The Russian, East European and Eurasian Center provides many academic opportunities for all students — even those just beginning their educational career. Last January, REEEC organized an outreach program with one of the local preschools, Champaign County Headstart. The program focuses on the introduction of regions and countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia to young students through various hands-on activities designed to teach students about culture. Each month, a new country and topic of discussion are introduced, and the students receive a stamp in their special passports to signify that they have “visited” that country. Since the beginning of this semester, we have visited four countries: Russia, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Estonia.

The first meeting in September introduced the students to Russia, and its iconic “onion dome” architecture. Specifically, the topic was St. Basil’s Cathedral. The students learned what the Cathedral was, observed its shapes and colors, and discovered that it primarily functions as a museum now. They had the opportunity to interact with pictures of the Cathedral as well as other artifacts from Russia, such as painted jars, fur hats, and other examples of Russian material culture. After the discussion, the students created their own renditions of the Cathedral by gluing paper cutouts of blocks and onion domes onto large sheets of paper.

October’s topic covered Bulgaria and the Kukeri festival. The students learned that the festival is meant to scare evil spirits away through the use of elaborate costumes and masks. We held our own small festival in the classroom, with traditional Bulgarian music and a dancing parade around the room. The students received bells, which they jingled to scare away any evil spirits in the vicinity. They also created their own scary masks with gems, feathers, and pom poms.

Turkey was November’s destination, and everyone was amused by the name of this country. We introduced the students to the Grand Bazaar: a giant, beautiful, colorful market. They learned about beautiful handmade Turkish mosaic lamps, and were thrilled to discover that they would be making their own. The lanterns consisted of small plastic cups that the students decorated with colorful squares of tissue paper. As a finishing touch, each student received their own battery-powered tea candle that illuminated their crafts.

Finally, December introduced Estonia. As Estonia is known for its hand-knitted wool clothing, the students learned about sheep shearing and the transformation of wool into yarn. They interacted with raw wool, which, according to a few kids, still smelled like sheep. As a project, they were each given a pair of gloves and tasked with decorating them with fabric paint. The goal was to emulate traditional Estonian knitted patterns, but the result was more avant garde.

The first four months of Headstart have been a sensational start; REEEC has many more engaging activities planned for students and many more countries to visit! We are eager to share them with the students and continue to increase their knowledge of Eastern European countries. The Headstart program has certainly been beneficial to the students — they are excited to listen and participate each month, and they love being able to create crafts and show them...
to their parents. The program serves as a great introduction to the culture and history of Eastern Europe, and encourages the students to think about the world outside of their own backyard. As a student helper, I am thrilled with the program's success and would love to see it implemented more often, or in classrooms with older students who would be able to participate in more advanced crafts and discussions.

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