Russian and Soviet Politics

POLI 329  
Fall 2019  
ENGMD 280  
W-F: 2:35 PM - 3:55 PM  
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Office Hours: W 4-5:00 PM

Course description

Often considered the natural successor of the Soviet Union after its collapse in 1991, Russia has had to deal with simultaneous political, economic, and social transformations that continue to significantly influence both the post-Soviet region and beyond. This course offers a broad introduction to Russian politics, aiming first to demystify the country and provide students with different frameworks with which to understand and analyze current affairs related to Russia. We begin with a brief overview of the Soviet era and then explore key issues in post-Soviet Russian politics, such as formal and informal political institutions, economic transformations, Russian nationalism and civil society, and Russian foreign policy. While our discussions will be mainly centered around Russia in an empirical fashion, students are encouraged to use and apply political science concepts and theories to sharpen their understanding of the topic.

Learning outcomes

By successfully completing this course, students will: (1) know key information about Russia’s past and present; (2) compare different viewpoints of leading Russian and Western analysts of Russian politics; (3) sharpen their analytical and critical lenses; (4) apply political science concepts to key questions of Russian politics; and (5) discuss Russian current affairs in an intelligent and informed manner.

Required Readings


An electronic version of the book is available at McGill library (see the link above). For those who would prefer hard copies, the book is available for purchase at the university bookstore and a copy will be put at the library reserve. Other readings are either hyperlinked (e-version from the McGill Library) or posted on MyCourses, as noted. For best results, please do the readings for each week ahead of time and in the order listed on the outline.
But events move fast in Russia – much faster than scholarly publishing! Students should keep up on current events in Russia by subscribing to David Johnson’s Russia List or the BEAR Market Brief, which offer daily compilation of news reports, analyses, and commentary on Russian affairs. Don’t be overwhelmed by the amount of information in JRL – just choose one or two interesting pieces per day to read. For those of you who enjoy getting your Russia news via podcast, I also recommend RFE/RL’s The Power Vertical.

Course Obligations

1) Conference participation (10%)
2) Quizzes (5%)
3) Midterm exam (20%)
4) Critical press report (35%)
4) Comprehensive final examination (30%)

Conference participation (10 %)

Please register for a conference time on Minerva. Conferences will begin during Week 3 and attendance is mandatory. Your conference grade will be based on the quality of your participation in group discussions. Please complete all of the readings for the week before coming to conference. We will not have conferences in Weeks 1 to 2, 7 (because of the midterm), and 13.

Quizzes (5 %)

There will be four in-class quizzes (Week 2, 5, 9, 11). Each quiz will consist of one question that will relate to the week’s readings. I will give you the question during the lecture, and you will need to submit your short answer through MyCourses during the allowed period in class. The responses themselves will be graded pass or fail. To pass, your response needs to show that you have done the readings, even if your response is not perfect. There will be no deferral quizzes. If you submit 4 pass quizzes, you will get 5%, 3 pass quizzes, you will get 3.75%, 2 pass quizzes earn 2.5%, and 1 pass quiz will get you 1.25%. The goal is to encourage you to read every week, thereby better preparing you for both the conferences and the final examination.

Midterm Exam (20 %)

The in-class midterm will be held on October 16th. The exam will include term IDs (short-answer definition) and factual questions. You will be tested on the material covered in lecture, discussed in conferences, and contained in the readings. The midterm is worth 20% of your grade. There will be no conference in the week of the midterm.
Critical press report (35 %)

The goal of this assignment is to push you to think critically about how important events in Russian politics are often viewed and discussed differently in Western media versus Russian ones.

For writing your critical press report, you need to first summarize the event you have chosen and the reasons why it is important for Russian politics. Then, you must critically analyze and compare how the event is being reported by your sources and discuss the potential limitations of your sources.

Your analysis must build on at least six different media sources (but you can use more of course), and needs to include at least one source from each of these three categories:

A – American or Canadian media sources, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Globe and Mail, National Post, etc.
B – Russian media sources, such as the Moscow Times, RT, Sputnik News Service, Interfax, Meduza, Levada Center, etc.
C – European media sources, such as The Times, Guardian, BBC, Deutsche Welle, Le Monde, Figaro, etc.

Note that the aim is not to describe in length every source you use; rather, you should refer to and build upon the sources (as well as on other academic material) in order to support your central argument. Although this work should include a number of media sources, it is still a research paper, and therefore needs an introduction, argument, conclusion, and bibliography.

While you need to use the reading material of the course for describing and analyzing your event, you must also incorporate at least two other academic materials that are relevant for your event.

To access more remote sources, you may want to use Factiva or another media database online tool. You can also search the archives of the David Johnson List website. More guidance will be given during class. Note that you can also always consult with the liaison librarian for political science, Sandy Hervieux (sandy.hervieux@mgill.ca), at the McLennan Library.

Your report must not exceed 8-10 pages (excluding the bibliography), is worth 35% of your grade, and is due on the last day of class (November 29). Late reports will be marked down 5% per day.

Text should be double-spaced, in 12-point font with reasonable margins. You can use any citation format you like, but you must be consistent throughout your paper (do not switch from one citation format to another).
Here is a list of topics/events that you can select (you can select another topic only with permission from the instructor).

**Domestic Politics**
- Perestroika
- The 1993 Constitutional Crisis
- The 1996 Yeltsin elections (or the Yeltsin regime in general)
- The Shock Therapy
- The 1998 financial crisis
- The Rise of Putin (as Yeltsin’s successor)
- One of the two Chechen War (1994-96; 1999-2009)
- Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s arrest (or trials)
- Putin’s re-elections (2008 as PM, or 2012, or 2018)
- The 2008 financial crisis
- 2011-12 movement “For Fair Elections”

**Foreign politics:**
- NATO enlargement (and/or the Kosovo War)
- The Color Revolutions
- The 2008 Russo-Georgia War
- The Annexation of Crimea (or the economic sanctions)
- Russia’s involvement in Syria
- Russian meddling in US elections
- The Russia-China relationship (or with the BRICs)

**Comprehensive final examination (30 %)**

The comprehensive final examination, worth 30 % of your grade, will be given on the university-selected date during the regular exam period. The exam will consist of three essay questions, which will require an excellent understanding of the class material and the weekly readings. Attending classes, doing your quizzes, and actively participating in conference will help you to prepare to the exam.

**Important Additional Notes**

**On MyCourses**
MyCourses is an integral part of this course, and you should check our site regularly.

What can you do on our MyCourses site?
- Read this syllabus;
- See special announcements for the course
- Read extra-material provided by the instructor or TA
- Send e-mail to me, to your TA, or to other students in the class;
- Send messages to our course discussion list;
- And much, much more!
If you have questions about how to use MyCourses, please refer to the McGill IT Knowledge Base site for MyCourses.

On Language
Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

On Academic Integrity
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

On Copyright
© Instructor generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.
Course Outline and Calendar

Week 1: The Soviet Communist Experiment (Sept. 4-6)


Week 2: The Collapse of the USSR (Sept. 11-13)

Quiz #1


* “Address by Mikhail Gorbachev at the UN General Assembly Session (Excerpts),” December 7, 1988, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive: http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116224

Week 3: The 1990s and the "Triple Transition" (Sept. 18-20)

Conferences begin this week!

In-class film “My Perestroïka”

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/726824318

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/5546909147

Week 4: Economic Reforms (Sept. 25-27)

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/45093773

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/732959291


Week 5: Political Institutions (Oct. 2-4)

Quiz #2

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/7376764142

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/926480517

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/358166291

Week 6: Federalism and the Chechen Wars (Oct. 9-11)

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/45093773

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/437109456
http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24080

Week 7: Midterm and Vladimir Putin (No conference this week)

October 16: In Class Midterm Exam

October 18: Regular lecture: The 2000s and Vladimir Putin  


Week 8: The Consolidation of the Putin Regime (Oct. 23-25)  
Oct 23: Presentation by Sandy Hervieux (Liaison librarian for Political Science)


https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/828302552


Week 9: Nation-building and Nationalism (Oct. 30-Nov. 1)  
Quiz #3

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/6895885878

https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/441988475

Week 10: People After Communism: From Passivity to the Color Revolutions (Nov. 6-8)


Week 11: The Authoritarian Backlash and the 2010s (Nov. 13-15)

**Quiz #4**


Week 12: Russian Foreign Policy (Nov. 20-22)


Putin 4.0. Changes, Continuities, and What comes Next (Nov. 27-29)
