SURF Program Overview

The Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum (SURF) is a unique initiative that annually convenes top Russian and American students to explore areas for bilateral collaboration. These fellows engage in a year-long collaborative research project, culminating in a published research paper and accompanying deliverable, a practical implementation of their research. Annual research topics include traditional areas for cooperation such as arms control, as well as more non-traditional avenues including environmental policy and education. The SURF delegation features some of the brightest young scholars from both countries; our 42 fellows were chosen from more than 700 applicants representing 157 universities and 37 countries, resulting in a 6% acceptance rate.

In the face of deteriorating bilateral relations, the mission of SURF is to foster peer-to-peer dialogue, generate innovative mutually-beneficial solutions, and sustain cross-cultural connections amongst the next generation of leaders from the United States and Russia. SURF’s mission is deeply rooted in the long-standing Track II diplomatic efforts of former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry and former Secretary of State George Shultz, both long-time SURF supporters. Each year, SURF hosts week-long conferences in both the United States and Russia to allow the delegation to attend high-level consultative meetings, participate in cultural exchange, conduct research, and present policy proposals. This past year, SURF delegations were also invited to participate in numerous other conferences and provide the next generation's perspective on a variety of issues, such as at the Fort Ross Dialogue, the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, and the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

SURF was founded in 2008 by two American and two Russian undergraduates concerned about the state of relations between the United States and Russia. What started as a small one-day initiative has since grown immensely in scope, content, and impact. Rather than simply a platform that brought fellows together in Moscow and California, SURF now provides fellows with access to some of each countries’ most eminent scholars, top-level decision makers, and successful business leaders in Moscow, Tyumen, Tobolsk, Silicon Valley, and Washington D.C. Over the years, SURF fellows have met with and presented their research to: former and current US and Russian Ambassadors, most recently with Ambassadors Jon Huntsman and Anatoly Antonov; Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov; former California Governor Jerry Brown; former Tyumen Region Governor Vladimir Yakushev; former U.S. Secretaries of State George Shultz and Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Dr. William Perry, Representatives from both Russia’s State Duma and Federation Council and the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate; and numerous academic, scientific, and business leaders from both countries.

As one of the few strong and long-term channels of US-Russian communication and collaboration, SURF is uniquely positioned to capitalize on the potential of young scholars to drive positive change in the bilateral landscape. Moving forward, SURF hopes to continue working to promote peer-to-peer interactions and lay the foundation for stronger bilateral collaboration and dialogue between the United States and Russia.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, SURF’s 2020 fall Russia conference will be conducted virtually. Given that SURF’s multinational working groups already collaborate remotely in-between the fall and spring conferences, the program is uniquely positioned to adapt to the current situation. We will make every effort to ensure the conference experience is as rewarding as possible, subject to Stanford University guidance and approval. Contingent upon public health developments, we are planning in-person programming for the 2020-2021 delegation at a later date.

For more information or to access our application, please visit usrussia.stanford.edu.