

My secondment at SPbSU – a life-changing experience

Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, ESR Middle East Technical University (Ankara)



One of the requirements of my position as a PRIMO fellow based at Middle East Technical University in Ankara was to spend three months at the World Economy Department at St Petersburg State University (SPbSU). As I've been working on Russian foreign policy for more than four years now, previously as a think-tanker in Brussels and currently as a PRIMO fellow, I was very much looking forward to this secondment, in order to conduct research and interviews for my thesis, and enhance my understanding of Russian politics, language, and culture at large. Now, upon completion of the secondment, I can safely say that it did not disappoint my expectations: it has indeed been one of the most exciting experiences I have had so far within the framework of the PRIMO project, and even in my life more generally. I literally fell in love with the city, its beautiful buildings, its vibrant cultural life, and the high-level academic offerings that I had access to not

only at SPbSU, but also at other universities — such as the European University in St Petersburg which I had the pleasure of visiting and collaborating with.

My secondment's main goal was to carry out fieldwork for my thesis, which looks at Russia's soft power, with a focus on Armenia. Thanks to the extensive network of my SPbSU supervisors (Professor Sergei Sutyurin and Associate Professor Alexandra Koval), I had the opportunity to interview not only well-known academics and experts in Russian foreign policy, but also policymakers, high-level civil servants, civil society leaders and members of the Armenian diaspora. Such a rich and diverse target group provided me with very valuable insights, and the interviews will be highly beneficial in terms of the results of my research. The incredibly rich and up-to-date database at SPbSU allowed me to access a great number of both Russian and international sources that would have been difficult to consult otherwise. I also attended several conferences and seminars given by Russian and international scholars. Examples include an international round table on "Eurasian integration in new geopolitical conditions", and the international conference "Studying EU-Russian Relations: Research Agenda in Russia and in the West", both based at SPbSU's International Relations Departments. I also attended the SPbSU's Third International Conference on 'Sustainable Development: Society and Economy', organized by the Faculty of Economics, where I was given the opportunity to present and obtain feedback for my research. I have also participated in the International Summer School in Russian Business organized by the World Economy Department of SPbSU.



Another objective of my secondment was to carry out an outreach activity promoting the PRIMO project amongst a non-academic audience. Hence, on 21 May 2016, I made a presentation about the project and my research together with Jovid Z. Ikromov, senior researcher at the Center for Strategic Research under the President of Tajikistan, who discussed the benefits of labour migration for the Russian economy. Participants engaged in a vivid debate after both presentations. The audience comprised citizens of different countries such as Germany, Iran, Mali, Moldova, Ukraine, Tajikistan, and included PhD and Master's students from several universities in St Petersburg, alongside civil servants, and business people affiliated with companies and banks such as Sberbank of Russia, Technopoisk, and Auchan.

These three months in Russia also gave me the opportunity to improve my Russian skills. Unfortunately I am still far from being fluent in this complex, beautiful language; however, I feel that this period of time was extremely beneficial, and will incentivize me to further progress in the study of Russian.

The secondment at SPbSU was really a life-changing experience for me. By the same token, I hope that my visit and my experience as an Italian researcher based in Turkey also brought some fresh and interesting insights to the SPbSU students and academic staff. In fact, given the current gloomy political situation between Russia and the EU, and Russia and Turkey, I'm all the more convinced that people-to-people socialization is the key to enhance mutual understanding and strengthen both professional and personal ties within the academic community.