

POL354H1F

Politics and Society in Russia

TIME: Thursday, 4:00–6:00pm

LOCATION: Bissell 325

INSTRUCTOR: Brendan McElroy, Assistant Professor, Political Science

OFFICE HOURS: Friday, 10:00am–12:30pm, Sidney Smith 6026A

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

It is already clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point, not only in the post-Cold War international order, but also in the development of the Russian polity and economy. How did we get here? Who is Vladimir Putin, how did he rise to power, and how has his regime changed over the past two decades? We will take an historical approach to these questions, examining the evolution of Russian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union. After acquiring a basic knowledge of Russia's political development since Gorbachev, students will explore a variety of themes in contemporary politics, including public opinion, the media, elites and parties, civil society and interest groups, state building, federalism, the military and security services, and the linkages between domestic politics and Russia's behavior on the international stage. This last theme brings us full circle, back to Putin's war in Ukraine and its near-future implications. Here, we will consider not only the prospects for Russia's democratization but also how Russia might adapt to the other challenges it will face in coming decades – especially climate change.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Understand the impact of pre-Soviet and Soviet legacies on the present-day Russian polity, society, and economy.
- Weigh alternative explanations for Putin's rise and enduring popularity.
- Evaluate competing (and complementary) explanations for the persistence of nondemocratic rule in Russia.
- Use comparative analysis to evaluate the uniqueness of patterns in Russian political and economic development.

- Make informed, plausible (though not necessarily accurate!) predictions about the future of Russian politics.

REQUIRED BOOKS (AVAILABLE AT THE UTSG BOOKSTORE)

Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015 (hereafter referred to as Gel'man).

Marshall T. Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006 (hereafter Poe). [Also available as a **one-user** e-book: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=714068>.]

Richard Sakwa, Henry E. Hale, and Stephen White (eds.), *Developments in Russian Politics*, 9th ed. London: Macmillan, 2018 (hereafter DRP 9). [Also available as a **one-user** e-book: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=6234820>.]

Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 (hereafter Taylor). [Also available as an e-book: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=5400953>.]

One-user e-books may only be used by one student at a time. Remember to log out as soon as you finish so that other students can get access, and to plan your reading with plenty of time to spare.

REQUIREMENTS

In brief:

- Participation: 5% of total marks
- Weekly reading/lecture quizzes: 20% of total marks
- Response paper 1 (1,500 words maximum): 20% of total marks
- Response paper 2 (2,000 words maximum): 25% of total marks
- Final exam: 30% of total marks

In detail:

- **Participation (5%)** includes, first and foremost, attendance and active engagement with weekly lectures. Read carefully and arrive with questions to ask and/or interpretations to present. Be prepared to answer the instructor's questions. If you feel uncomfortable speaking in class, office hours may offer an alternative format for participation.
- **Weekly quizzes (20%)** on the content of the readings and lecture will be posted to the Quercus site beginning on September 15. There will be no quiz during the fall reading week. **Quizzes will post on the Quercus site after each week's lecture and**

must be completed within 24 hours. These are open-book quizzes, each consisting of three multiple-choice questions; once the quiz is opened, however, you will have only 15 minutes to complete it. Answers will not be revealed immediately upon submission, but I will review the results of the quiz – concentrating on the questions with which the largest number of students struggled – in the following week’s lecture. Students are to complete the weekly quizzes *individually*, not in collaboration with others.

- **Response paper 1 (20%)** will ask you to write a critical review of a recent scholarly book on Russian politics and society. I will circulate a list of acceptable books in advance. Response paper 1 should be 1,200–1,500 words in length and is due on Thursday, October 20, at 1:00pm.
- **Response paper 2 (25%)** will ask you to bring the course readings for two different weeks into dialogue. Students may choose to “cross” any two weeks except for the Introduction (September 9) and, of course, the fall reading week. Response paper 2 should be 1,700–2,000 words in length and is due on Thursday, November 24, at 1:00pm. I will provide more detailed instructions as the assignment date approaches.
- The **final exam (30%)** will be comprehensive, covering material from the entire course. It will consist of two parts: 1) a selection of key terms and concepts to identify and 2) a longer response essay. Students will have two hours to complete the exam. I will provide more details about the structure and content of the final exam as it approaches.

Writing assignments should be formatted in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with the word count indicated near the top of the first page. Word (.docx) files and PDF submissions are both acceptable.

WEEKS AT A GLANCE

WEEK	DATE	TOPICS	NOTES
1	September 8	Introduction: Russia in Historical and Comparative Perspective	
2	September 15	Geography and History	First weekly reading quiz
3	September 22	The Soviet System and its Legacy	
4	September 29	The “Wild Nineties”, State Collapse and Re-Formation (1991–1999)	
5	October 6	Mr. Putin and the Building of a New Political Regime (1999–2008)	

6	October 13	Mature Putinism and its Global Context (2008–2022)	
7	October 20	Political Economy	Response paper 1 due by 1:00pm
8	October 27	Federalism and Regional Diversity	
9	November 3	Public Opinion and Political Culture	
10	November 10	Fall reading week	No class
11	November 17	Protest, Civil Society, and Media	
12	November 24	The Military, Security Services, and Foreign Policy	Response paper 2 due by 1:00pm
13	December 1	Whither Russia?	

SCHEDULE OF LECTURE READINGS AND TOPICS

1. Introduction: Russia in Historical and Comparative Perspective (September 9)

This week, we introduce the course and, with it, several longstanding debates about how to study Russian politics – debates that will preoccupy us throughout this course. Why has post-Soviet Russia “failed” to become a rich capitalist democracy? Why did anyone expect it to become so? Which countries are appropriate comparative cases for Russia, the standards of measurement against which it is reasonable to judge “success” or “failure” in the first place?

- Gel'man, introduction and ch. 1–2.
- Alfred B. Evans, “The Failure of Democratization in Russia: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2.1 (2011): 40–51.

2. Geography and History (September 15)

Is present-day Russia a prisoner of its past, or – worse still – its geography? This week, we consider long-run patterns of political and economic development. How unique is the Russian polity today, how unique has it been in the past, and what do the answers to these questions imply for the country’s chances of becoming a rich capitalist democracy?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Poe, ch. 1–7.
- Allen C. Lynch, “Roots of Russia’s Economic Dilemmas: Liberal Economics and Illiberal Geography,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54.1 (2002): 31–49.

3. The Soviet System and its Legacy (September 22)

This week, we examine the Soviet system and its legacies – attitudinal, behavioral, institutional, and economic. How were Soviet institutions supposed to work, and how did they work in practice? Did the Soviet inheritance constrain the prospects for Russia’s democratization and economic performance during the 1990s, and does it continue to do so today? Are there any positive Soviet “legacies”?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Timothy J. Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 3–4 (read up to page 101).
- Stephen Kotkin and Mark R. Beissinger, “The Historical Legacies of Communism: An Empirical Agenda,” ch.1 in Kotkin and Beissinger (eds.), *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

4. The “Wild Nineties”, State Collapse and Re-Formation, 1991–1999 (September 29)

This week, we consider politics and market reform under Boris Yeltsin. The central question we will attempt to answer is, how should we understand the development of Russia’s political regime during the 1990s? Is this a case of stalled democratization, a nascent electoral authoritarian regime, or something else entirely?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Gel’man, ch. 3.
- DRP 9, ch. 2 (Presidency and Executive).
- Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), ch. 1–2.

5. Mr. Putin and the Building of a New Political Regime, 1999–2008 (October 6)

Who is Vladimir Putin, what does he believe, and what explains his extraordinarily rapid political ascent? The succession dynamics of the late 1990s allow us to entertain an intriguing counterfactual: what if Yeltsin had chosen someone else to succeed him – say, Boris Nemtsov, the former governor of Nizhnii Novgorod and later (assassinated) Putin critic? Would the regime have evolved in a more democratic direction? Or would a Nemtsov-like figure ultimately have resorted to the same authoritarian measures as Putin in attempting to discipline the oligarchs and regional elites?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Gel’man, ch. 4.
- Taylor, introduction and ch. 1–2.

- Gleb Pavlovsky (interviewed by Tom Parfitt), “Putin’s World Outlook,” *New Left Review* 88 (July–August 2014): 54–66, available here: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii88/articles/gleb-pavlovsky-putin-s-world-outlook>.

6. Mature Putinism and its Global Context, 2008–2022 (October 13)

At the beginning of this course, we identified the possible endogenous, “deep” historical and geographical roots of Russian authoritarianism. This week, examining the more recent evolution of the regime, we will explore the idea that Putinism is less distinctively Russian than it might appear at first glance. Is Russia, instead, merely an early adopter of a type of political system that seems to be gaining ground everywhere, from rich democracies to the developing world – patrimonial, personalistic autocracy?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Gel’man, ch. 5.
- DRP 9, ch. 4 (Parliamentary Politics in Russia).
- Gulnaz Sharafutdinova and Karen Dawisha, “The Escape from Institution-Building in a Globalized World: Lessons from Russia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15.2 (2017): 361–378.
- Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, “Understanding the Global Patrimonial Wave,” *Perspectives on Politics* 20.1 (2022): 237–249.

7. Political Economy (October 20)

Twenty years on, how ought we to evaluate Putin’s economic record? To what extent do Putin’s policies deserve credit for the economic boom of the 2000s, and to what extent was he a beneficiary of forces beyond his control? Looking ahead, after the generally disappointing economic performance of the past decade, is a return to sustained growth possible under the present regime?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Taylor, ch. 4.
- DRP 9, ch. 8 (Assessing the Rule of Law in Russia).
- Anders Åslund, *Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), ch. 1, 3–4.
- Jordan Gans-Morse, “Threats to Property Rights in Russia: From Private Coercion to State Aggression,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28.3 (2012): 263–295.

8. Federalism and Regional Diversity (October 27)

This week, students will familiarize themselves with the political and fiscal dilemmas facing Russian regional and local leaders – those who are genuinely interested in developing their region as well as the unabashed kleptocrats. We will devote special attention to the fate of the ethnic or national republics under Putin.

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Nikolai Petrov and Darrell Slider, “Regional Politics,” ch. 2 in Stephen K. Wegren (ed.), *Putin’s Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, 7th ed. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
- Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, “Indigeneity, Land and Activism in Siberia,” ch. 1 in Alan C. Tidwell and Barry Scott Zellen (eds.), *Land, Indigenous Peoples and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- Thomas F. Remington, Irina Soboleva, Anton Sobolev, and Mark Urnov, “Economic and Social Policy Trade-Offs in the Russian Regions: Evidence from Four Case Studies,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65.10 (2013): 1855–1876.
- Natalia Zubarevich, “Four Russias: Human Potential and Social Differentiation of Russian Regions and Cities,” ch. 3 in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov (eds.), *Russia 2025: Scenarios for the Future* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

9. Public Opinion and Political Culture (November 3)

Are Russians undemocratic? What are the origins of this supposed authoritarian predisposition? Is post-Soviet autocracy a return to a centuries-old Russian tradition of patrimonial rule? Did the Soviet system nurture a personality type – the so-called homo sovieticus – that is fundamentally anti-democratic? Was the late Soviet Union an essentially “modern” society, whose democratic potential was undermined by the economic collapse and social disorder of the 1990s? Or are Russians’ regime preferences more nuanced than any of these narratives suggests?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Henry E. Hale, “The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy: The Public Opinion Foundations of a Hybrid Regime,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63.8 (2011): 1357–1375.
- Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “Was There a ‘Simple Soviet Person’? Debating the Politics and Sociology of *Homo Sovieticus*,” *Slavic Review* 78.1 (2019): 173–195.
- Lev Gudkov (interviewed by Maxim Trudolyubov), “Who Is ‘Soviet Man’ Today?”, available here: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/who-soviet-man-today-interview-levada-centers-lev-gudkov>.

10. Fall Reading Week: No Class

- Review lecture notes from previous week.

11. Protest, Civil Society, and Media (November 17)

Mentions of “protest” and “civil society” in the Russian context are likely to call to mind the 2011–12 demonstrations against election fraud, or the recent rallies and pickets against the invasion of Ukraine. But most protest movements in post-Soviet Russia have focused on social and welfare rights and shied away from challenging the regime, instead choosing to work within the system. This week, we will explore the oft-neglected influence of “society” – broadly construed to mean both protest and civic organizations – on the development of polity and economy under Putin. Are “within-system” movements and organizations schools of democracy in an authoritarian regime, or do they serve mainly to co-opt potential opposition?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- DRP 9, ch. 6 (Protest, Civil Society and Informal Politics) and 7 (Russia, Media and Audiences).
- Meri Kulmala and Anna Tarasenko, “Interest Representation and Social Policy Making: Russian Veterans’ Organizations as Brokers between the State and Society,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68.1 (2016): 138–163.
- Arbakhan Magomedov, “How Indigenous Peoples of Russia’s Arctic Defend their Interests: Social, Economic, and Political Foundations of Indigenous Resistance (On the Example of the *Golos tundry* Protest Movement),” *Anthropology and Archaeology of Eurasia* 58.4 (2019): 215–245.

12. The Military, Security Services, and Foreign Policy (November 24)

Although the military has failed to assert itself as an independent political actor in post-Soviet Russia, the importance of the security services can scarcely be exaggerated – or so it appears at first glance. This week, we consider the role of the security apparatus in polity and economy under Putin. To what extent is the fusion of business, political, and coercive elites in contemporary Russia exceptional, and to what extent does it find parallels in other present-day nondemocracies?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- DRP 9, ch. 12 (Russian Foreign Policy) and 13 (Security, the Military, and Politics).
- Adam E. Casey and Seva Gunitsky, “The Bully in the Bubble: Putin and the Perils of Information Isolation,” *Foreign Affairs* (February 4, 2022).
- Brian D. Taylor, “The Russian *Siloviki* and Political Change,” *Daedalus* (Spring 2017): 53–63.

13. Whither Russia? (December 1)

Wrapping up the course, this week we explore the future of Russian politics. What will happen after Putin exits the stage? A window of opportunity for democratization? State collapse? Or

more of the same – “Putinism without Putin”? And how will Russia adapt to the other challenges it will increasingly face in the decades to come, especially climate change?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- DRP 9, ch. 15 (The Continuing Evolution of Russia’s Political System).
- Taylor, ch. 7.
- Thane Gustafson, *Klimat: Russia in the Age of Climate Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), conclusion.

COURSE POLICIES

Office hours: No appointment is needed for regular office hours. If you cannot make regular office hours but would like to meet, email me to schedule an appointment.

Email: Consult the syllabus and Quercus before emailing me with questions. Email correspondence should be used for organizational questions only; substantive questions about the course material are best addressed to me in lecture or office hours.

Keep copies: Keep paper drafts and hard copies of all assignments until the graded versions are returned.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and will be dealt with accordingly. For further clarification and information, please see the University of Toronto’s policy on Plagiarism at <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize/>. This course uses anti-plagiarism software.

Anti-plagiarism software: Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University’s plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool’s reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

Extensions: Extensions may be granted in extraordinary circumstances. I will *only* consider requests for extensions made during office hours, not requests submitted by email. I will consider requests for extensions made less than two weeks before the assignment due date only if the student can present an official Verification of Student Illness or Injury: <http://www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca/index.php>.

Late and missed assignments: Late submissions will be subject to a penalty of 10% of total marks for the assignment per day; this includes weekends. In other words, a paper submitted the day after the deadline *cannot* receive a grade higher than 90% (of total marks for that assignment); a paper submitted two days after the deadline *cannot* receive a grade higher than 80%, and so on. Assignments submitted five or more calendar days after the

deadline will receive a grade of zero, as will any work handed in after the assignment in question has been returned to the class. I will not make accommodations for late registration in the course.

Accessibility needs: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, feel free to approach me and/or Accessibility Services (<https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as/contact-us>) as soon as possible. Note that you must contact Accessibility Services before 5:00pm on Friday, October 14, to request accommodations for the final exam period. I cannot grant such accommodations after this deadline.

Equity statement: The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As an instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behavior that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns you may contact the U of T Equity & Diversity officer.