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Dr. Jim Butterfield
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Saratov

Post-Cold War Russia has provided WMU political science professor Dr. Jim Butterfield with an exceptional model for conducting research on transition environments and the role civic initiative plays in defining the public agenda and addressing collective action dilemmas.

With a Fulbright joint research and teaching grant secured for the 2009-2010 academic year, Butterfield took a sabbatical to continue conducting research about the opportunities and challenges small businesses face in southern Russia—a research interest sparked more than 20 years ago when he was a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame. He also taught comparative politics at Saratov State University, which was his No. 1 destination choice to conduct his research and teach because of the relationship he helped WMU forge with the Russian university in the mid-90s.
“The country was somewhat of an enigma to us during the Cold War, and my gut instincts in college were that our demonizing of the Soviet Union was probably based as much in ignorance as in meaningful assessments of what it was about,” Butterfield said. “The near knee-jerk distrust was equally shared by both sides, something I discovered firsthand as a graduate student doing field research.”

As an undergraduate at Indiana University, Butterfield began studying the Russian language and continued as a graduate student at Notre Dame. Learning the language helped him receive an International Research and Exchanges Board grant for 1986-87—the only way to conduct field research in the Soviet Union at the time because of the country’s restrictions limiting scholarly exchanges.

“In 1986, at the beginning of the perestroika era, it was apparent that the Soviet Union was attempting to change,” he said. “Gorbachev was new in his position and was testing his ideas of glasnost, perestroika, and by 1987, competitive politics. I'm generally interested in transition environments and the role civic initiative plays in defining the public agenda and addressing collective action dilemmas. In the time I've been studying this society, it has gone through the reform era of perestroika, the collapse of communism and the Soviet bloc, the turbulent 90s of democratization and marketization, and the last decade of capitalist consolidation and simultaneous democratic decline. It's always a moving target. This is what makes transition environments so fascinating: the institutional flux, the high level of uncertainty, and the corresponding high potential—either for things to work out well or to work out very badly.”

Butterfield said civic initiative in Russia has been weak since the economic turmoil of the 1990s and the decline of democratic institutions over the last decade has weakened it further. However, he said there are business associations in the small and medium enterprise sector that work to represent the interests of small businesses in reducing red-tape, fighting predatory practices among local and regional officials, and advocating for policies that promote small business
development. These associations appear to counter the trend of weakened civic initiative, and Butterfield’s research is investigating exactly what kind of relationship the associations are forging with local authorities.

“My research is a combination of a review of federal and local legislation regarding small business development and interviews with leaders of business associations and members of the provincial legislature and government,” said Butterfield, a WMU political science professor since 1988. “The Russian small and medium enterprise sector has the potential to employ over half of the Russian population and contribute substantially to gross domestic product. As it stands now, the sector contributes roughly the same as the oil and gas sector, to the surprise of many. Yet the potential for growth is still far from exhausted. The main obstacles are clumsy processes, difficulties in acquiring locations and property and predatory practices by local and regional officials.”

He noted Saratov as a perfect place to conduct his research because in many ways it’s a typical Russian region with all the promise and problems one finds across modern Russia. With its government in the hands of the ruling party, Saratov is under pressure to both promote development and fight corruption—two policies of the federal government—yet the city’s leaders are part of the patronage network that underpins much of country’s corruption. The patronage network constricts fair practices, reduces competition and sponsors the granting of fraudulent government contracts.

“There is democratic formalism here, yet loads of evidence that the democratic processes are corrupted and dysfunctional,” he said. “It makes for an interesting environment to study public advocacy and interest-group lobbying.”
In a country like Russia, some might think it would be difficult to poke and prod officials and academics about corruption. To the contrary, Butterfield says that corruption is a major focal point of the associations and that there is a surprising amount of cooperation between them and some government agencies.

“Everyone is quite willing to talk,” he said. “The riddle of how better to promote small and medium enterprise development is one that many in Russia are wrestling with, so it's a topic they are generally very willing to talk about. Many of the association leaders have been on study trips to the United States, where they've met leaders of chambers of commerce and specialists on small-business development, so interacting with an American researcher is something most are comfortable with. Some are a little surprised that a Russian-speaking American has come all this way to learn about developments in provincial Russia, but that leads them to be even more cooperative. American academics have been poking around post-Soviet Russia for nearly two decades now, and the novelty for their Russian counterparts has worn off in many cases. Some scholars have found it a challenge to get time with officials and even other academics. But it hasn't been a problem for me.”

Butterfield’s primary research focus is to understand how the local environment restricts and permits associations and businesses to react in a limited democracy. He is not in any way trying to influence his research environments.

“I'll certainly share my findings with Russian specialists with whom I'm working, but I am not in a position to influence the environment here,” he said. “I'm interacting with business leaders who are trying to do just that.”

Teaching

When Butterfield wasn’t researching small-business associations, he was teaching a semester of comparative politics to fourth-year students at Saratov State University. The class covered democratization, including transitions to and consolidation of democracy, nationalism and ethnicity. This is the first time since Butterfield began conducting research in Russia that he’s had the opportunity to simultaneously interact extensively with Russian students.
"One of the most interesting and enjoyable aspects of my sabbatical in Russia was the opportunity to get to know Russian students,” he said. “They are very similar to students at WMU. Some have a clear idea of their career interests, some don't; some are highly motivated, some significantly less so; some are highly intelligent, while others are above average; some work to put themselves through college, while others do not; some participate freely in class, while others are more introverted. They all share the same intellectual curiosity and excitement about the future that students exhibit everywhere.”

One significant difference he has noted, however, is that the students are all the same age. They entered college together and take the same courses lockstep with one another throughout their program. There are no non-traditional students or “super-seniors”.

“I'm also giving presentations at the invitation of one or another department,” he said. “I've given lectures on American government, the American system of higher education, graduate education in the United States, environmental policy and alternative energy technologies, and a comparison of U.S. and Soviet societies in the 1950s and 1960s. I was also invited to give a paper as part of a one-day conference in the regional legislature on principles of justice and constitutional law. At the invitation of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences, I spent a week in Tajikistan as well, giving lectures on American foreign policy, transitions to democracy, recent reforms in Russian history education in schools, and American graduate education.”

At WMU, Butterfield has also served as associate director of the Haenicke Institute for Global Education from 2000-2003 and chair of the International Education Council of the Faculty Senate from 2003-2007.

Visit Dr. Butterfield’s website: http://homepages.wmich.edu/~butterfi/

WMU offers study abroad programs in Russia at Saratov State University in the fall, spring and summer II. Fields of study include Russian language and culture. http://international.wmich.edu/content/view/754/356*42