

POL 354

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

Time: Tuesday, 11:00 AM–1:00 PM

Instructor: Brendan McElroy, Assistant Professor, Political Science

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Office hours: Friday, 10:00–11:00 AM (sign-up sheet available on course site)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

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 a historical approach to these questions, examining the evolution of Russian politics and society 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, economic reform, civil society and interest groups, state building, federalism, regional diversity, 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 political future but also how the country 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:

- Describe the impact of pre-Soviet and Soviet legacies on the present-day Russian polity, society, and economy.
- Weigh competing explanations for Putin's rise and enduring popularity, despite war and economic distress.
- Evaluate competing (and complementary) explanations for the persistence of nondemocratic rule in Russia.
- Use comparative analysis to assess the uniqueness (or otherwise) of long-run patterns in Russian political and economic development.
- Make informed predictions about the future of Russian politics and Russia's position on the international stage.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In brief:

- *Participation*: 10% of total marks
- *Weekly reading and lecture quizzes*: 30%
- *Book review (1,500 words maximum)*: 35%
- *Term test*: 25%

In detail:

- ***Participation*** includes, in the first instance, attendance and active engagement with weekly lectures. Read carefully and arrive with questions to ask and/or your own ideas and interpretations to share. Be prepared to answer the instructor's questions. If you feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the class, office hours may provide an alternative format for participation.
- ***Weekly quizzes*** on the content of readings and lectures will be posted to the Quercus site beginning on September 10. There will be no quiz during the reading week. Quizzes will post following each week's lecture and must be completed within 24 hours—no exceptions. These are open-book quizzes, each consisting of three multiple-choice or true-false questions; once the quiz is opened, however, you will have only 15 minutes to complete it. The correct answers will not be revealed immediately upon submission; instead, I will review the results of each quiz at the beginning of the following week's lecture. Students are to complete the weekly quizzes individually, not in collaboration with others.
- The ***book review*** will ask you to write a critical and analytical review of a recent scholarly book on Russian politics and society. I will circulate a list of acceptable books along with more detailed instructions as the assignment date approaches. The review should be in the range of 1,300–1,500 words in length and is due (through Quercus) by 9:00 AM on Friday, October 18; it should be formatted in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, and with the word count indicated near the top of the first page. Late submissions are subject to a penalty of 5% of total marks for the assignment per day, including weekends, and any assignment handed in five or more calendar days after the deadline will receive a grade of zero. Don't go there!
- The ***final term test*** 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 test. I will provide more details about the organization and contents of the term test as it approaches.

REQUIRED BOOKS

Chapters from the following book will be posted to the Quercus course site:

- Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analysing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). Hereafter **Gel'man**.

WEEKS AT A GLANCE

Week	Date	Topic	Notes
1	September 3	Russia in comparative perspective	
2	September 10	Geography and history	First reading quiz
3	September 17	The Soviet system and its legacy	
4	September 24	The “wild nineties,” state collapse and re-formation (1991–99)	
5	October 1	The building of a new political regime (2000–08)	
6	October 8	Mature Putinism and its global context (2009–23)	
7	October 15	Political economy	Book review due 9:00 AM, Friday, October 18
8	October 22	Federalism and regional diversity	
	October 29	<i>Fall reading week</i>	No lecture
9	November 5	Public opinion, political culture, and ideology	
10	November 12	Civil society and protest	
11	November 19	The forces of “order”	
12	November 26	The impact of war	
13	December 3	<i>Term test</i>	

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND LECTURE TOPICS

1. Russia in comparative perspective (September 3)

This week, we introduce the course, and with it, several longstanding debates about post-Soviet Russian politics—debates that will preoccupy us throughout the semester. Why has Russia “failed” to become a rich market democracy? Why did anyone ever expect this to happen? Why have periods of rapprochement between Russia and the West repeatedly proved to be illusory, giving way to new conflicts? 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 chaps. 1–2.

2. Geography and history (September 10)

Is present-day Russia a prisoner of its past, or even, as some especially pessimistic observers might have it, of its geography? This week, we examine long-run patterns of Russian political and economic development. How unique is the Russian polity today, has it arrived at its present condition by a “special path”—a history that is somehow unusual in comparative perspective—and what, if anything, do the answers to these questions imply for the country’s political future?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Marshall T. Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chaps. 1–7.
- Allen C. Lynch, “Roots of Russia’s economic dilemmas: Liberal economics and illiberal geography,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54.1 (2002), pp. 31–49.

3. The Soviet system and its legacy (September 17)

This week, we examine the Soviet system and introduce the notion of Soviet legacy, a concept that will preoccupy us throughout the course. How were Soviet institutions supposed to work, and how did they work in practice? How did the regime cope with issues of nationalism and identity? Did the Soviet inheritance constrain the prospects for Russia’s democratization and economic development during the 1990s, and does it continue to do so today? If so, how? Are there any positive Soviet “legacies”?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000*, updated ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), introduction and chaps. 1–4.
- Gregory Grossman, “The ‘second economy’ of the USSR,” *Problems of Communism* 26.5 (1977), pp. 25–40.

- **Recommended:** Benjamin Tromly, “An unlikely national revival: Soviet higher learning and the Ukrainian ‘sixtiers,’ 1953–65,” *The Russian Review* 68.4 (2009), pp. 607–622.
- **Recommended:** David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart, “Soviet growth and American textbooks: An endogenous past,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 78 (2011), pp. 110–125.

4. The “wild nineties,” state collapse and re-formation, 1991–99 (September 24)

This week, we consider politics under President Boris Yeltsin. During the 1990s, the most popular model through which observers sought to understand post-Soviet politics was that of a “transition” from single-party autocracy and the command economy to liberal capitalist democracy. Of course, that model is no longer viable, not only because Russia has not democratized but also because the presumed endpoint of the transition is increasingly contested in Western Europe and North America. How, then, should we understand the evolution of Russian politics under Yeltsin? Is this a case of stalled democratization? The birth of a new electoral authoritarian regime? A study in state collapse? Or something else entirely?

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

5. The building of a new political regime, 2000–08 (October 1)

Who is Vladimir Putin, what does he believe, and what explains his extraordinary popularity among Russians? What type of regime did Putin construct during his first two presidential terms, and how did it differ from Yeltsin’s system? The political 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 critic of Putin, assassinated in 2014? Would the regime have evolved in a more pluralistic direction? Or would a Nemtsov 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, chap. 4.
- Gleb Pavlovsky (interviewed by Tom Parfitt), “Putin’s world outlook,” *New Left Review* 88 (Jul–Aug 2014), pp. 54–66.
- Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, “The Weimar/Russia comparison,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13.3 (1997), pp. 252–283.

6. Mature Putinism and its global context, 2009–23 (October 8)

Previously, we identified the possible endogenous, deep historical roots of Russian authoritarianism. This week, examining the more recent evolution of Putin’s regime, we will explore the possibility 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 appears to be gaining ground almost everywhere—personalistic, patrimonial autocracy? And what do Russian politics look like in comparative, post-Soviet perspective?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Gel’man, chap. 5.
- Gulnaz Sharafutdinova and Karen Dawisha, “The escape from institution-building in a globalized world: Lessons from Russia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15.2 (2017), pp. 361–378.
- Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), chaps. 3–4.

7. Political economy (October 15)

This week, we explore the other side of “the transition,” namely, the making of Russian capitalism. How was the Soviet command economy transformed into a market system during the 1990s? How did the many informal practices and institutions which had evolved to compensate for the Soviet economy’s shortcomings—described by Grossman in Week 3—impact the transition to capitalism? How have other Soviet legacies influenced post-Soviet Russia’s economic development? What type of capitalism exists in Russia today, and how has the dominant economic model changed over the course of Putin’s long reign?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Anders Åslund, *Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), chaps. 1, 3–4.
- Jordan Gans-Morse, “Property rights: Forging the institutional foundations for Russia’s market economy,” chap. 9 in Susanne A. Wengle, ed., *Russian Politics Today: Stability and Fragility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 199–224.
- Clifford G. Gaddy, “Room for error: The economic legacy of Soviet spatial misallocation,” chap. 3 in Stephen Kotkin and Marc R. Beissinger, eds., *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 52–67.

8. Federalism and regional diversity (October 22)

This week, students will familiarize themselves with the evolution of center-regional relations in Russia since 1991, devoting special attention to the fate of the ethnic or national republics under Putin. We will also examine the political and economic dilemmas facing Russian regional and local leaders—those who are genuinely interested in developing their regions as well as the unabashed kleptocrats.

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Nikolai Petrov and Darrell Slider, “Regional politics,” chap. 2 in Stephen K. Wegren, ed., *Putin’s Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, 7th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), pp. 49–68.
- Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, “Indigeneity, Land and Activism in Siberia,” chap. 1 in Alan C. Tidwell and Barry Scott Zellen (eds.), *Land, Indigenous Peoples and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 9–27.
- Ilya Matveev and Sarah Wilson Sokhey, “Inequality and social policy in Russia,” chap. 13 in Wengle, *Russian Politics Today*, pp. 293–317.
- 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), pp. 1855–1876.
- **Recommended:** Natalia Zubarevich, “Four Russias: Human potential and social differentiation of Russian regions and cities,” chap. 3 in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov, eds., *Russia 2025: Scenarios for the Russian Future* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 67–85.

9. Public opinion, political culture, and ideology (November 5)

Understanding public opinion has been one of the central concerns of the field of Russian studies since the early 2000s. What explains Putin’s enduring popularity, and how genuine is this popularity to begin with? What kind of political regime do Russians want, and what kind of regime do they think they have? Does the Russian public have an “authoritarian predisposition,” deeply rooted in history and culture, or does support for autocracy have other sources? This week, we explore a variety of perspectives on the political culture of contemporary Russia.

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, “Is Putin’s popularity (still) real? A cautionary note on using list experiments to measure popularity in authoritarian regimes,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39.3 (2023), pp. 213–222.
- Henry E. Hale and Timothy J. Colton, “Who defects? Unpacking a defection cascade from Russia’s dominant party 2008–12,” *American Political Science Review* 111.2 (2017), pp. 322–337.
- Kåre Johan Mjør, “*Smuta*: cyclical visions of history in contemporary Russian thought and the question of hegemony,” *Studies in East European Thought* 70 (2018), pp. 19–40.

- **Recommended:** Daniel Treisman, “Presidential popularity in a hybrid regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55.3 (2011), pp. 590–609.
- **Recommended:** 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), pp. 1357–1375.

10. Civil society and protest (November 12)

Mentions of protest in the Russian context are likely to call to mind the 2011–12 demonstrations against electoral fraud, or, more recently, the scattered rallies and pickets against the invasion of Ukraine and the extension of military conscription. But many protest movements and civic groups in post-Soviet Russia have shied away from openly challenging the regime, instead choosing to work within the system. This week, we will explore the oft-neglected influence of society—broadly construed—on the development of polity and economy under Putin. Are “within-system” movements schools of democracy in an authoritarian regime, or do they serve mainly to co-opt potential opposition?

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Natalia Forrat, “Civil society in Russia: Compliance with and resistance to the state,” chap. 18 in Wengle, *Russian Politics Today*, pp. 408–430.
- 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), pp. 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), pp. 215–245.

11. The forces of “order” (November 19)

What are the forces of “order,” continuity, or “stability” (long a favorite Putinist slogan) in present-day Russian politics? In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the relative cohesion of Russian elites over the past two and a half years (despite many predictions to the contrary), the question of sources of regime stability assumes even greater importance. This week, we consider several candidates for the bases of regime stability, including overarching agreement on foreign-policy objectives, the political power of the security apparatus (the siloviki), the prevalence of people with ties to the Soviet-era political elite in present-day politics, and socially conservative public opinion.

- Review lecture notes from previous week.

- Seva Gunitsky and Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The Wilsonian bias in the study of Russian foreign policy,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 65.6 (2018), pp. 385–393.
- Marlene Laruelle, “Russia’s conservative forces and the state: A dynamic balancing act,” chap. 16 in Wengle, *Russian Politics Today*, pp. 365–389.
- Sharon Werning Rivera and David W. Rivera, “Are *siloviki* still undemocratic? Elite support for political pluralism during Putin’s third presidential term,” *Russian Politics* 4.4 (2019), pp. 499–519.
- Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov, “Long Soviet shadows: The nomenklatura ties of Putin elites,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38.4 (2022), pp. 329–348.

12. The impact of war (November 26)

Wrapping up the course, this week we discuss the medium-term future of Russian politics. What sorts of political dynamics has the invasion of Ukraine unleashed in Russia, and in which outcome are these dynamics most likely to culminate once Putin finally leaves the scene? State collapse? Elite conflict, a disputed succession, and a window of opportunity for more open politics? Or more of the same—Putinism without Putin? We also ask how Russia will adapt to another fundamental challenge the country (and the world) faces, climate change.

- Review lecture notes from previous week.
- Kirill Rogov, “Preface,” in Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, eds., *The Russia-Ukraine War, vol. 2: Russia’s Imperial Endeavor and its Geopolitical Consequences* (Budapest, Vienna, and New York: Central European University Press, 2023), pp. xv–xx.
- Nikolay Petrov, “The evolution of Russia’s patronal system: Elites during the war and after Putin,” in Madlovics and Magyar, eds., *The Russia-Ukraine War, vol. 2*, pp. 3–25.
- Ekaterina Paustyan, “Elite cohesion and resilience of the Russian regions: The case of Belgorod Oblast,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40.4 (2024), pp. 296–312.
- Thane Gustafson, *Klimat: Russia in the Age of Climate Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), conclusion.

13. Term test (December 3)

More information to follow.

COURSE POLICIES

Office hours: A sign-up sheet for regular office hours will be posted to the course site. If you cannot make my regular office hours due to a scheduling conflict but would like to meet, email me to set up an appointment. I cannot guarantee that I will be available to meet outside of regular office hours.

Email correspondence: Consult the syllabus, Quercus course site, and other course documentation before contacting me with questions. Email correspondence should be reserved for organizational questions; substantive questions about the course material are best addressed to me in lecture or office hours. Email should be directed to me, not to the teaching assistant for the course.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will be dealt with accordingly. For further information and clarification, examine the University of Toronto's policies on plagiarism (<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize/>). This course uses antiplagiarism 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 and Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

Generative AI: Students may not use generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT) to write the required response paper for this course, to answer weekly reading quizzes, or in the final term test. The final submitted assignment must be original work produced by the individual student alone. There are some uses for generative AI tools in an academic context: you could, for instance, use ChatGPT to generate summaries of articles as a study guide for the term test—I still expect you to read and take notes on all of the assigned readings for this course—or to generate a reading list for a particular topic. While I do not forbid the use of generative AI for these purposes, I nonetheless strongly advise you against using it: what the algorithm deems most significant in a particular article or book chapter may not be what I consider most significant. Accordingly, your own notes are a more reliable guide. As for reading lists, whenever possible I have included the complete bibliography associated with a particular reading so that you know where to look for additional material. A final caveat: it is well-known that ChatGPT and other generative AI tools frequently generate false statements and concocted references. Keep in mind that concoction—attempting to pass off fabricated data, facts, or references as the genuine article—is an offense under the Code of Behavior on Academic Matters.

Extensions: Workload-related extensions may be granted under extraordinary circumstances. I will only consider requests for workload-related extensions made during office hours, not those submitted by email. I will not consider workload-related extension requests made less than one week before the assignment due date.

Late and missed assignments: Late papers will be subject to a penalty of 5% (of total marks for the assignment) per calendar day. This includes weekends. In other words, a response paper submitted the day after the deadline cannot receive a grade higher than 95%; a paper submitted two days after the deadline cannot receive a grade higher than 90%, and so on. Papers 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 Accessibility Services (<https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as/contact-us>) as soon as possible.

Recording of lectures: This course, including your participation, will be recorded on video and will be available to students in the course for viewing remotely and after each session. Course videos and materials belong to your instructor, the University, and/or other sources depending on the specific facts of each situation, and are protected by copyright. Do not download, copy, or share any course or student materials or videos without the explicit permission of the instructor. For questions about recording and use of videos in which you appear please contact your instructor.

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 and Diversity officer.