think this leads to you speaking mostly English, German, French or whatever language, but Russian. Usually you share your room with another exchange student, have a shared kitchen with the whole floor and shared bathrooms with everyone or one for your room only. In general there is always something going on in the dormitory as it feels like a big family, but they also have spaces to study in quiet. The rules in the dormitory are quite strict, but nevertheless it is a great – and cheap – opportunity to spend the semester and meet a lot of different, interesting people. The aim of meeting Russians, however, has to be accomplished elsewhere.

6 Special advices for future exchange students

Many advices I put in the report above, so for further advice I will be happy, if you just contact me anytime, so I can help you out on anything you would like to know. My main advice is to use the opportunity to go to this exceptional country and not to back off because of the current situation in Ukraine or the conflict with the EU as some other students did. Even though one should never forget the problems in and with this country, Russia and Russians are very worth getting to know to and deserve a less one-dimensional look upon them. I had great experiences at the university and in general life there and am already planning my next visit to Russia.