

The University Consortium and the Harriman Institute: Promoting Engagement with Russia

By Julie Newton

Nataliya would not go inside. Her peers—a group of international graduate students from the six elite Russian, European, and American universities that comprise the University Consortium—filed happily into our Harvard host's front door for a welcome dinner and the 2016 Superbowl game. But Nataliya lingered out front. I finally found her there, snowflakes layering her coat and hat. “It will be just like Paris,” she said, trying not to look at me. “I just don’t want to go in.” She then told me about her first trip abroad to France a month after Crimea. The few Russians at the conference faced hostility, she said, and it felt personal. “They told me that ‘Russia today is aggressive; that’s why we are doing what we are doing in Ukraine,’” she continued, recovering her composure, “but that’s exactly the way *we see you*.”

Inherent in Nataliya’s story are strands of competing narratives about today’s Russia-West confrontation that the University Consortium (UC) sets out to examine. For the past six years, the UC—in which the Harriman Institute and its director Alexander Cooley take a leading role—has brought equal

numbers of Russian, American, and European graduate students together for weeklong intensive training modules (now also online) to unpack their respective narratives in front of one another within a scholarly framework.

The results are impressive: after every module, UC fellows report greater understanding of the other side(s), broadened conceptual lenses for analysis, shifted or expanded perspectives, and stronger belief in the need for cooperation to solve common problems. UC alumni have surpassed expectations by forming the UC’s crown jewel, its Alumni Network, comprised of active members from all years, going back to our first module in 2016, which took place at the Harriman.

Such results have branded the University Consortium an unusually

successful multilateral project promoting constructive engagement among Russia, the U.S., and Europe. Funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York and led by six equal partners—the Harriman Institute at Columbia, the Davis Center at Harvard, St Antony’s College at Oxford, Sciences Politiques in Paris, the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO), and the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow—the UC generates critical thinking, honest exchange, and greater trust among our network of students, scholars, and former officials across our regions. The University Consortium does this through careful, sustained efforts to build and expand safe spaces for genuine Russia-West dialogue where Nataliya and her Western peers do not feel attacked, dismissed, or disrespected—no matter how deeply they disagree—but instead remain willing to listen to and learn from one another.

Such platforms for productive engagement are not only painstakingly difficult to create; they are also increasingly rare. At both official and unofficial levels since 2014, Russia-West forums for discussion have steadily shut down. Shutting off engagement has encouraged tendencies on all sides to explain the other’s behavior as a function of its nature. This leads to what many call “essentialism”—a disproportionate focus on inherent or

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systemic factors, without considering the role of contingent or contextual ones. Essentialism has encouraged sharp divisions about the causes of the Russia-West confrontation along national, or rather tribal, lines. Even around the UC's seminar tables, we hear versions of these essentialist narratives, mirroring black-and-white images of the other, as Nataliya suggested. But "the color of truth is gray," to quote former Harriman director (and UC senior adviser) Robert Legvold, citing the painter Piet Mondrian. And that is the problem. Essentialism rejects gray. It undermines complex understanding, pours fuel on confrontation, and reduces our willingness for cooperation to overcome today's global threats.

It is the mission of the UC to foster constructive engagement in order to gain more accurate understandings of the other's intentions, assumptions, beliefs, interests, and domestic political influences—that is, the multiple sources driving each side's foreign-policy behavior. These sources are not fixed in any country; their content, nature, and relative weights shift over time, depending on internal and external conditions, so understanding them is hard going. And yet, the risks of misunderstanding, mistake, and miscalculation represent the most likely causes for military conflict in Europe, cyber warfare, or even the failure of nuclear deterrence.

Heightened concern for these stakes as well as other costs drives the UC's work and unites its growing community. At all our activities (semiannual training modules, online conversations, member publications, alumni gatherings, and annual conferences), we stress empirical inquiry into the sources of the Russia-



U.S.-EU confrontation and assess the effectiveness of proposed solutions. We seek local and context-specific knowledge through area-studies programs; we apply academic insights from multiple academic disciplines from politics to economics, history, sociology, psychology, and so on; and we incorporate ideas from professional and practical realms. Such a comprehensive approach—for which the Harriman Institute is especially well known—is invaluable. It allows our interregional fellows to explore together not just our countries' profound material and systemic differences but also the more contingent, contextual, and ideational factors dividing us.

Regarding the latter, UC fellows evaluate the impact of perceptions and action-reaction dynamics on Russia-

U.S.-EU relations over the last 30 years. In a popular UC seminar, fellows plumb underlying assumptions and motivated biases on each side—biases that unconsciously inform thinking and hamper positive change. For example, they consider the dangers of "confirmation bias" on Russia-West relations—how preexisting beliefs shape how we react to new information, whatever the reality. Fellows also identify "fundamental attribution errors," where one side tends to offer mitigating, circumstantial explanations for its own behavior, while explaining the other's actions in immutable, essentialist terms. And they discuss the power of emotion, such as resentment, humiliation, respect, fear, hubris, or disillusionment, in shaping change in Russia-West relations over the past

Above: A Harriman-hosted University Consortium training module on Zoom, February 2021. All photos courtesy of Julie Newton.

three decades—all corroborated by recent social science.

Such “mental unpacking” has to happen on all sides to make a difference. As UC senior adviser and emeritus fellow at St Antony’s College Dr. Alex Pravda observed, the process of spelling out our mental assumptions and discussing them in front of one another fosters empathy and stimulates introspection on all sides.

To be clear, empathy does not mean sympathy; it simply means seeing the situation from the other side’s perspective for the sake of progress in areas of mutual self-interest, as reported by President Joseph Biden from his recent summit with Vladimir Putin. Empathy is even “indispensable” as a practical policy tool for solving diplomatic problems, as British Ambassador to the USSR Roderick Braithwaite explained to the UC. This means that empathy and introspection are essential for the success of official Track I or unofficial Track II negotiations—something that Legvold says he learned from Marshall Shulman, his own mentor and predecessor at the Harriman and special adviser on Soviet affairs to the Carter administration.

But even inside the safe spaces of the UC, the depths of Russia-West hostility make listening, introspection, and empathy hard. Listening at official levels is even harder under the weight of domestic politics, domestic lobby groups, vested corporate and political interests, biases, misperceptions, historical fears, and emotions.

What helps? First, we take indirect approaches. Rather than debating issues directly—such as Crimea, Donbas, election meddling, or NATO enlargement—we approach them



indirectly through workshops about different national understandings of core concepts, such as sovereignty, interference, security, or national interests. The issues then emerge as examples to illustrate broader concepts, not as subjects for argument. Students may disagree over Ukraine, for example, but they tend to remain constructive as they discuss differences in their respective conceptual understandings, rather than pointing fingers at one another. They learn a lot about each other’s thought process—and the reasons behind it—and this generates mutual understanding and respect, even in times of disagreement.

Second, we strive to represent as many voices as possible around our tables. Though we were concerned at first that including emotive voices from conflict regions or former Soviet satellites/republics might inject too much intensity or provoke fights, we have found that incorporating those voices is crucial, given that their security concerns and postcolonial complexes shape Russia-U.S.-EU relations in fundamental ways. Indeed, East Central European or East European concerns go to the heart of European security, so we include

constructive voices from those regions at every event. As a result, we have managed to retain a productive and educational atmosphere, while exposing our students to fuller understandings of how *all* sides think through different conceptual lenses, which encourages real learning and cognitive shifts.

What about impact? That UC events lead to more broad-mindedness and solution-oriented thinking is documented in UC surveys and feedback. Moreover, many UC fellows who report new thinking or cognitive shifts have gone into professions in the field. This brings us back to Nataliya, outside in the snow. I finally coaxed her into the Superbowl welcome-dinner and she loved it. She reported that as a result of what she learned during

Above: Participants at a MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations)-hosted University Consortium module in Moscow, March 2017.

that UC week of training at Harvard (led by an MGIMO professor with a vast array of multinational speakers), she adjusted her master's thesis on NATO enlargement/Russia-NATO relations by adding more insights from the international relations theory of constructivism and greater emphasis on perceptions. She participated enthusiastically in successive UC events, until she left to accept a Russian Foreign Ministry internship with the goal of joining Russia's diplomatic corps.

Similar stories abound among the Western participants. One American student, for example, stressed the value of hearing firsthand (even via Zoom) how differently her Russian peers perceive the same events, and how much they focused on the role of centuries of Russian history in explaining current Russian foreign-policy behavior. Our inter-regional Zoom module, she added, had deepened her understanding of the sources of Russian foreign policy in ways exceeding American academic curricula. Regarding professional impact, UC alumni (13 of them) were selected by the European Leadership Network as special interns to assist former European officials in policy action-groups, hitching their unique UC training to practical policy goals. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of impact, though, is the UC's growing

Alumni Network, which is highly active from the bottom up across all three geographic regions.

Unsurprisingly, we face tough problems. First among those are the Kremlin's political squeezing of Russian universities and America's political polarization over the Russia issue—both of which reduce participants' openness to honest reflection and genuine dialogue. Second, the decrease in job opportunities in professions related to Russia-West relations, especially in Russia, makes it harder for UC alumni to remain in the field. Third, there is the problem of “engagement skepticism.” Persuading some UC members, especially from East Central Europe or Eastern Europe who have experienced postcolonial trauma or war, that engagement is required for improving accuracy and enhancing security is especially hard going. Finally, our future growth and financial strategy may require additional funding, but it's a struggle to identify funding sources beyond Carnegie Corporation of New York that are politically acceptable to all sides.

But these struggles are worth the effort. We are relatively small, but I am reminded of Elizabeth Valkenier's interviews with the USSR's 1960s generation. Their unorthodox thinking over two decades helped build the intellectual foundations of Gorbachev's “New Thinking” in foreign policy. I am also reminded of my own IREX exchange back in 1989 when I interviewed Soviet experts on Europe from the early 1960s onward: their engagement with Europeans over decades fostered the kinds of new ideas, greater understanding, and genuine trust on both sides that helped lead the Cold War to its



peaceful end. And I think of Nataliya, who took what she learned from the UC about complexity to Russia's Foreign Ministry. I also think of our American and European fellows, who report similar intellectual and affective benefits from our UC dialogues and who will become the policy-makers and opinion-shapers in Western countries for the future. In this way, the UC's growing epistemic community—promoting better mutual understanding through intellectual exchange, more complex ways of thinking, and genuine Russia-West respect—is on the path to affect change. ■

Julie Newton is the principal investigator of University Consortium; a research fellow at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford; and associate professor at the University of Paris. She is also a member of the Harriman Institute's National Advisory Council and an alumna of the Harriman Institute ('85).

Above, right: Students and faculty at the first-ever University Consortium training module, which took place in New York at the Harriman Institute in November 2015.