Insights into the US-Russia Relationship via the Stanford US-Russia Forum

Summary

For the last nine months, I have been working with a team of students hailing from Russia, Ukraine, and Singapore thanks to the Stanford US-Russia Forum. This is an academic year long program that includes working trips to Moscow, the Siberian city of Tyumen, Washington DC, California State Park Fort Ross and Stanford University with the goal of promoting academic level engagement between Russian and American students. Through this program I was about to publish a research paper entitled, “Challenges of entrepreneurial collaboration between the US and Russia: Academic incubators as a platform for change” along with my co-authors, as well as a satirical children’s book entitled, “Entrepreneur’s Bad Advice: How to Get Rich” (soon to be available for purchase on Amazon).

Insight into US-Russian Relations

For the entirety of this school year, I have been a member of a small team working to understand the rather complex and important aspects of US-Russian potential for collaboration in the entrepreneurial space. The program that I have participated in, the Stanford US-Russia Forum, aims to inform students and young professionals from a variety of countries and backgrounds of the challenges and opportunities with regard to the changing US-Russian relationship as seen by stakeholders in Russia and the US. The focus was for students such as myself to further understand and appreciate the growing importance of learning about Russia and perspectives about Russia in as many different contexts as possible.

While the focus of the program as a whole was on the US-Russian relationship, the participants were divided into 10 different working groups, covering everything from nuclear policy and conflict resolution to culture or the status of the oil and gas industry. My group, consisting of 4 students from Singapore, Ukraine, Russia and the US (myself), wrote and published a working paper on the challenges presented by entrepreneurial collaboration posed by the current geopolitical situation.

The aim of our report was to describe the existing landscape of academic incubators in the United States and Russia and to understand what changes could enable entrepreneurial collaboration between these two countries, making incubators more successful, while benefiting the global economy. We identified several challenges that seemed to limit participation of incubators and startups they represent in the US-Russia cross-border transactions. The fundamental challenge has to do with the high level of perceived risk associated with Russia: (1) perceived risk of Russian investors and sources of funding in the eyes of entrepreneurs, which incentivizes them to migrate abroad and incubate there in search for more benign capital and partnerships; (2) perceived risk of Russia as a destination for capital, which scares off foreign investors. On the more technical level, collaboration is further undermined by the lack of current and granular information on the
early-stage startup universe across US-Russia incubators, by the underdeveloped legal framework in Russia, which prevents straightforward implementation of standard Western venture capitalist contracts, and by the lack of entrepreneurial training at a university level. We discussed these challenges in detail and outlined possible solutions.

There were approximately 25 students and young professionals participating in the program (half American, half Russian, plus some additional countries represented – Pakistan, Singapore, Australia, and others). This program involved a trip to Russia and the US (a first for some involved). In November we were able to travel to Moscow and Tyumen where we visited a number of high profile individuals and organizations, including but not limited to: Sergei Lavrov (Minister of Foreign Affairs), the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Jon Huntsman (US Ambassador to Russia), The Governor of Tyumen, the Ministry of Defense, and more. We were able to speak one-on-one with the people making decisions and living on the forefront of US-Russian relations. Additionally, we were able to meet with students from a number of different universities and hear more about their lives, as well as presenting our research to them.

In Spring, we met again in person in Washington DC, for the US part of the program. There we were met with a new set of perspectives on the relationship between these two countries – from all sides of the aisle. Meetings were set up with Congressmen Joe Kennedy and Ted Lieu, the US-Russia Business Council, The Heritage Foundation, the Penn-Biden Center, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, and NASA. Then we traveled to California to visit Russian-American historical site, Fort Ross to participate in a service weekend of clearing trails as well as to learn about the history of the region. Finally, in this marathon of a trip, we were off to Stanford University to speak with George Shultz, Michael McFaul, Brett McGurk, William Perry, Jerry Brown, and other influential figures in this space. Additionally, we were allowed unprecedented access to some of the Hoover Institution’s extensive Russia/Soviet archive, including handwritten letters by the Russian royal family, a massive collection of Soviet-era posters, and Stalin’s personal photo album. Needless to say, both these trips provided us with quite a lineup of powerful figures and artifacts.

This was a truly amazing and unique experience made possible through MIIS’s connections and funding opportunities. I would not have been able to do this this program without the financial support of MIIS—and it will be an experience that I will remember forever. I only hope that in the future programs like this are maintained, because if there is one thing that I learned from all of our many meetings: there is nothing as important to the future of US-Russian relations as human-to-human contact. It is vital that people from both of these countries realize that we are not so different. We all share similar hopes and dreams. At the end of this program, I’m not sure if optimism is the right word – because many of the people we spoke with painted quite a dark picture, but I am sure that as long programs like this exist, participants will continue to learn and grow and understand different perspectives.

In the coming months, I will continue to sort through my notes from this unbelievable program. Even as I write this short download, I am pulled in so many different directions by the various roundtable discussions and one-on-one interviews with students and professionals and officials
that I had the opportunity to participate in. An opportunity like this is a rare thing, and I am glad that I took this opportunity.

Additional Photos

Margo Poda (MBA/MAIPD ’19) attending a round table discussion with fellow delegates at the Governor’s Palace in Tyumen, Russia.
Margo Poda (MBA/MAIPD ’19) visiting the Federation Council in Moscow, Russia.
Margo Poda (MBA/MAIPD ’19) touring Skolkovo technology park outside Moscow, Russia.
Stanford US-Russia Forum delegates including Margo Poda (MBA/MAIPD ’19) attending a briefing held by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov in Moscow, Russia.