

Borderlands and the Value of Academic Research for Policy

A Case Study

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Without a doubt, the worlds of academic research and policymaking in the United States are worlds apart. The skills, demands, and modes of work in each realm are very different. This is as it should be, since the mission of each is different. The mission of universities is to understand and teach fundamental knowledge that is important over time and without regard to fashion or political acceptability. The mission of the policy realm is to conceive and execute the strategies and actions of government in order to achieve national objectives and secure national interests, which means that the work of policymakers and analysts must be specific and pragmatic.

Between these real differences in mission, however, lies a potentially promising borderland of interaction. Policymakers may need to know what to do right now, but in order to know what works and fails, the lessons of history or comparison across cases can guard against misguided policy. Professors may face strong incentives to develop and test elegant

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deductive theory that cuts across time periods or specific events, but since good scholarship requires rigorous testing of theory, they need to investigate those cases by descending from the ivory tower for regular forays in field research and data gathering.

To make professors live by the demands of the policy world and to award professional advancement according to the standards of good policymaking would undermine and possibly destroy the ability of universities to serve their primary mission. To expect policymakers and analysts to spend months or even years exploring whether their proposals are fully in accord with the underlying concepts and casual dynamics of the latest theories as a measure of their professional success would be, obviously, a recipe for inaction and even irresponsibility.

However, that does not mean that the residents of each world cannot travel to the borderlands occasionally, or even regularly, to ask questions and learn something new. Like visitors to a foreign country, they need some help with transportation, with meeting infrastructure, and in communication across different languages.

They certainly need to feel secure that they will not be punished back home for speaking to foreigners. They may feel a little uncomfortable encountering a different culture, and so they will have to learn to be tolerant and open to other ways of speaking or thinking.

But intelligent and motivated people can learn to interact in new cultures if given time and resources to become acclimated. An American who regularly visits Moscow learns how to negotiate the visa system and read enough Cyrillic to get around on the metro, and, by showing respect and empathy for Russian experiences, comes to understand and even appreciate what Russians hope and fear about the United States. With patience, motivation, and the opportunity to interact with academic scholars, a policymaker can learn why letting a single case guide decisionmaking is a bad idea, and how political and economic systems may determine policy success to a greater degree than seemingly powerful foreign leaders. Perhaps most importantly, they can get up-to-date, very practical, and well-grounded empirical evidence and information vital to the immediate policy issues that are their responsibility (which would otherwise likely appear only in thick scholarly books a few years in the future, or in jargon-constrained specialist scholarly journals that policymakers would never read).

What follows is a short case study of one effort to create an infrastructure and support system in the borderland between scholars and policymakers in the area of post-Soviet studies, the Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (PONARS), funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

PONARS and its Mission

As political change swept across post-Soviet Eurasia in the mid-1990s, it became more important than ever before to understand the causes of Russia's difficult transformation and the political and economic role it plays in the larger post-Soviet space. During the Cold War, the existence of the Soviet Union commanded policy resources in pursuit of a strategy against a global competitor. The generation of American professors on Soviet affairs who played roles in U.S. policy were largely defense and security experts. Although knowledgeable about the Soviet system and traditional security issues, their seniority did not necessarily translate into expertise on post-Soviet developments and issues, which were increasingly shaped by post-communist economic, political, and social dynamics.

The gap in training and expertise was all the more a problem because the post-Soviet era created new opportunities and new demands for cutting-edge research in the field. Scholars could engage in research projects based on systematic interviews, field research, building data sets, and systematic surveys. However, because this new research was being conducted by junior scholars and newly-minted Ph.D.s, it was unknown within the already limited avenues by which the policy world could reach out to and benefit from this entirely new and vibrant expertise.

Furthermore, since young professors rationally respond to professional standards and demands, these scholars were focused on individual achievement and high theory rather than scholarly collaboration among peers and speaking to the policy community. One does not achieve tenure by networking among junior scholars or sharing one's ideas with them (although networking among tenured faculty who may review one's tenure case is of course important). And in a professional environment where the greater rewards and the most prestigious tenured positions go to scholars known for strong theory with relevance across the broadest scope of history and comparisons, being viewed as policy-relevant or policy-responsive can be fatal to one's professional aspirations.

American scholars on Soviet and post-Soviet affairs faced an additional challenge: they had few resources to work with or even to meet colleagues and peers in Russia and the other new states that had been republics of the Soviet Union. Scholarly contacts during Soviet times had been limited and highly orchestrated. Soviet social science was politicized and controlled by political priorities, making it difficult to create transnational partnerships in the borderland between the worlds of American and post-Soviet social scientists. Even more than their American colleagues, well-funded and well-connected by comparison, young social scientists in the former Soviet Union had few resources for building professional contacts that would improve their teaching and research. Many of these new professors had benefited from Gorbachev's period of glasnost and new

thinking, serving as visiting scholars in the west and in many cases even training in leading western social science departments. However, with the dislocations and economic crash following the Soviet demise, it was not clear that they would be able to build the national and transnational linkages that would enable them to become leaders in social science for the future.

The Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (PONARS) was founded in 1997, in the midst of this era of transition, with the premise that poorly informed policies toward Russia would be costly to the United States, and with the realization that a great opportunity for building a new and transnational generation of experts whose work could contribute to good policy risked being lost. PONARS has two simple objectives: to build a scholarly network of the leading social scientists in the United States and Russia (and other post-Soviet states) in order to allow members to produce the best possible scholarly work, and to make that scholarship and those scholars known and useful to the policy world.

From its beginnings in 1997 with 12 American members, PONARS is now a network of nearly 80 scholars in the United States, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. PONARS has created open channels of dialogue and friendly debate and has facilitated a noncompetitive forum for cooperation among the members. PONARS has played an important role in connecting the largely academic network of scholars with the U.S. policymaking community. In addition, all PONARS publications are available to the public via the PONARS website.

Membership in PONARS has in several cases been noted as a positive factor in the successful tenure cases of members. The PONARS website is used regularly by media, government, and academic institutions seeking experts on issues relating to post-Soviet affairs. PONARS members have cooperated to secure competitive research grants, develop panels for professional association meetings, and conceive and hold scholarly conferences. Collaboration among members generated by program activities has resulted in numerous scholarly publications, and even those publications by members that are single-authored have usually had extensive input and shaping by PONARS-based interactions.

However, our greatest success has been in proving that the work of academic scholars can be of great interest to the policy community, that it can be accessible, and that the work and the scholars themselves can have impact. Our annual one-day policy conference in Washington, DC now attracts over 250 participants, as well as 40 or so PONARS members. Participants include officials from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Department of Treasury, Congressional staff, the National Security Council, the Office of the Vice President, and intelligence agencies. Analysts and activists from nongovernmental

organizations, as well as representatives of business, also attend the conference.

PONARS has published over 400 policy memos: five-page briefs on the issues that members have been working on in their scholarly research. The policy briefs serve as the focal point for discussion at the conferences, but are also published on the PONARS website, making them accessible to a much broader audience. Now a common practice, the web-based dissemination of policy-relevant briefs has been a hallmark of PONARS from its inception. Not merely their availability, but their quality makes PONARS policy memos highly regarded and used. They have been cited in U.S. government reports, and have had impact on Congressional legislation. They are used extensively in course syllabi at universities in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

More than simply hosting its own conference and publishing its policy memo series, PONARS has facilitated scholarly-policy interaction by creating infrastructure in the borderland for regular travel outside the two separate worlds of the university and government. The PONARS website is a resource for ideas and experts, and PONARS members are regularly invited to write papers or serve as panelists for policy-related conferences. When policymakers or U.S. government staff are looking for expertise and insights, they do not have to Google for names in the hope that the individual scholar such a search might turn up is not only qualified in the topic, but also that she is a proven resource who has traveled to the academic-policy borderland, learned how to speak a common language, and coped with the different culture of the policy world. When American or international media call the PONARS office to find a new voice or an expert on what might appear to be an obscure topic suddenly thrust into the headlines, the PONARS network has proven time and again that professors can serve the public interest by making sense of unfamiliar or complex developments in Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors. They can do so because they have learned how to translate academic language into communication meaningful to educated non-specialists. Among ourselves, we revert to the conceptual language of university seminars and academic conferences, and in doing so we advance our scholarly research and help one another improve. But PONARS members have learned, as too many academics have not, that standing in the policy borderlands complaining loudly that government officials do not understand you is a little like an American tourist standing in Paris complaining that the French will not speak English. Better to learn some French, try to use a phrasebook, or at least hire an interpreter.

How PONARS Works, and Why it Works

The first principle upon which PONARS works is that in the scholarly realm, individual scholars are self-motivated and know best what to study and how to do it. Put another way, PONARS builds on the professional

excellence and self-imposed high standards of its individual members. PONARS does not assign topics, research, or areas of expertise. Over time, we have sought to find new members on issues or with scholarly expertise underrepresented by current members, but in the end we shape our conferences and publications around what the members do best, not on what the policy community might deem important. That is a potential weakness in making PONARS useful to the U.S. policy community, but in practice it has never been a problem. In the months leading up to the annual policy conference, PONARS members volunteer topics for their policy memos based on their current research. The result somehow is always a comprehensive, varied, and high-quality conference program.

The second principle is that PONARS members are the best in their field, and members are expected to live up to the highest professional standards. Membership is by invitation, through a process of internal nomination and approval by the program's Executive Committee.

The third principle is that in serving its mission to inform the policy community, PONARS has to speak to its audience, and effective communication is key. PONARS policy memos are brief, free of jargon, footnotes, or scholarly citations, written in clear English, and focused on two or three key points. Producing the memos has been a learning process for the members and staff. PONARS members have over time learned how to write more effectively for a policy and non-specialist audience. However, in order to meet the objective of effective communication, PONARS members have to be willing to accept a more intrusive editorial process for the policy memos than would ever be the case in the realm of scholarly publications. This has been one of the more contentious and difficult aspects of cultural adaptation in visiting the borderlands, but it has been essential to the impact of PONARS members and their research in the policy realm.

This is true all the more in our policy conferences. At an academic conference, it is perhaps acceptable for a panel to be diverted on some interesting digression, to allow the panelists to dominate in order to present important research, or to dispense with time limits and schedules. At our policy conference, PONARS panel members have 10 minutes to summarize the key points from their memos. With an average of three panelists, presentations thus total only 30 minutes (of a 90 minute session). That leaves the bulk of each session's time for lively interaction among members and guests. If policymakers want to be lectured at, they can visit the university world: the purpose of the borderland is to create discussion and interaction. Similarly, during the discussion period PONARS members are expected to answer questions or react to comments in the space of two minutes or so, with panels usually chaired by PONARS members who can be counted on to be strong moderators. This has also been a matter of learning and acculturation, and has improved over time. A positive benefit of this method of operating policy conference panels is

that it encourages guests from the policy world to follow up individually with PONARS members for more extensive discussion and evidence from the member's research, extending the impact and interaction beyond the one-day conference.

Fourth, an effective and useful website has been key to PONARS's outreach and the success of its policy impact. Web-based outreach is now commonplace, but it was an important innovation early in PONARS's development. The website lists members, their areas of expertise, and contact information. All policy memos are posted in easily downloadable PDF format, and the program grants permission to use memos freely. The program also produces a working paper series to disseminate more traditional scholarly work-in-progress so that authors can get feedback. PONARS working papers often are developed into articles placed in scholarly journals, but they have also been used in courses and cited in government studies. Many Russia-related websites provide links to the PONARS website and/or PONARS publications.

Finally, the success of our public outreach and interaction in the policy borderland is rooted in the strong scholarly community created by the PONARS network. In addition to the policy conference, PONARS members meet annually for an academic conference. The purpose of the academic conference is to present work-in-progress for feedback and criticism, to spend time together talking informally about developments in post-Soviet affairs, and to discuss how scholars can and should study them. We also meet for PONARS dinners at larger professional conferences, including the American Political Science Association, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and International Studies Association meetings. These regular face-to-face meetings among members help to build and sustain a community of friends and colleagues that is not merely a collection of specialists.

Even more important to the network and its community has been the PONARS listserv, a closed and unmoderated email virtual network of PONARS members. The number of messages posted daily varies, but averages 10-20, peaking at several times that number during crises, unfolding events, or particularly heated scholarly exchanges. PONARS members discuss their research, argue about how to explain current events, explore alternative theories of democratization or the Soviet collapse, ask for help or research resources for themselves or students, post job openings and funding announcements, and swap advice on survival strategies for field research. One member aptly called PONARS "a powerful information machine" and another cited the importance of "immediate access to the great minds that made up the listserv."

The network creates a community of purpose to better understand post-Soviet affairs and to make that understanding and knowledge accessible and useful to the policy community. It means that academic

experts do not visit the borderland alone, so that they can make better sense of the new language and work better with the different culture of the foreigners they meet there. They can share and work on the new language and understandings when they return home, so that the next visit will be even more productive. And instead of letting “policy relevant” be a term of disdain and scorn back in the university world, by sharing it with the community of elite scholars and professors in their field each member knows that being able to talk to foreigners is a legitimate and admirable achievement for a profession that has as its mission serving society’s knowledge and understanding.

Implications

Perhaps the majority of borderlands between the scholarly and policy worlds are inhospitable wastelands. To assume the borderland is a wasteland because no one *can* go there, however, is to commit the fallacy of confusing cause and effect: perhaps it is a wasteland because no one *does* go there, and if someone created some meeting places and invested in resources for effective communication, the borderland would become a lively and productive place.

The case of PONARS certainly suggests that the scholarly community on Asian affairs should look into exploring its own borderland with the Washington policy community on Asia. Many of the conditions are similar, with systemic and historic changes in both international affairs and in the political, economic, and social systems within the countries of the region. The field is also experiencing a generational change in American universities, with a new cohort of regional experts trained in rigorous methods of social science. There is certainly a need in the policy community in Washington for ideas and knowledge of the region. The new global powers of the 21st century will likely be centered in Asia, and modern security challenges such as global health pandemics, energy politics, terrorism, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are increasingly connected to the evolution of the region’s states and societies.

To be successful, such an effort has to respect the different missions of the scholarly world and the policy world in Asian affairs. Seeing to the high professional standards of each world is the primary responsibility of the professionals and leaders within it. Efforts in the borderland should focus on supporting publications by scholars that allow them to communicate their findings and explanations in ways that are accessible and useful to policymakers. Any such effort has to be long-term and patient: it takes time to learn to read and write a foreign language. And the enormously successful example of PONARS shows that what might be most productive is to make it possible for a community of scholars to meet with a community of policymakers, rather than to have to venture out alone.