

Final Report: Sustainability Volunteer Swap at St. Petersburg State
University, Russia (SPbU)
“Societal Transformation to Sustainability”
18th – 26th September 2018

SUSTAIN IT!:

Regina Aulenbach, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s history/philosophy

Kathrin Henße, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s social sciences and politics

Friederike Feindt, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s social sciences and politics

Carolin Bergmann, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, master’s social sciences and politics

1. PURPOSE

SUSTAIN IT! is an interdisciplinary initiative for sustainability and climate protection at Freie Universität Berlin, which serves as an interactive platform for discussing local and global questions of sustainability in the fields of politics, science, economics, administration, technology, society and education, and for implementing practical solutions.

Within the framework of the UAS scholarship, we aimed at developing and strengthening intercultural relations in the area of sustainability. The overall goal of our trip was to establish international networks – in particular liaisons with other students and student initiatives – within the realms of environment protection and societal approaches towards sustainability. This report will give a brief overview of our stay at St. Petersburg State University and the activities we conducted during our 9-day stay in St. Petersburg.

2. MAIN ACTIVITIES

Seminar: Sustainability at the University - many ideas to be shared



Prior to our travel to St. Petersburg, we got in touch with Nikolai Bobylev Ph. D. Associate Professor. He is the head of the master’s program in Environmental Management at the SPbU. We had met him during the FUB Campus Days in April and were given the opportunity to organize one of his seminars.

To start off, we held a presentation about the philosophy, objectives and projects of SUSTAIN IT! and FURad. The aim was to provide the students with an overview of the structure and goals of SUSTAIN IT! and FURad and how they interacted and underline some of our successful activities and projects we realized on the FUB campus. This also served as an inspiration to the students for possible own projects. The students showed great interest in our initiatives and activities and asked

many questions. Interesting to us was that the students had little experience in „hands on“ projects and mostly a more scientific and / or economic approach.

Nevertheless, inspired by our presentation, we brainstormed on different topics and issues students were concerned about and sustainable ideas and experiences in St. Petersburg and at the SPbU. The different topics such as ecological city management, community and education, environmental management and green economics were then used for a world café session where we could exchange ideas and experiences etc. and deepen our conversations.

This incentive initiated an interesting conversation where we gained great insight on the students concerns and perceptions of sustainability and sustainability issues in St. Petersburg. The students had many ideas that could be implemented and knew of different kind of projects that had been realized throughout the city. The world café and the outcome were also very helpful in our field study that we used as a foundation for our recycled exhibition.

All in all, we gained an interesting insight into the understanding of sustainability of the students and hope our approach made a positive impact. We are thankful to Bobylev's class for participating in our enriching discussions and for taking part in all our other projects the following days. Our thanks also go to Nikolai Bobylev for presenting us with this opportunity.

Travelling Art Lab

One of our main projects carried out at SPbU, was the interactive photo-booth event titled *“What does sustainability mean to you?”*. This art lab had already been executed in Beijing on Peking University's campus during a prior volunteer swap and on several occasions on Freie Universität's campus. SUSTAIN IT! has had a lot of positive experience with art labs in the past. For us, these events not only provide unique means of promoting sustainable lifestyles but also give opportunity to creating a direct dialogue with participants. Furthermore, they create an interactive space where participants can exchange ideas and experiences in a free and creative manner.

The idea of the activity is simple. We used a big picture frame we built out of black cardboard which had the question *“What does sustainability mean to you?”* written on it in English, Chinese and Russian. The question was held simple with the purpose to overcome language and cultural barriers and to gather a variety of answers from different areas of the

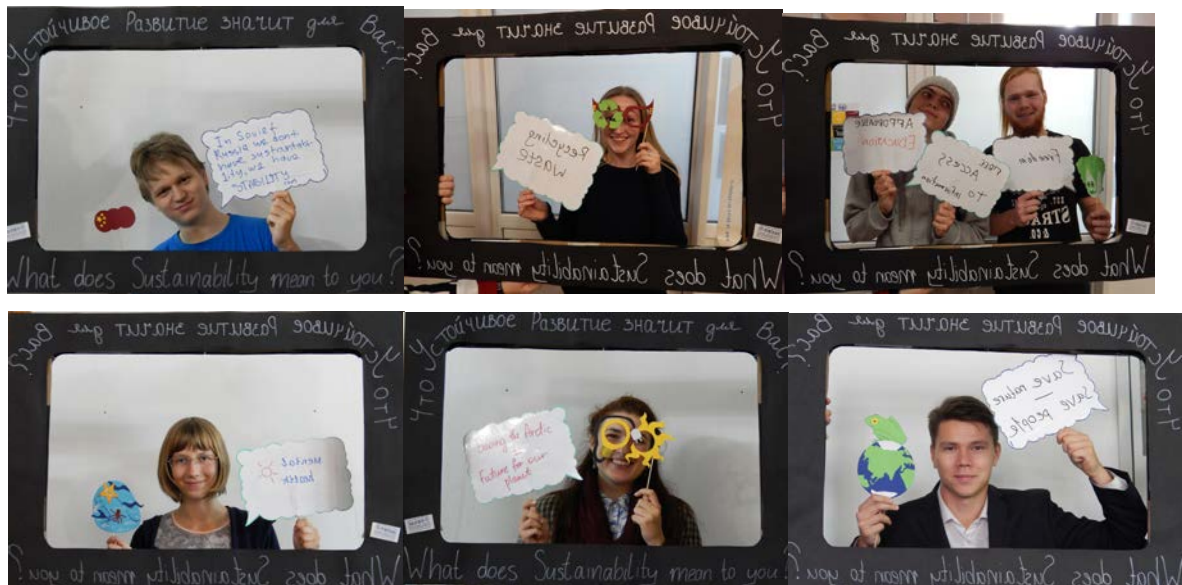


world. Nevertheless, our inquiry proved to be the cause of much pondering and musing in every culture. We also reused our handcrafted sustainability-themed props which participants could hold up when having their picture taken. In addition, participants were asked to write down what came into their minds when thinking about sustainability on reusable whiteboard speech bubbles provided by us. We created a Drop Box folder in which we uploaded the pictures and participants were able to scan a QR-Code to gain access to their favourite pictures.

The art lab was performed thrice during our stay in St. Petersburg. The main event took place in Peterhof, another campus of SPbU outside of St. Petersburg. Peterhof was an ideal location because the campus offers affordable student housing to students of every faculty which allowed us to engage with a lot of people with a variety of academic backgrounds and experiences. We arrived there after classes ended and set up in the entrance of a student apartment building. Therefore, there were a lot of casual visitors. We were very grateful to receive the help of Yaroslavna Ageyeva, a research fellow at the faculty of Earth and Environmental Sciences, who was so kind to accompany us to the remote location of Peterhof and to translate administrative issues and student's inquiries for us. Her

tremendous commitment resulted in many interested participants taking part in the art lab and in lively exchanges about the Russian perception of sustainability.

It was especially interesting to learn that there is no expression in Russian for “sustainability”. The word that comes closest to the meaning is the translation for “sustainable development”. However, the Russian translation for “sustainable development” is not an expression that is used widely outside its academic context. Once introduced to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals though, the participants came up with a variety of topics that were of importance for them. Nevertheless, waste separation and recycling were recurring themes that seemed to be of substantial significance to many. Despite the language barrier we were very happy with the high participation rate and the general outcome of the art lab. This project enabled us to rethink our extensive usage of the expression “sustainability” that we take almost for granted. We were also able to engage in interesting discussions about the differences and similarities in Russian and German understandings of various ecological, social, economic, and cultural issues.



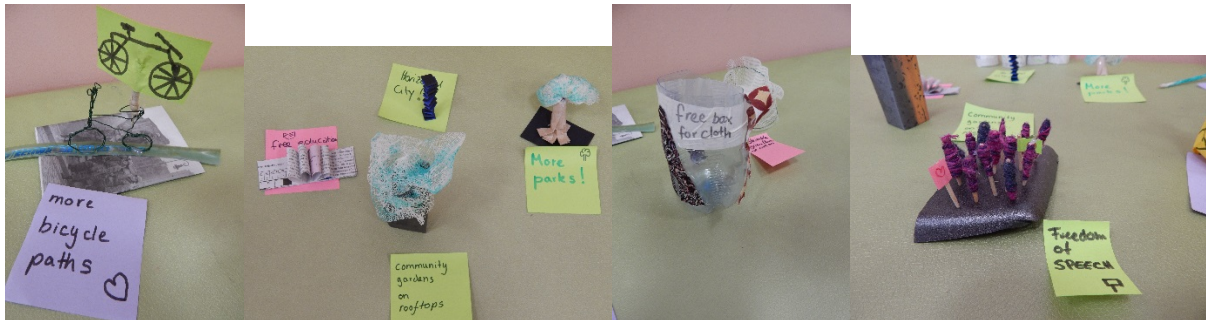
Recycling Exhibition - a sustainable city of dreams

Having made the positive experience that interactive exhibitions are a great basis for exchanging ideas, interacting and understanding each other’s backgrounds especially in international contexts where language barriers exist, and knowing of the great importance of waste separation and recycling students and university staff saw when talking about sustainability we decided to realize this interactive recycling exhibition. Our recycling exhibition was divided into three parts. A field study as a knowledge base, the preparation i.e. collection and providing of the material and the realization.



In our field study we talked to different students and academic staff about their ideas for a sustainable city of dreams and collected the information on posters. The ideas ranged from community and education, to mobility and waste management, drinkable tap water, urban gardening, environmental control and many more.

For our exhibition we arranged a big map of St. Petersburg and collected different kinds of garbage in the city and on campus. The map itself and the posters were hung up on a wall and students and staff had the opportunity to create new objects out of the old garbage. With each item created out of old garbage, a green city of dreams was created. The exhibition was a great basis for talking about upcycling possibilities, differences and similarities between Berlin and St. Petersburg and rethink ideas that are integrated into our daily lives in comparison to having to be newly developed in a city like St. Petersburg.



Meet Up with student waste separation group

The meeting with the Waste Separation Group “razdelnysbor inoz” at the Institute for Earth and Environmental Sciences was part of one of our networking activities.

In St. Petersburg and Russia in general, the waste is not used in a profitable and efficient way. Students told us that most of it just rots in a sanitary landfill. Therefore, garbage is a non-existent topic to discuss about. Except for some small initiatives which are trying to achieve a way to make separating, sorting and recycling a topic in the public, there is no real recycling movement.

Under these circumstances, the meet-up with this university group was very interesting. The team members we met were very open-minded and were keen to talk about similarities and differences. We were happy to present SUSTAIN IT's efforts to introduce a system for waste avoidance at student



housing and the waste separation game that was part of our Sustainability Days this summer. The students of the waste separation group can imagine some new developments, which can be implemented in the daily life of Russian students. The focus of the meeting was to bring people together and talk about difficulties. The aim is to empower citizens and primarily students to recycle, separate and reduce waste in their daily lives.

As their first step, they started an initiative with four different bins for separating garbage placed in front of their open space study hall.

3. FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Tour through the Botanical Garden

A both enjoyable and educational event in our stay was the guided tour through the botanical garden. Our thanks go both to its director, who kindly showed us around this wonderful green area and to Madina Kokanazova, former student of SPbU, who offered her help as a translator.

The garden consists of an outside area with mainly regional vegetation and several greenhouses where a big variety of plants from all over the world can be found.

Especially the outside area, compared to the botanical garden we knew from FU Berlin, seemed much more natural and less focused on classification and detailed inscription which made the experience of wandering through it very authentic. Since the climate of Saint Petersburg and Berlin is not very different there were many plants that we recognized.



Being shown around the greenhouses was an impressive experience in itself but the most interesting part were the stories connected to some of the plants. The fact that a plant found its place in the botanic garden of SPbU was often due to research trips of the director himself and scientific cooperation with international institutes even of the former GDR. This is the way in which the entanglement of history and botanical sciences showed in this place. Throughout the tour we realized that our guide used names for the plants that sounded very familiar to us and asking for the reason we found out that he had studied botany in the German city

Heidelberg. An interesting background information we got was that students of SPbU assist the staff in the gardening work, which we found to be a very inspiring model.

All in all, this tour was a wonderful way to get to know the flora of northwest Russia and to see a place where pedagogy in biology takes place in a very entertaining and fascinating way. Personally, we also appreciated the communication at eye level that we could have with the director of the botanical garden, and the personal and friendly way in which we were treated.

Conference: Environmental Responsibility and Marine Spatial Planning in the Arctic

While arriving at the St. Petersburg State University, Dr. Nikolay Bobylev invited us to the “Environmental Responsibility and Marine Spatial Planning in the arctic” conference with included workshops. The international scientists discussed about highly political topics like the fishing issues, the problem of recycling and waste in growing cities in the arctic. Bobylev pointed out that there is a high need of movement because of a lack of waste management systems in permafrost areas. In the past years many new inhabitants arrived without any governmental structures, leading to a mismanagement of using resources effectively. Further, the discussion was about protection zones for fish and the different views of environmental and species responsibility in conflict with the daily income of fishermen.

Representatives from different universities and states spoke about their studies and political views about the future of the arctic. The most interesting experience was the observation of the correlation between science and politics. Sometimes, the discussion was hard to follow because of intercultural misleading and misunderstandings.



4. OUTCOME

WHAT WE ARE TAKING WITH US:

All in all our stay in St. Petersburg was a unique and enriching experience in many different ways. Getting a deeper insight into the Russian perception of sustainability and talking to staff and students at the SPbU helped us make new contacts and broaden our horizon. We were able to get a small insight into the Russian culture and develop a better understanding for their perception on sustainability. Organizing a volunteer swap in a group we all were strongly involved in the preparation and implementation of our projects. We learned a lot about our individual talents that we could contribute to the group as a whole and improved our organization, creative and communication skills. It was the fact of sharing the workload and realizing the projects as a whole, away from home, as a team that strengthened our team spirit within SUSTAIN IT! and will definitely be of huge advantage for the realization of future projects in Berlin. The intercultural aspect has definitely already become part of SUSTAIN IT!'s projects and will continue so in the future. We have realized the ART LAB at the FUB during the Spring Campus Conference and will surely display the collection of different views on what sustainability means to different people around the world in a future exhibition, maybe even with the chance to involve more people. We will definitely be in touch with our inspiring contacts we made in St. Petersburg and hope to meet again in future projects.

INDIVIDUAL IMPRESSIONS

CAROLIN BERGMANN, responsible for art lab and logistics



Throughout the stay in St. Petersburg I was able to improve my intercultural and communication skills. I was especially fascinated to experience how well received our art projects were and how those interactive projects worked, despite a sometimes-insurmountable language barrier. I was enlightened to witness how art can be used as a nonverbal communication medium.

Furthermore, I was impressed by how passionate students at SPbU were to initiate a waste separation and recycling system at their university. The topic seemed to be of great general interest since it came up in numerous conversations with Russian students.

In addition, the time at St. Petersburg was a great opportunity for us as SUSTAIN IT! members to strengthen our team spirit and get to know each other better on a personal level. I think the exchange gave us many impulses for new events we will hold at FUB in the future.

Despite our various activities at the campus, there still was a little time left for exploring the city and visit some of the many cultural attractions. I enjoyed walking through the historic district and being awed by the architectural highlights that await one behind every corner.

In conclusion I can say that this exchange was truly enriching, and I am grateful to having been offered the opportunity to participate in the Sustainability Volunteer Swap offered by the UAS and for all those great experiences I was able to make because of this.

KATHRIN HENSSE, responsible for the seminar and preparation of recycling exhibition



Our stay in St. Petersburg was a very unique and fascinating experience for me and the others. I learned a lot about the impact language and cultural background can have when talking about sustainability and was delighted to see how in spite of language barriers, nonverbal communicational approaches could help overcome these barriers and enhance curiosity for unknown topics amongst students from other than environmental study backgrounds. I definitely improved my communication, organization and intercultural skills and was happy for the

opportunity to get to know the other SUSTAIN IT! members better on a personal level. Spending these days together, realizing different projects and overcoming one or the other obstacle definitely moved us closer together, inspired us in many different ways, and will help us realize new events in the future at the FUB.

The possibility alongside our activities on campus to have a little bit of time to explore the beautiful city of St. Petersburg and eat some “typical russian food” in a cantine with one of the fellow students from the SPbU added to the great experience of the exchange and I am very grateful for having had the opportunity to participate in the UAS Sustainable Volunteer Swap.

REGINA AULENBACH, responsible for communication and the tour through the botanical garden



This student exchange was a really unique opportunity for me to learn in many ways. Getting in touch with professors, students and other intellectuals at SPbU, thinking about possible joint projects and organizing the necessary bureaucratic support was a both demanding and motivating task. On the one hand I realized that international projects need very long-sighted and detailed preparation with a sensitivity for different structures and procedures - the help we got here especially from local students cannot be overestimated.

On the other hand, I was amazed about the ideas that developed and the many opportunities that opened up in cooperation with other environmental activists, especially because the SPbU offers a huge variety of projects in this field. Mainly in personal encounters I learned about differences and similarities in sustainability activism in Germany and in Russia. The arctic, for example, seems to be much more in the focus in the latter country while alternative means of transportation don't seem to play such a big role. Also, this exchange was a great chance to create some new contacts that might be useful in future international projects. Last but not least cooperating in a team of SUSTAIN IT members, creating a team spirit and combining our skills and motivations in a productive way was a beautiful and precious learning experience.

I personally and our initiative will definitely benefit from the impressions, gained practical knowledge and contacts we bring home from this trip to St. Petersburg. My thanks to for the financial and organizational support go to Katrin Risch and the UAS.

FRIEDERIKE FEINDT, responsible for networking with Russian initiatives



In the St Petersburg State University (SPbU), we were greeted with much hospitality and a warm welcome. The students were very open and interested in what we had to tell from our projects in Berlin and the Freie Universität Berlin. I personally think, the language barrier on both sides (we did not know Russian and many of them did not know effectual English) lead us to ways to explain our project and ourselves in very creative ways. Especially the female students were always to the fore to help in translating and connecting. This part of getting creative in expressing myself

is definitely one of the things I learned from this Volunteer Swap along many other things. I really hope to tighten my bonds with this very interesting Russian culture and hope very much to see more of the country and the people in Russia. The few students we became to know closer, who accompanied us to some events, were very interesting to talk to and for me, as a student of political science, politics was a very interesting topic. In those conversations, many of my prejudices were revealed as untrue. The intercultural differences and fine nuances were obvious in especially those conversations. This way, I really learned to distinguish such fine undertones even in uneasy spoken communication.

For my personal life and academic career, this stay was very special and changed many of my personal views. After returning to Berlin, I started a course of the Russian Language at the university and hope to come back to this big and diverse country soon.

I really hope to revive this project next year, being in the planning from the start and experiencing another culture and state. Many thanks from my side go to the UAS, without their funding I would have never been able to take part in such a project. Also, the organization and support we got from our new academic friends at SPbU was very great.