Fordham Students Travel to Ukraine to Investigate Youth and Politics

The first thing that the students in Youth and Politics had to learn as their plane touched down in Kyiv, Ukraine was flexibility.

“We flew into the wrong airport,” said Rose Hill senior Peter Heintz about their diverted flight. Heavy fog had forced the plane to land in Kyiv, which meant the group had to then travel seven hours by bus to Lviv, their destination. “It was the first insight into a post-communist transitional state—that not everything works 100 percent, and you have to be flexible in your scheduling [on account of] the basic infrastructure and road systems.”

Once settled in Lviv, the students turned their attention to their objective—to study how political attitudes and behaviors differ between American youth and Ukrainian youth.

The interdisciplinary capstone course, taught by assistant professor of political science Olena Nikolayenko, Ph.D., explores the political participation of young people in non-democracies. During Fordham’s spring break, Nikolayenko and her 11 students traveled to Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU)—with which Fordham has an academic partnership—to interview Ukrainian students about their stances on their country’s politics.
“The political situation is quite different there,” said Nikolayenko, a native of Ukraine. “Ukraine is still struggling to shake off the communist legacy. So there is a high incidence of corruption and electoral fraud, which makes it more challenging for young people to effectively participate in politics and to affect policy-making processes.”

Heintz, a political science major, said his Ukrainian peers are cognizant of widespread corruption in the government, but they commit nonetheless to making themselves heard.

“Theyir vote counts for much less than ours do,” said Heintz, who will present his research findings at the Undergraduate Research Symposium this spring. “But they said that if they don’t vote, then they can’t complain about the government, because they didn’t take responsibility and try to do something about it.

“A lot of them also said that if they don’t vote, [and have their name recorded as having voted], then the government will take their [unused vote] and count it toward [its preferred candidate.]”

He also found that Ukrainian students, unlike their American counterparts, tend to look for political news on the Internet, since they cannot rely on television or newspapers, which are government-controlled.

“Sometimes I take it for granted that we live in a country where things run on time, and the government is actually voted in by us,” he said, reflecting on the trip. “It made me take a step back and appreciate that.”

When they weren’t conducting research, the students attended lectures given by UCU faculty, including Yurii Logush, Ph.D., former associate professor at Fordham’s Graduate School of Business Administration, now vice rector of UCU.

The class also visited several cultural sites, such as the Lviv Art Gallery, the Museum on Lanskogo Street—a former Soviet jail for political prisoners—and the National Theater of Opera and Ballet, where the class attended a performance of Swan Lake.

Seeing these sites firsthand, as well as directly interacting with their Ukrainian peers, was an invaluable learning experience for the students, Nikolayenko said.

“You can read about Ukrainian politics and society in a book or a newspaper article, but students can gain a much a deeper understanding of what it’s like to live in such a society when they interact with the people face-to-face,” she said.

“Social media is breaking down barriers, but still, walking through the city streets and talking to students gives the Fordham students a completely different perspective on what it’s like to live in another country. And I also think it helps them appreciate better all the political freedom that they enjoy in the
policies that have overwhelming support and for which there are few antecedents in their lifetime, mast movements do...

—— Joanna Klimaski

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