



Study Abroad

Possibilities in Eastern Europe and the USSR



by

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Rapid political changes in Eastern Europe are now making study abroad in these areas more accessible for U.S. undergraduates. By the time this column appears in print, there may have been more changes and developments that affect our field, but the interest that is being generated on U.S. campuses in a study abroad experience in Eastern Europe makes it worth commenting on now.

Historically, programs have been of two different patterns, mirroring the different historical, cultural and political traditions in Eastern Europe before World War II. Russian universities have had little experience with the free movement of scholars coming to take degrees. But preparatory language "Courses for Foreigners" already existed in universities in prewar Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, and provided the basis for American programs when they started up in the 1970s. American students have even been able to apply directly to some of these summer programs. It was also easier for these universities to put on area studies courses taught in English for groups of American students.

Q: What kinds of programs now exist in this area for U.S. students?

A: The Institute of International Education (IIE) lists some U.S. college and university-sponsored group programs for the academic year, semester, and summer. Compared to Western Europe, however, student

numbers have been very small.

In the Soviet Union all semester and year programs have been especially organized for U.S. institutional sponsors at Soviet universities under arrangements with the Ministry of Culture. Although special courses have been arranged for groups, these have been taught in Russian by regular university faculty. Knowledge of the language at the advanced level has been a requirement for participation. (The oldest and best-known of these are sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange [CIEE], the American Council for Teachers of Russian [ACTR], Ohio State-Purdue and Middlebury).

Some universities in Poland and Yugoslavia offer summer courses for foreigners, such as at the popular Jagiellonian University in Cracow, as well as universities in Lubin, Posnan, and Warsaw.

Individual U.S. universities have their own exchange programs, usually limited to a small number of their own students willing to take on the challenge of study in difficult languages such as Hungarian; in many cases, these students have a head start from their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Students going to East Germany are expected to be able to study in German. The German Democratic Republic has four major university language programs for foreigners at institutions in Rostock, Leipzig, Dresden, and East

Berlin. Brown University has had a group program to Rostock. Finally, it has not been uncommon for programs based in Vienna to sponsor a study tour to Eastern bloc countries at some point during the semester.

Q: What kinds of new programs can we expect in the next year or so?

A: One major difference will be interest on the part of individual Soviet universities in developing their own programs for short-term (i.e., summer, semester, and year) international students who are not seeking a degree. This will be an important source of hard currency for them.

Representatives of Polish and Hungarian universities, with more experience in language courses for foreigners, have been spotted at international conferences handing around materials on special area studies programs taught in English.

Q: To whom should we turn for information and advice on new developments and programs for U.S. students in Eastern Europe?

A: Sponsors of long-standing programs in these areas, such as the CIEE and the consortium of universities and colleges which sponsors a Russian language program at Leningrad State, are experienced and knowledgeable. There is a great deal of networking among specialists in these areas.



The United States Information Agency keeps on top of where programs are and who is developing what, as many institutions are requesting funds from them under the Samantha Smith Memorial Scholarship program. (Call 202-485-1927 for information).

Your own Slavic language faculty, as well as professors in such areas as economics, political science, law, science and engineering, may have individual contacts with Eastern European colleagues who will now be more communicative about new opportunities for study at their institutions and interested in establishing exchanges.



Q: If our students have been studying in these countries for years, why should we suddenly be looking for new problems?

A: Until now, the competition for places in the few existing programs in the Soviet Union has resulted in our sending students who were carefully selected and highly motivated for what lay ahead. This screening often included a telephone interview to ascertain an adequate level of Russian language competency. In other words, participants were relatively well prepared for the differences in environment.

Our average study abroad students will probably not be as well prepared to face certain academic and practical problems. And with greater numbers of students going abroad, it is unrealistic to expect that their demands can be met in the short run.

Even in Western nations, it can take many years to build the local institutional infrastructure capable of handling large numbers of short-term, consumer-oriented American students worried about credit transfer, daily hot showers and telephones that work. Both sides will need to have a good deal of patience and good will to make a success of this.

Q: What kinds of academic problems will exist?

A: Formerly eligibility for study abroad programs in the Soviet Union required completion of Russian language studies through the intermediate level. Programs now are being created for study in English with an intensive Russian language component. The Plekhanov Institute in Moscow is developing a summer program with CIEE. Leningrad State has created a new venture (TEMP Cooperative) which seems similar in administration to the Intensive English Language Institutes on U.S. campuses. Summer programs now exist that concentrate on a specific scientific discipline, such as archaeology or mathematics, as a result of colleagues who wish to collaborate and expose their students to scientific opportunities without the need for knowledge of the language.

In creating a new program at a Soviet university, control over the academics should be maintained by the U.S. program sponsor. This cannot be done without developing certain relationships between key U.S.

faculty and their Soviet counterparts. To get courses tailored for American consumption, the safest way is to provide your own syllabi. When it becomes possible for students to go individually to Soviet universities, it will be interesting to see what kinds of transcripts will be provided.

There is also the important consideration of what language will prevail in regions where nationalistic feelings run high. Will it always be possible to receive instruction in Russian in Moldavia, Lithuania, Georgia, etc. or will the universities insist on teaching in the nation's first language, like the University of Barcelona now does with Catalan?

Q: What kinds of practical problems will exist?

A: Because the economies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have been characterized by austerity for many years, students should not expect many of the amenities often taken for granted here. Residence halls can be nonexistent or in bad disrepair. Alternative housing options, such as small hotels, should be kept in mind. Other important considerations are the availability of health services and of security in times of civil disturbances. And what about rapid access to transportation out of the city, region or country in case of illness or other emergencies?

For the USSR, the need for a good method of communication will require underwriting the cost of a

FAX system or a PC with a modem for communication through the San Francisco-Moscow Teleport computer link, an electronic mail service.

Q: What about exchange programs with Eastern European and Soviet universities?

A: This is an excellent way to begin a relationship with an institution that can become a partner for many types of programs in the future. For exchanges of more than a semester, faculty and graduate student exchanges provide a safer base from which to learn where the potential land mines are, assuming that these individuals are more mature and are more committed and prepared for the new culture.

One serious difficulty in the swap of students is related to the fact that Soviet currency cannot be converted into U.S. dollars and vice versa. Thus Americans cannot obtain the rubles, nor Soviets the dollars, for purchase of airline tickets to interior cities on each others' airlines. These must be provided by the receiving institution as part of the exchange package. In an exchange to the Siberian city of Irkutsk, for example, the University of Irkutsk must provide the tickets from Moscow to Irkutsk, just as the American university would have to have tickets waiting for the Soviet students at the port of entry in the U.S. for further travel within the U.S. □