

PSCI 1172 / 5172 (REES 1535): RUSSIAN POLITICS

(fulfills 'Cross-Cultural Analysis' requirement)

Professor SIL

Department of Political Science

Spring 2025

Course Description and Objectives

Keeping in mind the difficulties of teaching about an adversary that has unleashed a horrifying war, this course will seek to analyze Russian politics as objectively as possible, with an eye to understanding long-term continuities and changes through alternating periods of stability and turmoil. This necessarily entails a consideration of historical complexities, especially the Soviet era (1917-1991). Thus, the first part of the course examines the origins and evolution of the Soviet regime from Lenin to Gorbachev. The goal is not to memorize every historical detail but rather to grasp the sweeping continuities and key shifts in political dynamics, economic development and social conditions, particularly aspects that would later affect post-Soviet Russia. We will also seek to specify which elements stem from the pursuit of a transformative revolutionary vision, which constitute a distinctive model of political organization and economic development, and which reflect long-standing geopolitical ambitions of a former empire (Russia) being temporarily fulfilled through an erstwhile superpower (the USSR).

The rest of the course delves into the evolution of politics, economics, society and foreign policy, first during the early years of transition under Boris Yeltsin (1992-99), and then primarily under Vladimir Putin (2000 - present). In this section, we will begin with a survey of Russia's political system, the fluctuations in economic growth, and changing social conditions over time. In the process, we will consider the rise of the oligarchs, patterns of political protest, social/demographic trends, and the role of natural resources. We will then turn to the drivers of Russia's foreign policy since the break-up of the USSR, trying to identify the sources for the sharp decline in Russia's relations with the US/West since even before the invasion of Ukraine. We will trace some of the forces over the past decade that set the stage for the invasion of Ukraine, and consider the long-term prospects for peace and conflict in the region.

In all these domains, from Russia's political dynamics and economic policies to its foreign policy behavior, a core question for us is: how "normal" is post-Soviet Russia's trajectory over the last 30 years when compared to other post-communist nations and to non-western powers with their own competing geopolitical aspirations (e.g. China, India, Turkey...). Our answers may vary, but they collectively point to a variety of long-term scenarios worth keeping in mind.

Graduate students (or undergraduates who obtain instructor permission) can enroll in PSCI 5172, but will have to meet different requirements (see the comments below in red font).

Plan for Delivering Course Content

- **Lectures** will be in person. All students, undergraduates and graduate students, are expected to attend the lectures. Most lectures will be accompanied by slides that will be posted in the relevant Canvas modules after the lecture. The slides will contain key pieces of information, but you should use them as a guide while taking your own notes as much as possible. Lectures may extend from 50 minutes to one hour depending on the topic.
- **Recitations** are one hour long, and attendance is mandatory. If you are unable to attend for any unavoidable medical reason or family emergency, you need to inform the TA and me in advance to avoid having the absence marked as “unexcused.” In such situations, you can still get credit for attendance by submitting a 300 word “response paper” containing some key points that struck you from two or three of the readings for the week. **Graduate students are not expected to attend regular recitations but will instead meet with the Professor about every 3 weeks.**
- **The T.A. is Daniel Shapiro.** Daniel is a Ph.D. student in the Political Science Department at Penn. He holds an M.A. in Russian Studies from Harvard, and a B.A. from Brown University. He has traveled widely across the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and has extensive knowledge of the region. He will lead the recitations, grade your papers, and hold office hours to answer questions. Please give him your full cooperation and attention.
- **Readings:** There are two required books, both [available at the Penn Bookstore](#): one is **Mary McAuley, *Soviet Politics, 1917-1991*** (Oxford University Press, 1992), which will be relevant for Part I of the course; the other is brand new text, **Susanne Wengle, ed. *Russian Politics Today*** (Cambridge University Press, 2023), which will be relevant for Part II of the course. In addition to these texts, required readings will include **articles and other items posted in the modules** for each topic. The readings will not duplicate lectures but can offer alternative framings and/or develop particular angles. **Graduate students will be assigned additional readings along the way (available on Canvas for PSCI 5172).**
- **Requirements:** For undergraduates, the requirements will include one midterm (30%), one paper (30%) and the final exam (30%). The remaining 10% will be at the discretion of the T.A., reflecting attendance and engagement in recitations. **For those seeking graduate credit, two papers will need to be submitted, one at the end of Part One of the course (8-10 pages) and one at the end of the course (12-15 pages). The topics will be negotiated in advance.**
- **Time commitment:** (i) about 3 hours per week to engage the material presented by the Professor and T.A. during scheduled class times; (ii) about 3-5 hours doing readings each week; and (iii) additional hours when required papers are due. This is only a rough estimate, since individuals vary in how many hours they can or need to invest. **Graduate students should expect to devote additional time to cover supplemental readings and prepare their papers.**

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES/TOPICS

WED, JAN 15 (Introduction)

1. Introduction: Confronting a Wartime Adversary vs. Understanding a Country

<< **MON, JAN 20: no class on Martin Luther King Day** >>

PART I

THE RISE & FALL OF SOVIET RUSSIA, 1917-1991

WED, JAN 22

2. Imperial Russia and the Rise of Marxism

MON, JAN 27

3. Towards the October [1917] Revolution: The Rise of the Bolsheviks

WED, JAN 29

4. Lenin's Ambiguous Legacy, 1918-1924

MON, FEB 3

5. Stalinism, pt. 1: The Making of a Planned Economy

WED, FEB 5

6. Stalinism, pt. 2: Terror, Totalitarianism & the "New Soviet Man"

MON, FEB 10

7. End of Stalin Era - with excerpts from film "STALIN" (1992)

WED, FEB 12

8. Nikita Khrushchev (1956-64) and the Challenge/Impact of De-Stalinization

MON, FEB 17

9. The Long Brezhnev Era, 1964-82: Stability or Stagnation?

WED, FEB 19

10. Gorbachev's Reforms, Part I: Acceleration, *Glasnost*, *Perestroika*

MON, FEB 24

11. Gorbachev's Reforms, Part II: *Demokratizatsiya* to Fragmentation

WED, FEB 26

12. The End of the USSR: Was It Inevitable?

Part lecture, part review, part discussion

MON, MAR 3

**** MIDTERM EXAMINATION (in class) ****

WED, MAR 5

13. In lieu of class: watch film "MY PERESTROIKA" ([available at Penn Library](#) – need Pennkey)

>> NOTE: NO recitations this week (MAR 6-7), then SPRING BREAK (MAR 8-16)

PART II

POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: POLITICS, ECONOMICS, SOCIETY

MON, MAR 17

15. Troubled Transition, 1992-93: From Polarization to a New Constitution

WED, MAR 19

16. Built-In Limits to Democratization: Emergence of a "Super-Presidential" System

MON, MAR 24

17. Parties & Elections: How Much Do They Matter? What Do They Tell Us?

WED, MAR 26

18. Civil Society and Protest Amid "Democratic Backsliding"

MON, MAR 31

19. Russia's Economy, Part I: From Shock Therapy to High Growth

WED, APR 2

20. Russia's Economy, Part II: From Steady Expansion to Coping with Sanctions

MON, APR 7

21. Oil and Gas: The Russian Petro-State in Comparative Perspective

WED, APR 9

22. Demographic Shifts & Social Trends in Post-Soviet Russia

PART III

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN A CHANGING REGIONAL & GLOBAL CONTEXT

MON, APR 14

23. Post-Communist Pathways: The Former USSR, Eastern Europe & China

WED, APR 16 (video lecture – to be posted on Canvas)

24. Soviet Enclaves, Russian Subjects, and the "Near Abroad"

MON, APR 21

25. Russia and the West: Cold War Redux? Or 'Normal' Great Power Competition?

WED, APR 23

26. The "Euro-maidan" Crisis, Crimea's Annexation, and the Path to War (2014-2021)

MON, APR 28

27. The Tragedy of the Ukraine War: What Led to It? How will it End?

WED, APR 30

28. Conclusion: Russia and the World After Putin

>> PAPER due by 5 pm on Monday, MAY 5, 2024 (via Canvas)

>> FINAL EXAM (in class, TBA)