

MY SECONDMENT WITH SAINT-PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY



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This March I travelled to Russia for my first academic secondment with St. Petersburg State University (SPbSU). Being part of the PRIMO – Power and Regions in a Multipolar Order project of the EU/EC Marie Curie Initial Training Programme, I had the opportunity to choose this particular partner institution over a number of others, therefore my expectations were exceptionally high and I was looking forward to a very productive period and success in my field research.

After landing at Pulkovo Airport and finding a taxi, I quickly realized that I have, indeed, arrived in the former capital of Russia – the grand architecture and the scale of city planning left no room for doubt. In weeks to come, this city would never cease to astonish me: its theatres, libraries, galleries, restaurants, parks, and – most importantly – people provided me with plenty of opportunities for inspiring recreation and intelligent pastime.

During my stay in ‘Peter’ – as the locals tend to call their hometown – I also learnt that this is a metropolis of ostensible contradictions. For instance, while I found the city itself to be most profoundly Russian, it was also teeming with tourists and international students from all the corners of the world. It was also apparent to me that Petersburg managed to become an economic powerhouse by capitalizing on its Imperial past just as much as on its preeminent Soviet institutions of grandeur (e.g. City Metro). At the same time, I experienced ‘Peter’ as a rare microcosm wherein varied forms of re-emerging Russian traditionalism seemed to complement a renewed fervour and a profound ambition for social and economic progress. After all, it was precisely here that some of the greatest Russian talents and visionaries rose to prominence, for better or worse.

My host institution for this secondment was no less prestigious than the encompassing city. As I soon found out, SPbSU’s history has been more-or-less equivalent to that of enlightenment and higher education in Russia. Moreover, on their exceptionally long list of famous alumni I encountered names like Lomonosov, Mendeleev, Lenin, and Putin – thus it goes without saying that Russia would be an entirely different country without this highly esteemed place of learning.

I must confess, at first – given that relations between the EU and Russia had been strained very recently – I wasn't fully certain about the success of this secondment. However, all such concerns of mine were completely unjustified, as I was extended the warmest of welcomes by fellow academics and staff at SPbSU. Indeed, my hosts – Associate Professor Alexandra G. Koval and Professor Sergey F. Sutirin – left nothing to chance when it came to involving me in the programmes and events of the Department of World Economy (where I soon felt completely at home) and were it not for them, much of my academic progress would have been impossible.

In terms of independent academic research, the databases at SPbSU provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to engage with the Russian literature on Energy and EU-Russia relations. I also attended several topical seminars in both Petersburg and Moscow and met a number of renowned academics from my field of interest. In addition to this, I conducted several deep and insightful background talks with leading energy policy experts, thereby further augmenting my understanding of trade in natural gas and its political relevance to EU-Russia relations.

Eventually, my field research culminated in a thoroughly updated and revised research project and an important presentation at SPbSU's *Third International Conference on Sustainable Development*. In light of these results and my overall experience in St. Petersburg (and especially at SPbSU), I found the secondment in Russia to be both very productive and immensely successful. Needless to say, I will be looking forward to my next visit with much anticipation.

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