

## **Putin's Russia: Culture, Society and History**

REES 0131-001

Prof. Kevin M F Platt

Meets: TR 3:30 PM-4:59 PM

Fulfills Humanities & Social Sciences Sector (New Curriculum Only)

Winston Churchill famously said that Russia "is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Strikingly, today many informed Russians would agree: no one can provide definitive answers concerning what has driven Russian public life and politics over the past decade, as it ricocheted from the mass protests of 2011 and 2012, into the Pussy Riot scandal, then the intense patriotism that drove the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine. In this course we will examine how Russians themselves communicate about and represent Russia and what this reveals about this complex society and its development. We will consider print journalism, novels, films, televised media, and the internet, paying close attention both to particular representations and to social institutions for their production, dissemination and consumption. Topics of special concern will include: conspiracy theories, representations of Russian history, collective identity and patriotism, intellectuals and elites, gender and sexuality, consumption and wealth. Putin's Russia is an introductory level course for which no prior knowledge of Russian history, culture or society is required. All readings and screenings will be in English.

### **Class Structure**

Preparation for each class will include readings, viewings, and short video lectures. Usually, there will be a short reading and viewing check quiz to help you make sure you have read the materials attentively (you can retake it multiple times—see more on this below, under **Grading**). On a number of Thursdays, you will have the option to write a short (150 words), informal reflection on a question that will propel us into discussion during our class meeting, graded with a check minus (65%), check (85%), check plus (95%), or check plus plus (100%). In the course of the semester, you are required to complete at least five such reflections from a total of ten opportunities.

### **Readings and viewings**

*NB: Any student may consult with Student Financial Services to find out what support they are eligible to receive to cover course costs or other items that ensure their health, safety, and secure learning environment.*

In addition to shorter readings, provided as links or .pdfs, students will purchase and read the following works:

- Viktor Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin, 2002).
- Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya*, trans. Mariya Gusev & Jeff Parker (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Disquiet, 2014).
- Victoria Lomasko, *Other Russias*, trans, by Thomas Campbell (New York: n+1 books, 2017).

Students will also watch the following films:

- Aleksey Balabanov, *Brat (Brother)*, 1997)
- Sergey Bodrov, *Kavkazskii plennik (Prisoner of the Mountains)*, 1996)
- Pavel Lungin, *Oligarkh (Tycoon, a new Russian)*, 2002)
- Dunya Smirnova, *Kokoko* (2012)
- Fedor Bondarchuk, *Stalingrad* (2013)
- Kantemir Balagov, *Dilda (Beanpole)*, 2019)
- Levan Gabriadze, *Rezo* (2018)

### Course Work:

In addition to the reading checks and the five required weekly reflections, participants in the course will write two short close-analysis papers, take part in two group "collation" exercises, and write a longer final paper due on the last day of classes. Your papers should be double-spaced, in 12-pt. font, with one-inch margins on all sides, and submitted electronically in Word via the canvas utility (not via email).

**Paper One: Close Reading**—The first paper, of 3-4 pages (at least 1000 words), will be due on Sunday, September 12 at 10pm. This paper will undertake a close reading of a literary passage from Viktor Pelevin's novel *Homo Zapiens*.

**Paper Two: Close Film Analysis**—The second paper, of 3-4 pages (at least 1000 words), will be due on Sunday, October 24 at 10pm. This paper will undertake a close film analysis of a sequence from one of the films we will view.

**Final Paper: Analytic Essay**—The final paper, of six-seven pages (at least 1800 words), will be due on Thursday, December 9, at 10pm. This paper will respond to one of several open questions.

**Collations:** twice in the course of the semester you will be responsible to find a single interesting source from the media (Western or Russian, depending on your language skills) regarding an assigned topic. Before the first class meeting dedicated to the collation, you will post a link to your source, along with a brief, 200-word annotation of the source, in a discussion thread in Canvas. I will explain what should go into this annotation in greater detail in the class before the first collation assignment. In class, you will break out into small groups and analyze these sources in order to create a group presentation. Everyone will watch all of the presentations before the second class meeting dedicated to the collation, when we will engage in a larger, class-wide discussion of them.

### Grading:

Your final grade will be calculated according to the following weights: Participation: 15%; Weekly Reflections: 10%; Reading Checks: 10%; Collations: 15%; Paper One: Close Reading: 10%; Paper Two: Close Film Analysis: 15%; Final Paper: Analytical Essay: 25%

*Note on Reading and Viewing Check Grades:*

You will be assigned short reading and viewing check quizzes relating to the material for most class meetings. You will be given four attempts to pass these quizzes, and in order to pass you must answer 4 out of 5 questions correctly. The stakes are low: these quizzes give you a chance to get credit for doing the readings. At the end of the semester, we will recalculate quiz grades in the

gradebook to assign 0% for each failed quiz and 100% for quizzes passed with four or more correct answers.

*Note on Participation Grading:*

On September 30, November 2 and after the end of the semester you will receive a grade for class participation. The first of these grades you will assign to yourself, and I will report to you what grade I would have assigned had it been our decision. The second grade will be the average of a grade assigned by you and one assigned by the instructor. And I will decide on the last participation grade at the end of the semester. The final grade for participation will be the average of these three marks.