

## Limán Fellowship Report: Summer 2008

Ryan Ebanks

Founded at Columbia University in 1997 and now headquartered in Budapest, Hungary, the Public Interest Law Institute was created to advance human rights around the world by stimulating public interest advocacy and developing the institutions necessary to sustain it. PILI pursues this mission by building the capacity of civil society organizations and leaders, by providing technical assistance on reforming legal aid systems and legal education, and by promoting pro bono legal practice globally. In addition to its Budapest headquarters, PILI conducts its work from hubs in New York, Moscow, Belgrade and Beijing. With support from the Ford Foundation, PILI formally established its Russia office in 2007. This summer, I worked as an intern working out of the New York office, but under the auspices of PILI's newly founded Moscow office—which has been growing steadily, but needs support and recognition from Western institutions, while simultaneously struggling against Russians' suspicion toward foreign NGOs.

Since October 2007, the PILI Moscow office, in cooperation with its headquarters in Budapest, has been facilitating relationships between NGOs and law firms represented in Russia, and promoting their collaboration. With volunteer assistance from the International Senior Lawyers Project (ISLP), PILI launched the eminently successful Russian Pro Bono Clearinghouse. PILI has had an unofficial presence in Russia since the early 2000s, during which time it focused on increasing legal aid norms in Russia—norms that are often taken for granted in America. As an intern working primarily for the Moscow office, I assisted the office on logistical aspects of both its legal aid and pro bono clearinghouse programs. The theme overarching my work was increasing visibility in the

West of PILI Russia and its goals, and I pursued that goal through several different strategies.

The first step I took to help increase the profile of the Russian office was to scour its English-language documentation and overhaul the style and content into something comprehensible and interesting. A common problem for native Russian publications seeking recognition in the English-speaking world is that even professional English translation services in Russia are insufficient, translating well-formed, delicate Russian compositions into perplexing English-language monstrosities. Because the two languages are grammatically far off, Russian-native translators won't do. I edited several texts – from quarterly publications to website copy to informational pamphlets – using my knowledge of the language to refer back to the original Russian when necessary, and utilizing my native knowledge of English to polish the already-translated texts. I also recommended a different translation system for the future, since the current translation system does not have been effective in producing understandable documents that would appeal to an English-language scholar or policymaker.

The Russian office was also able to benefit from our cultural differences in another way; given my familiarity with international and western NGOs, I was able to compile a list of over 100 as of yet untapped NGOs that might be of interest to the pro bono clearinghouse. (The clearinghouse has, perhaps counterintuitively, benefited from a surging number of law firms eager to do pro bono work, but has been held back by a dearth of NGOs to match them with.) I also researched current American and international best practices for legal aid programs at the NYU library and discussed American legal aid practices with the Russian office staff, which was primarily focused on European legal models, such as that in the Netherlands.

Finally, as the summer waned and the Russian staff went on vacation, my responsibilities shifted to the American side of PILI. Working under the auspices of

PILI's development coordinator Lauren Cotton, I used the knowledge of the Russian office that I had built throughout the summer to draft a grant proposal applying for additional foundation funding for the Russian office. I also drafted and updated several quarterly Moscow office reports, which PILI routinely submits to its sponsors. Additionally, I did background research on several individuals who PILI was eyeing as prospective individual donors. Finally, I used my Excel knowledge to reorganize and flesh out PILI's massive database of contacts from around the world, enabling PILI to more easily contact its alumni and friends with news and donation requests.

PILI gave me substantial leeway to pursue the projects I was most interested in, and to have both a challenging and rewarding experience over the summer. Ultimately, by serving in the role of a consultant, as it were, I hope that I have effected a difference in the ways that PILI's Russian branch reaches out to the Western world, blending Russian and Western institutions together—a connection which, given the strain between Russia and the West in the present day, I feel is eminently valuable.

As for myself, upon graduation this upcoming year I plan to continue my work with public interest law, and I hope to continue my work with Russian civil society organizations. PILI gave me a great taste of what it is like to work at a well organized, well funded NGO, and my experience will keep me in the non-profit sector for the foreseeable future. Eventually, after gaining some real-world experience, perhaps abroad, I plan on returning to America for law school.

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