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Key Russia Program Axed Amid U.S. Government Cuts

By Matthew Bodner

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U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul **Maxim Stulov**

Correction appended

WASHINGTON — Worries have erupted that the U.S. is not giving proper attention to the development of its next generation of post-Soviet experts after the Department of State decided to withhold funding for its Title VIII grant program for the 2013 fiscal year.

It was a budget-cutting move roundly denounced by James Collins, a former ambassador to Russia, as well as a host of other Russia experts.

"I sincerely hope that sanity will prevail," Collins said in an interview.

The program, otherwise known as the Program for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union, has labored for 30 years to provide

policymakers with "independently verified" and "factual knowledge" of the history, politics, languages and cultures of the post-Soviet states, according to the bill that established the program.

In this regard, Title VIII has been remarkably successful. "It has been the lifeline ... the source of our expertise" on the region, said Collins, director of the Russian and Eurasia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Stephen Hanson, vice provost for international affairs at the College of William and Mary and a recipient of Title VIII support, said the success of the program could not be overstated. "A remarkable percentage of contemporary specialists have received Title VIII support as some point in their careers," he said. The list of program alumni includes current U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul and former Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Madeline Albright.

The bill that established the program, the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, declares that Congress considers these efforts to be "of the utmost importance for the national security of the U.S." The program's budget amounted to an estimated $3.5 million last year.

A spokesman for the Department of State, which is charged with the authority to administer the program, said the department last month found itself unable to fund all its programs amid a Congress-led drive to reduce government spending. Title VIII did not make the cut, although the state department will continue to "support engagement between students and academic scholars specializing in the region," said the spokesman, speaking on customary condition of anonymity.

But such assurances are doing little to calm the jitters of people like Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia’s security services and a professor at New York University. Galeotti said the program's demise represents "a creeping rise of the cult of 'fungibility'" in government circles, where officials believe "that so long as you have smart and well-trained people, they can be trained up to address whatever needs you may have: Syria today, China tomorrow."

This point places the Title VIII decision in a puzzling light, because the program also funds briefings and training for embassy staff before shipping them out on assignments to the region. Without a dedicated, well-developed cadre of experts, it will be increasingly difficult to find the expertise needed to prepare the nomadic diplomatic staff and desk officers, which Galeotti asserts "work best when they are backed by an invisible but essential team of genuine subject-matter experts."

This is a problem considering that, even with the highly qualified field of experts currently available, "U.S. policy towards Russia can hardly be said to be either especially successful or grounded in a particularly strong understanding of Russia, its leaders and its political system," Galeotti said.

The reigning cadre of post-Soviet experts is generally comprised of veterans, and the ranks will soon need replenishing.

Collins, the former ambassador, praised Title VIII for giving "the emerging and younger

research community focused on that part of the world the ability to do field work, perfect their language skills and basically to gain firsthand understanding of the culture."

"It is not a one-time project," he said, adding that a failure to invest properly in supporting new experts "is going to be in the long-term a source of weakness in our policymaking, education system, and the public's understanding of a part of the world in which we have an important relationship."

Perhaps the most remarkable consideration comes from a recent poll conducted by Hanson and his colleagues at William and Mary. The poll, which sought to shed light on which types of academic research policymakers find most useful, found that area studies — the kind of research fostered by Title VIII — ranked highest. Contemporary case studies, historical case studies, and policy analysis were ranked second, third, and fourth, respectively. By and large, policymakers have yet to find much value in theoretical, model-based research.

Because Title VIII funding is disbursed annually, a number of programs will be able to continue with funding left over from past years. However, the decision to withhold funding has left a number of graduate and Ph.D students such as Kaitlyn Tucker, who is working on a dissertation on South Slavic intellectual history at the University of Chicago, in a state of limbo. "Immediately, most graduate students are trying to figure out what other grants exist," Tucker said.

Without Title VIII, it will be difficult for many of these students to find funding dedicated and tailored to the regions and topics that their research is focused on.

The effects that this will have on graduate students will be detrimental in other ways if Title VIII funding is not restored next year. The language training that they receive through Title VIII is often called upon to assist in teaching these languages to undergraduates.

The question of Title VIII funding affects even research centers such as the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami University, which are supported by private endowments. "This is short-sighted behavior in the extreme," said the Havighurst Center's director, Karen Dawisha.

Although the center's core funding is not affected by Title VIII, the deleterious effects to the post-Soviet field will certainly be felt. Havighurst post-doctorate students often receive funding from the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, while the students also have gone on trips organized by ACTR and IREX, and their faculty have benefited from Title VIII funds distributed through the University of Illinois' summer research program. In addition, many Havighurst students have received training from Indiana University's intensive-language program.

"But more importantly," Dawisha said, "the U.S. government will not be able to hire students with the level of proficiency in Russian required to do the job they need to do."

In recent years, the U.S. has increasingly neglected efforts to independently collect knowledge of the regions in which it faces the greatest challenges, Russia experts said. The WikiLeaks diplomatic cables, for example, revealed that the Department of State has increasingly relied on English-speaking Russians, said Sean Guillory, post-doctoral fellow in the Center

for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, and the author of Sean's Russia Blog.

Reliance on English-speaking locals is not unique to U.S. efforts in Russia, but a pattern that has been replicated globally.

Guillory also pointed to an increased reliance on technology. The extreme case in which the pitfalls of this approach are most evident is the so-called war on terror, which Guillory criticized as being "done on the cheap," with the U.S. deploying troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq "without knowing too much about the complexities of the region."

No one anticipates a day in which U.S. boots march through Red Square. But the dangers of misinformed policy toward Russia are very real, Russia experts warn. One particularly complex and volatile aspect of Russia's domestic situation — rising ethnic tensions across the nation — has come into alarming focus in recent weeks with the riots in Moscow's Biryulyovo district. This incident highlights what Guillory described as "the ethnic and confessional complexity of the region," and programs like Title VIII are important if the U.S. is to correctly interpret, appropriately react, and competently craft future policy in the region. "Only now are more and more scholars dealing with ethnic issues," Guillory said.

Collins echoed this sentiment. "At a time when Americans need to have a global perspective, it makes absolutely no sense to be withdrawing funding," he said.

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly said students from the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami University had received training from the University of Illinois' intensive-language program. It was, in fact, Indiana University's program.

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