

# Why Russia could become a place for American students to study

Almost 300,000 U.S. students went to study abroad in 2013, but Russia is still one of the least popular destinations.

BY ALEXANDER ABASHKIN

I wanted to spend a year abroad and improve my Russian language skills,” says Jennifer Rolfes, who graduated from Harvard in 2014 and is currently studying in the Change Management master’s program at the School of Public Policy of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA).

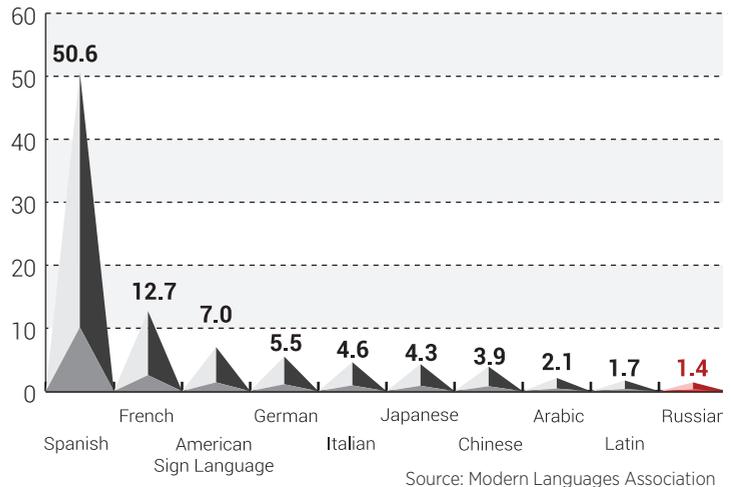
There are very few young Americans like Jennifer. Although outbound international student mobility is growing and almost 300,000 American students went to study abroad in 2013, Russia is one of the least popular destinations, and worsening U.S.-Russian relations might further impair its attractiveness.

“My family and friends were very concerned about me going to Russia,” Jennifer continues. “A lot of that has to do with the fact that Americans do not have a good idea of the geography of this country, and they are concerned about the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border, but it is hours from here.”

“Undoubtedly the coverage of the Ukrainian situation in the American mass media complicates our work,” says Alexander Ruchkin, director of Grint, a private educational institution that has been offering Russian language and culture classes to international students since 1996. “Just today, I received a call from a concerned father of a U.S. student who asked me to comment on some footage from Moscow he saw on American TV. He was worried about his daughter’s safety.”

Grint mostly brings students here from American state universities. In previous years, about 200 students regularly attended its language courses that last from four to 12 weeks from universities such as University of Arizona, University of Virginia, and Truman State Uni-

**Russian in Top 10 languages learned in the U.S. in 2013**  
by percentage of total language course enrollments



**1,562**

**Americans studied in Russia in the 2012/13 academic year. (Institute of International Education)**

versity. However, this year their number has decreased to about a 100. But even this is a very impressive number for a Russian educational institution.

And Grint is probably one of the leaders in this respect. Take for example, a much bigger Russian institution, Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia, which is proud of having 29,000 students from 140 countries. The university offers 20 Master’s degree programs in English in disciplines such as Innovation Management, Oil and Gas Management, International Marketing, and International Private Law.

However, according to the deputy director of the Department of Northern and Latin America, Gabrielle Mashlyak, only seven students from the U.S. are currently enrolled at the university. They take courses at the Preparatory department intending to continue studies at the Department of Philology. The University seeks to expand cooperation with U.S. universities through built-in exchange programs, but such programs require a lot of mutual trust, which is often missing these days.

Building mutual trust takes time. “We started sending students to RANEPA in 2007. Only six students came on that first summer program,” says Dr. Anthony Brown, associate professor in the Department of German and Russian at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah. “Since that time, the program has ex-

panded to winter, spring-summer, and fall semesters. Our collaboration with this Academy has been one of the finest collaborations that we've had in years."

RANEPA offers American students an interesting combination of language classes and academic internships. They spend mornings in the classroom brushing up on their language skills, and in the afternoon they work as interns in banks, museums, research organizations, law firms and many other types of organizations.

"These days having an internship is increasingly important for American students and having it in one of the world capitals is hugely attractive to our students," Dr. Brown says.

Unfortunately, this kind of an arrangement can hardly be provided by regional Russian universities, which are also trying to lure foreign students to come to study Russian. It is much more difficult to find relevant internships in a town far from Moscow or St. Petersburg. The unemployment rate in many of them is increasing, and the idea of offering a job, even if a temporary one, to U.S. students does not enthruse local employers.

Moreover, the attitude towards American citizens in Russian provinces is more ambiguous than in the capital. Russian mass media contributes to the creation of a negative image of the United States among Russians.

As Rolfes describes, "In Moscow there are a lot of Americans and Europeans. So, I have not actually seen any anti-Americanism in Moscow, but I went out to Rybinsk for a skiing competition, and there I would ask a normally polite question, and the responses from local people were not very polite."

It is true, though, that local universities in Ryazan, Yaroslavl or Samara have one important advantage: They charge U.S. students much lower tuition fees than their competitors in Moscow or St. Petersburg do. St. Petersburg has always been considered the cultural capital of Russia and it attracts multitudes of foreign students, including Americans. The opportunity to study art in the galleries of the Hermitage or the Russian Museum, and to learn about the works of Dostoevsky or Brodsky wandering the streets where they lived cannot fail to fascinate.

A good opportunity for Americans to study in this city is by enrolling at Smolny College (the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of St. Petersburg State University), which works in close collaboration with Bard College in New York state. According to Marina Kalashnikova, associate professor of the College, each semester, 20 to 30 U.S. students enroll at Smolny through the academic exchange program. They can get up to 18 credits of Russian language and a number of elective courses from a long list that is available for both Russian and



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American students.

Some other prominent Russian higher education institutions, though, do not want to rely on language studies to bring in more foreign students. One of them is the Higher School of Economics (HSE) which offers 17 master's programs in English, in the areas of International Relations, Sociology, International Business, Computer Science, and Big Data Systems. There are 105 students enrolled from countries that are not part of the former Soviet Union, but only 16 of them are Americans.

Prof. Maxim Bratersky of HSE, who for many years has been involved in international education programs says, "So far, relatively few American students have been coming to Russia mostly because they do not know about new opportunities and the low tuition – a change brought about as a result of the ruble devaluation. Russia was traditionally viewed as a place to study only such subjects as ballet, theater, literature, but never as a place to go to for regular master's studies. Now these opportunities are appearing, and U.S. students may very well take advantage of them. Politics is not an issue in this regard," he believes.

Only time will tell if this is true or not. It is impossible to say how the political tensions between Russia and the United States that are reminiscent of the Cold War will affect higher education exchanges. According to Dr. Brown of BYU, he is currently looking at 24 students going to RANEPA this summer, and is also expecting the biggest ever fall group—fourteen students. "I do not think this is directly related to the political situation," Dr. Brown says, "although oftentimes the Cold War rhetoric has increased interest in all things Russian. But I would not say it is solely connected to the political situation, it is probably because our students see the value of going to Russia."