

The Library of Congress Open World 1999 Russian Leadership Program Final Report

The Library of Congress 1999 Open World Russian Leadership Program (RLP) succeeded beyond anyone's expectations, bringing an unprecedented cadre of 2,150 of Russia's new and future political leaders to experience America firsthand as the Russian Federation seeks to establish democratic reforms. The RLP was inspired by and modeled on the small but critical part of the Marshall Plan that brought large numbers of emerging German political and societal leaders to the U.S. after World War II to observe the workings of America's democratic government and market economy.

The similar aims of the RLP were achieved by the 1999 pilot: to improve relations and mutual understanding between the two participating nations, to allow Russian visitors to observe the workings of American democracy and its free market system, and to enable them to see firsthand how Americans from all walks of life conduct their business and professions and also their private, social, and cultural lives. To the extent possible, Russian participants were matched with hosts in the same profession -- members of the Russian State Duma (Russia's lower legislative house) with U.S. House of Representatives members, mayors with mayors, and so on. The vast majority stayed with American families in their homes and shared in their daily lives, activities, and recreations. They spent time with their professional counterparts, observing them in action.

Funding

The U.S. Congress under the leadership of Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library, generously provided \$10 million of transferred Senate funds to launch the 1999 RLP pilot program. With seventeen weeks from enactment of the authorizing legislation (P.L. 106-31) to the end of the program on September 30, 1999 -- and overcoming several seemingly insurmountable obstacles -- the Library mobilized staff, established the first-ever grants program in the Legislative Branch, awarded contracts and grants to provide logistical support and hosting arrangements, and oversaw the vetting of 7,200 nominations to select the first participants. Although the full impact of the program will only be known many years hence, it demonstrated emphatically and conclusively that there is vast good will between Americans and Russians and that both peoples desire greater knowledge and understanding of each other.

Praise for the program from the Russian visitors, the American hosts, and Members of Congress was widespread and enthusiastic, and the participants on both sides were unanimous in the hope that it would be continued and expanded. Congress responded positively, authorizing the Library of Congress (LOC) to repeat the project in the year 2000 to continue advancing understanding and good will between the peoples of the United States and the Russian Federation. To this end, Congress generously approved a new \$10 million appropriation through the Freedom Support Act for RLP 2000 (Public Law 106-113, Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY 2000) to bring up to 3,000 more emerging young Russian leaders to the U.S. The commitment of the Congress to improving relations through direct contact and exchange of visits among parliamentary and congressional leaders has enhanced the size and scope of this far-reaching endeavor.

One of the strongest endorsements of the RLP was made by Senator Ted Stevens himself on November 18, 1999, when he announced the renewed Fiscal Year 2000 funding on the Senate floor:

"Beyond the strong ties of friendship that developed between guests and hosts, it is clear that the Russian Leadership Program fundamentally changed how these Russian guests see America. They constitute the largest single group ever to travel from Russia to the U.S. They return to Russia with clear ideas and strong commitment to positive change." And Senator Stevens concluded his comments, saying: "The Russian Leadership Program has had a tremendous impact in one year. It is a good program, and I am pleased that we were able to provide the necessary funding to continue this program into the new millennium."

The Librarian of Congress Dr. James H. Billington, who first proposed the program, stressed its direct significance for the U.S.:

"The stability of Russia is the number one foreign policy concern for U.S. interests, and this is a time of transition in Russia's development of democracy."

One of the world's leading historians of Russian culture and a recently elected Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Billington served as Chairman of RLP 1999 and now is Chairman of RLP 2000. James W. Symington, former Congressman from Missouri and State Chief of Protocol in the Carter administration, was the program's Executive Director and is serving as Chairman of the Advisory Committee for RLP 2000.

Results

The RLP 1999 pilot brought 2,150 Russian leaders to the United States for ten days between July 28 and September 30. They represented 41 ethnic groups from 83 of Russia's 89 autonomous regions, ranging across 11 time zones from Smolensk in the west to Kamchatka in eastern Siberia, and visited 538 American communities in 45 states and the District of Columbia. U.S. Senators met with several members of the Federation Council, Russia's upper legislative house, and 32 House members hosted deputies of the lower body, the State Duma, which is equivalent to the House of Representatives. The program's aim of concentrating on emerging Russian leaders was realized with an average age of 37.

The Russians were a well-educated group -- about 90 percent had university level or other higher level education -- and 68 percent of them were male and 32 percent, female. Elected and appointed government officials and other government employees from the federal, republic, regional, and municipal levels constituted the largest group (38.4 percent); but industry, business, science, education, medicine, the media, cultural, and other organizations also were represented. The vast majority of the Russians had not been to the U.S. before and few of them spoke English.

Leadership and Partners

A number of governmental and private Russian and American organizations in both countries nominated the participants. The nominees were then screened by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, RLP Honorary Co-Chairman, the late Academician Dmitri S. Likhachev, the American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS (ACIE), and the Library of Congress.

The 1999 RLP owes its vision and success in large measure to the RLP Chairman, Librarian of Congress James Billington; the late Academician Dmitri Likhachev, who served as RLP Co-Chairman; U.S. Ambassador to Russia James Collins; Senator Ted Stevens, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress and sponsor of the authorizing legislation; and Representative Charles Taylor (Republican, North Carolina), Chairman of the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee. They all shared the belief that widespread, direct contact between American and Russian citizens would greatly benefit both nations. Without their collective leadership and support, the success of the 1999 Open World Russian Leadership Program could not have been realized.

As overall administrator of the project, the American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS, under the leadership of Dr. Dan E. Davidson, played a vital role in achieving the successful completion of the RLP 1999 pilot.

Nor would the program have succeeded without the remarkable efforts of the organizations that hosted the Russian visitors. These organizations were the American Foreign Policy Council, the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Friendship Force, Meridian International, National Democratic Institute, Peace Links, Rotary International, Russian Ministry Network/Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church Russian Initiative, and the Vermont Karelia Sister State Committee. Many of these groups have expressed interest in hosting RLP 2000 participants.

In many ways, however, the Library owes its greatest debt of gratitude to over 800 hosting families whose extraordinary generosity, warmth, and personal commitment made it possible to realize the goals of RLP 1999.

Evaluations

RLP 1999 received widespread media coverage in the U.S. and Russia, samples of which may be found on the RLP website. The total of newspaper articles published in both countries numbered over 500. CNN has presented a television special on the program. Video series consisting of several segments, along with interviews of RLP alumni, Dr. James Billington, and Ambassador James Collins, were shown on Russian TV (ORT).

Post-exchange questionnaires registered a very high level of enthusiasm, 90 percent or more, for the program by both the Russian participants and their American hosts. Nearly all the Russian participants, 97 percent, believe the RLP will have a beneficial long-term impact on U.S.- Russian relations. Ninety percent or more expressed satisfaction with their host families, their group meetings, their placement, and social contacts. The more time spent in professional activities during the day, the higher their level of approval.

The eloquent voices of the Russian participants offer compelling indication of the successful achievement of RLP 1999 goals.

Deputy of the Russian State Duma Sergei N. Falaleyev, who was hosted by U.S. Representative Pete Sessions in Dallas, Texas, and Washington, D.C., stressed both the high quality of the program and its contribution toward strengthening relations:

"I'd like to note the high level and intensiveness of the program developed by Congressman Sessions and his colleagues. I was able to become familiar with some aspects of U.S. political and social life. I sincerely hope that participation in these programs by Russian parliamentarians was interesting both for them and the U.S. hosts. I hope that these contacts are mutually beneficial and will serve to strengthen Russian-American relations."

Robert F. Vagapov, Deputy Minister of International Relations and Trade of the Republic of Bashkortostan, who was hosted by U.S. Representative Sue Myrick in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C., poetically echoed his fellow countryman's sentiments:

"The Leadership Program is a large stone tossed into the water issuing forth large ripples. We will hope that these ripples will play an important role in the future in bringing two of the largest countries in the world, Russia and the U.S., closer together."

As expressed by Nikolai E. Shubich, Deputy Chairman of the Government of the Republic of Severnaya Osetia-Alania, who was hosted by U.S. Representative Martin Frost in Texas and Washington, D.C., the RLP participants gained an understanding that the U.S. does not wish them ill, but on the contrary:

"Strong, prosperous America, in private and official conversations, speaks in a single voice: 'We share an interest in a Russia that is robust, that won't disintegrate, that will consolidate friendly relations with America.'"

Statements such as these demonstrate that many misunderstandings were eradicated and the anti-American sentiment which had been growing among Russians in the past couple of years, most notably over the expansion of NATO and the Yugoslav war, was greatly diminished as a result of their firsthand experiences of the U.S. and the American people.

Russian participants also were inspired by the U.S.'s economic prosperity and social well-being to begin working harder and harder to improve their own circumstances, as illustrated with a mixture of playfulness and seriousness by the words of Aleksandr Ermoshin, Administrative Head of the Aleksin Regional Center in Tula Oblast. Ermoshin calls on his fellow countrymen to at least begin the work of "catching up" with America:

"When I first arrived and explained to my comrades in arms [American hosts] how far ahead of us they were, and somewhat jokingly added that, even if they were to stand still, it would take us about 150 years to catch up with them in all these areas [economic, social benefits, etc.]. So let's get moving [my fellow countrymen] and accomplish 1/150th [of catching up] this year, and next year, 1/130th -- that is, work in an accelerated fashion. Only then will we move ahead." *[Interviewed in the last segment of "America in the Eyes of Russians," a Russian TV series about the RLP.]*

The American hosts, including members of Congress, gave convincing testament as well to the gain in mutual understanding and their commitment to the goals of the RLP.

U.S. Representative Ron Kind (D-Wisconsin), who hosted a delegation in his district, expressed such sentiments on the floor of the House:

"Perhaps the greatest thing I learned is how similar are our goals and dreams for our countries, our communities, and our families. I applaud the members of the Russian

delegation that visited my district for their dedication and loyalty to their nation...I submit that we have a duty, not only as legislators, but as Americans and as citizens of the world to help our Russian friends at this critical time in their history."

Edgar C. Hatcher, a Rotary International host in Bristol, Virginia, echoed those feelings:

"The Russians have come and gone and some of us will never be the same again. I firmly believe we have made a decided difference in amending their perception of America and its democratic principles. The impact their visit made on all of us has left us with a deep sense of gratitude for this opportunity."

Jane Elliott, who hosted with the assistance of Meridian International/NCIV in Los Angeles, emphasized the importance of the contacts that are made:

"The program established contacts between Russian elected officials [of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic] and Los Angeles County business, government and civic leaders that would not have otherwise been realized. The Russian participants and the local volunteers had positive experiences with their meetings. This was possible because we arranged relevant professional appointments and the participants were open in sharing their own situations and in gaining as much information as possible from each appointment."

Dan Clancy, a host with Friendship Force, Atlanta, Georgia, recalled in a highly moving vein:

"The program at Stone Mountain Park concluded with fireworks and a rousing rendition of the National Anthem. Nastia and Yelena told us that they got goose bumps at that point. They said that they want to feel that way about their country and that what they were experiencing here would help them go home and bring about the kind of changes that would allow all Russians to feel such patriotism. I can't think of a better tribute to the Russian Leadership Program than this observation from our guests."

Dr. Billington himself concludes enthusiastically:

"These and many testimonials that may be found on the website echo the overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic assessments of members of Congress, hosts, and participants alike. They greatly inspire the Library of Congress and its partners to achieve an even more successful experience with Open World 2000."

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