Russian and Soviet Politics

POLI 329
Fall 2018
ENGMD 279
TTh 10:05 AM - 11:25 AM
TA: Andrey Davydov

Lecturer: Virginie Lasnier, PhD
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Office Hours: T 11:30-12:30

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 currents 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 (JRL) 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) Two weekly reading reports (20 %)
3) One critical press report (30 %)
4) A comprehensive final examination (40%)

Conference participation (10%)

Please register for a conference time on Minerva. Conferences will begin during Week 4 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 3 and 13.

Two weekly reading reports (20 %)

Twice during the semester, you will need to submit a report of the week’s readings (due on Mondays at midnight before the first class of the selected week). Each report is worth 10 % of your grade, for a total of 20 %. You can select whichever weeks you want, but one report needs to be submitted in the first half of the semester (i.e. on or before Oct. 8 midnight) while the second is due on or before November 19, midnight. For each reading, you must:

1) Sum up the most important argument. What major point is the author trying to make? (1 paragraph)
2) Identify the methodology that the author uses to support his/her argument. (1-2 sentences)
3) Give one important insight that you gained from the reading. (1-2 sentences)
4) Give one major critique of the reading - consider methodology, logic, biases, omissions, etc. Does the author prove his/her argument convincingly? (1-2 sentences)
5) Finally, you need to comparatively assess these readings - how do they sit alongside one another, do they contradict or complement each other? Which one do you find the most convincing/useful and why? (2-3 paragraphs)

Consequently, each (double-spaced) reading report will contain both summaries of the readings – about a page each (components 1-4) – and a comparative discussion of them – no more than one page (component 5). As a result, for a week of three readings for example, your report should not exceed four pages.
While writing a report on a specific week will help you participate more actively during that week’s classes, it will also be good preparation for the final exam. Thus, while only two reports are required, I strongly encourage you to write reports every week.

One critical press report (30%)

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 five different media sources, 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 Journals, 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.

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@mcgill.ca), at the McLennan Library.

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

Your (double-spaced) report must not exceed 6-8 pages (excluding the bibliography), is worth 30% of your grade, and is due on the last day of class (November 29).

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)
- 2011-12 movement “For Fair Elections”
- The 2008 financial crisis

**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)

For all assignments (weekly or press reports), the number of pages indicated are double-spaced, in 12-point font with reasonable margins. Reports may be submitted in English or in French. Late reports will be marked down a half grade for each day that they are late (e.g., a B+ report becomes a B on the first day it is late, a B- on the second day, and so on). Further details on the writing assignments will be distributed in class and on MyCourses.

**A comprehensive final examination (40%)**

The comprehensive final examination, worth 40% of your grade, will be given on the university-selected date during the regular exam period. The exam will consist of ID questions, short-answer, and essay questions, which will require an excellent understanding of the class material and the weekly readings. Attending classes and actively participating in conference will help you to prepare to the exam, as will consistently doing your reading reports.

**Important Additional Notes**

**On Grading**

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This course uses the standard 4.0 system for grading. An A on an assignment is worth 4 points, an A- is worth 3.7 points, etc. To calculate your final grade, I will first multiply the grade points you have earned on each assignment by the relative weight of that assignment (e.g., since the first paper is worth 10% of your grade, I would multiply your paper grade by 0.1), and then add all of the scores together to get your final grade point average. That average will determine your final letter grade (refer the grade range column above). For example, if your overall grade point average is a 2.91, you would earn a B in the course.

**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

The Soviet Communist Experiment (Sept. 4-6)


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


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

Sept. 18: In-class film "My Perestroïka"

*Vladimir Gel’m’an. Authoritarian Russia (University of Pittsburg Press, 2015), chapter 3: 43-70.


Economic Reforms (Sept. 25-27)
Conferences begin this week!
Sept. 25: Guest lecture by Prof. Juliet Johnson (McGill) on the shock therapy


Political Institutions (Oct. 2-4)


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

October 8, midnight: Deadline for submitting your first weekly reading report!


The 2000s and Vladimir Putin (Oct. 16-18)


The Consolidation of the Putin Regime (Oct. 23-25)


Nation-building and Nationalism (Oct. 30-Nov. 1)


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


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

**Nov. 15: Journalist Frédérick Lavoie presents his book For Want of a Fir Tree: Ukraine Undone (LLP, 2018).**


**Russian Foreign Policy (Nov. 20-22)**

**November 19 midnight: Deadline for submitting your second weekly reading report**


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

**November 29: Deadline for submitting your critical press report!**

