N E W S   R E L E A S E

Wilfrid Laurier University

Laurier students will undertake governance projects in Russia

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WATERLOO – Four Laurier students will spend four months in Russia's fourth largest city developing a good understanding of the region's governance challenges – and helping to search for solutions. They will arrive in Russia on September 13.

The students are participating in a project, funded by the Canada Corps University Partnership Program (CCUPP), to promote and develop governance strategies in Ekaterinburg, Russia. During their four specific project placements, they will help develop regional political entities and advocacy groups that encourage government accountability.

"We want to educate our undergraduate students to become future Canadian leaders in governance at a global level," says Len Friesen, co-ordinator of the project and a specialist in Russian history. "This team project provides a timely opportunity for us to contribute to the ongoing development of democratic and civil sensibilities within Russia. These internships will make a significant contribution by focusing on governance within projects which combine short-term goals within a sound long-term strategy."

Governance is recognized as central to any political economy because it deals with the institutions, processes and relationships necessary for societal progression. Governance is also increasingly understood to be a central part of sustainable development and poverty reduction.

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The students' fieldwork will involve assessing the challenges and successes faced by civil society within the Ural Region of Siberia, especially in the capital city of Ekaterinburg. Details of the anticipated placements are still being finalized with Laurier's Russian partner, the Institute of Regional Policy in the Ural Region of Siberia, and are subject to change. They currently involve:

- Working with the emerging Women's Association of Ekaterinburg to better address advocacy issues relating to significant increases in urban poverty over the past decade.
- Helping various youth centres with issues of AIDS awareness.
- Assisting the mayor of Polevskoi (a nearby community) in the formation of parent-teacher councils within schools, based on models from Ontario that encourage educational accountability.
- Working with the growing student council at Ural State University, particularly to establish accountability mechanisms and transparent electoral processes.

As currently planned, the project will form the basis of new partnerships between Ekaterinburg's school councils and the Waterloo Region Board of Education; the Ekaterinburg AIDS Hospice and the Hospice of Waterloo Region; and Waterloo Region government officials and their counterparts in Ekaterinburg's regional Duma (or government).

Pre-departure training for the project began in May at Laurier. When the students arrive in Ekaterinburg, they will receive three to four weeks of further intensive language instruction and will be assigned to student mentors.

"Travelling abroad, especially to a country like Russia that looms so large in history, represents a tremendous opportunity for learning," said Meghan Snider, one of the student participants. "The experience of living there will add some nuance to the concept of Russia that I've gained in the classroom, which will only be an asset in my future academic pursuits."

The three other students participating are Christina Woolner, Christian Mahlstedt and Joey Raso. After returning to Canada, they will share their experiences through presentations in the classroom and the community.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) manages CCUPP, which is supported by a $2 million contribution from the federal government's Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). For more information on CCUPP, visit http://www.aucc.ca/programs/intprograms/canadacorps_e.html.

– 30 –