POLI 329: Russian Politics

Winter 2026
Prof. Juliet Johnson

Redefining and recreating a Russian state from the ashes of the collapsed Soviet Union has represented one of the greatest political, economic, and social challenges of our time. This course invites students to explore this transformation through a broad introduction to Russian politics. We first briefly examine the Soviet system and its collapse, followed by key elements of contemporary Russian politics such as formal and informal political institutions; economic transformation and state-business relations; nationalism, memory, and identity; civil society and social movements; foreign policy; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Prerequisites: POLI 212 or 227, or instructor permission.

Course Obligations

Assignments	*Weight*	*Date Due*
Weekly Questions	10%	Jan 16, 23, 30; Feb 6, 13, 20; Mar 13, 20, 27; Apr 10
Conference Participation	5%	Weeks 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12
Mini-Midterm	15%	Monday, February 9 in class
Policy Brief or Podcast	25%	Thursday, April 2 at 9pm
Final Exam	45%	TBD during official exam period

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control (e.g., pandemic, earthquake, Sharknado), the content and/or evaluation scheme is subject to change. Please check MyCourses regularly, as course materials, assignments, updates, etc. will all appear there.

Required Readings

Our core text is Hale, Johnson, and Lankina, ed., *Developments in Russian Politics 10* (Duke 2024). It is available for purchase as a paperback from the McGill Bookstore and is on reserve at the library. Chapters from the text are tagged as DRP 10 in the syllabus. For up-to-date analysis, we will read several short PONARS Eurasia Policy Memos (PEPM) and watch a few introductory videos from the PONARS Eurasia Online Academy (PEOA). These are hyperlinked in the syllabus. *All other readings on the syllabus are hyperlinked and/or will be available electronically on MyCourses under Readings*. For best results, please do the readings for each week ahead of time.

Course Schedule

Conferences begin the third week of class and will be held six times during the term (in weeks 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12); please sign up for a time as soon as conferences open for Minerva registration. Conferences times are first-come, first-served. Please do not ask us to change your conference or to attend sessions for which you are not registered. We will not have Wednesday lectures on weeks that we have conferences. We will also have occasional lectures and/or short Q&A sessions with guest scholars and practitioners, I will announce these in class and via MyCourses as they are scheduled.

Assignments

Weekly Discussion Questions

The instructor will post ten sets of discussion questions on MyCourses, beginning with Week 2. Please choose ONE question from each set to answer in written form and submit your short, thoughtful response via MyCourses. For full credit, responses must be at least 200 words long and answer the question with explicit reference to the course reading(s). No footnotes or bibliography needed - just be sure that you discuss at least one reading in your answer (e.g., "As Hale argues"). **Responses are due by 5pm on the following Fridays: Jan 16, 23, 30; Feb 6, 13, 20; Mar 13, 20, 27; Apr 10**. *Late responses will not be accepted*. You can skip one response without penalty. Please use this skip only if you need it (e.g., if you are sick, have an unavoidable work, family, or athletic commitment, etc.). The responses are not graded – you get credit just for writing them. There are ten opportunities to submit responses. If you submit *nine or ten* full-credit responses, you will receive an A for this part of the course; eight earn an A-, seven a B+, and six a B. Submitting fewer than six responses earns an F for this part of the course.

Conference Participation

Conferences will take place in Weeks 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12. Your conference mark is based on the regularity and quality of your participation in group discussions. You should be prepared to draw on the readings and lectures to discuss the weekly questions and to raise your own questions. You may miss one conference without penalty. As above, please use this skip only if you really need it.

Mini-Midterm

The mini-midterm will take place in class on Monday, February 9 and will consist of four short identifications. The mini-midterm is designed to help you to gauge your level of preparation. If you receive a higher grade on the final exam than on the midterm, the final exam grade will replace your midterm grade (i.e., the midterm grade disappears and your final is worth 60%). Similarly, if you do not take the mini-midterm at all, your final exam will automatically be worth 60%.

Policy Brief or Podcast

In this assignment, you will respond to a prompt that will be provided by the instructor. You can choose either to write a policy brief or create a podcast. Prompts and details will be distributed later in the semester. **Your policy brief/podcast is due via MyCourses by 9pm on Thursday, April 2**.

Option 1: Write a 1,500-2,000 word policy brief. The emphasis is on tight, persuasive writing. Please attach a separate bibliography, not included in the word limit. Two students may also choose to collaborate on a policy brief; these joint briefs must be 3,500-4,000 words long and both students will receive the same grade.

Option 2: Prepare an informative 8-10 minute podcast responding to the prompt. The emphasis is on engaging analysis supported with strong evidence. Two students may also choose to collaborate on a podcast; these joint podcasts must be 18-20 minutes long and both participants will receive the same grade. Please submit the audio file, a written transcript, and a reference list.

Late submissions will be accepted until April 7 at 5pm but can earn a maximum grade of B+ (e.g., if it would have earned an A or A-, it will get a B+ instead). Submissions after April 7 but by April 14 at 5pm will receive a maximum grade of C. No papers will be accepted after April 14. Completing this assignment is a requirement for receiving a passing grade in the course. See the Policy on Assessment of Student Learning as well as the Political Science department assessment policies for more information concerning assessment. All regrade requests must include a written justification.

Final Examination

The comprehensive final examination will be given on the university-selected date during the final exam period. The exam will consist of IDs and essay questions inspired by the weekly questions.

Course Outline

Week 1 (Jan 5 and 7)
Understanding Russian Politics

Henry Hale, "Putin and the Dynamics of Russia's Political System" (DRP 10 C1 pp. 1-18)

Brian Taylor, "Understanding Putinism," PEOA (2021)

Maria Snegovaya and Jade McGlynn, 2025. "Dissecting Putin's regime ideology." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 41(1): 42-63.

Week 2 (Jan 12 and 14) - First weekly questions due January 16
The Soviet Union and Legacies of the Past

Kristy Ironside, "Russian and Soviet History" (DRP 10 C2 pp 19-46)

Tomila Lankina, "How Russia's Past Influences Current Politics" (DRP 10 C3 pp 47-68)

David Marples, 2011. "Revisiting the Collapse of the USSR." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53 (2-4): 461-473.

Maria Lipman and Vladislav Zubok, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," PEOA (2022)

BBC Timeline: Soviet Union & The Atlantic, "20 Years since the Fall of the Soviet Union" (photos)

Recommended: Cold War documentary series

Week 3 (Jan 19) – First week of conferences
Nation and Memory

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Nationalism, Identity, and the Russia–Ukraine War" (DRP 10 C4 pp 69-86)

Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, 2002. "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet–Era Monuments and Post–Soviet National Identity in Moscow." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92(3): 524-547.

Kathleen Smith, 2019. "A Monument for our Times? Commemorating Victims of Repression in Putin's Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies*, *71*(8), pp.1314-1344.

Katie Stewart, "Consolidating Values to Consolidate Power in Russia," PEPM (2023)

Travis Frederick et al, "From Memory Wars to War," PEOA (2022)

Week 4 (Jan 26 and 28)
Economic Transformation and the Legacy of the 1990s

Juliet Johnson, "Russia's Economic Policies" (DRP 10 C6 pp 107-125)

Yoshiko Herrera and Evgeniya Mitrokhina, "Russia's Informal Economy" (DRP 10 C7 pp 127-142)

Gel'man, Vladimir. "In Search of the Roots of Failure: Reassessing Russian Politics in the 1990s." Russian Politics 10, no. 1 (2025): 51-70.

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Russia's Struggle over the Meaning of the 1990s," PEPM (2019)

William Pyle, "Russians' Worldview and the Legacy of the Early 1990s," PEPM (2025)

Watch the movie Leviathan (2014) (Be sure that you are on the McGill VPN)

Week 5 (Feb 2) – Conferences this week
Economic Challenges and the War Economy

Jeremy Morris, "Inequality and Marginalized Groups" (DRP 10 C12 pp 219-234)

Mareeva, Svetlana V., and Ekaterina D. Slobodenyuk. "The Super-Rich in Modern Russia: Who Are They and Are They Changing?." *Russian Politics* 9, no. 2 (2024): 161-196.

Peter Rutland, 2018. "The political economy of energy in Russia," in Slawomir Raszewski, ed, *The international political economy of oil and gas* (Palgrave): 23-39.

Debra Javeline, "Climate Change" (DRP 10 C14 pp 253-266)

Volodymyr Ishchenko, Ilya Matveev and Oleg Zhuravlev, "Russian Military Keynesianism: Who Benefits from the War in Ukraine?", PEPM (2023)

Susanne Wengle et al, Russia's War Economy, PEOA (2024)

Week 6 - Mini-Midterm Feb 9, Lecture Feb 11
Political Institutions

Grigorii Golosov, "Formal Institutions of Government" (DRP 10 C8 pp 143-160)

Lyubarev, Arkadii E. "Political Parties and Elections in Russia after the 2012 Reform." *Russian Politics* 10, no. 4 (2025): 493-519.

Pomeranz, William E. "Putin's 2020 constitutional amendments: What changed? What remained the same?." *Russian Politics* 6, no. 1 (2021): 6-26.

Week 7 (Feb 16 and 18)
Political Practices

David Szakonyi. "Authoritarian Mechanics" (DRP 10 C9 pp 161-180)

Tom Casier, 2025. The war against Ukraine and the transformation of the political regime in Russia. Forthcoming in *Contemporary Politics*, 1–19.

Valerie Sperling, "Russia's Gendered Politics" (DRP 10 C5 pp 87-106)

Guzel Garifullina, 2024. "The best among the connected (men): promotion in the Russian state apparatus." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 40(1): 19-38.

Week 8 (Feb 23) – Conferences this week
Centre-Regional Relations

Vladimir Gel'man, "Federalism and Centre–Periphery Relations" (DRP 10 C10 pp 181-198)

Bondarenko, Oleksiy. "Center-Region Relations and Neo-Patrimonial Governance in Russia: A Tale of Two Regions." *Russian Politics* 9, no. 3 (2024): 315-341.

Busygina, Irina, and Mikhail Filippov. "The Impact of War on Center-Regional Relations in Russia: the Case of Defense-Linked Regions." *Russian Politics* 10, no. 1 (2025): 1-21.

Week 9 (March 9) – Conferences this week
Chechnya

Marat Iliyasov, "Chechnya" (DRP 10 C11, pp 199-218)

Jean-François Ratelle, "Armed Conflicts in the North Caucasus since 1991," PEOA (2023)

Jean-François Ratelle and Marat Iliyasov, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Between Putin's Loyal Praetorian Guard and Devoted Servant of the Chechen People," PEPM (2023)

Week 10 (March 16 and 18)
Russian Foreign Policy

Kathryn Stoner, "Russian Foreign Policy" (DRP 10 C16 pp 293-313)

Michael McFaul, 2020. Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy. *International Security* 45 (2): 95–139.

Margarita Zavadskaya and Jussi Lassila, "The Kremlin's Dilemma: Effectiveness versus Loyalty in the Case of Prigozhin's Wagner PMC," PEPM (2024)

Elizabeth Wishnick, China-Russia Relations, PEOA (2024)

Week 11 (March 23) – Conferences this week
The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Maria Popova & Oxana Shevel, "Russia's Invasion and Ukraine's Resistance" (DRP 10 C15 pp 267-292)

Kateřina Fridrichová and Zdeněk Kříž, 2025. "Diminished Hegemony: Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* 72(4): 343-355.

Carna Pistan, "Alarming Alterations: How Memory Politics Turned the Russian Constitution into a War Weapon," PEPM (2022)

Travis Frederick et al., "From Memory Wars to War," PEOA (2023)

Irina Busygina, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Eurasian Economic Union," PEPM (2024)

Week 12 (Mar 30) – Conferences this week – Policy Briefs/Podcasts due April 2
Civil Society and Protest

Katerina Tertytchnaya, "Protest and Civil Society" (DRP 10 C13 pp 235-252)

PONARS Eurasia, "Russian Society in Wartime," PEOA (2024)

Stanislav Shkel, Anna A. Dekalchuk, Ivan S. Grigoriev, and Regina Smyth, "The Roots of Spontaneous Protest in Bashkortostan" PEPM (2024)

Guzel Yusupova, "Silence Matters: Self-Censorship and War in Russia," PEPM (2023)

Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, Laura Henry, and Valerie Sperling, "The Impacts of Host- and Home-Country Political Environments on Russian Activists Abroad," PEPM (2024)

Week 13 (April 8)
Media and (Dis)information

Aaron Erlich & Calvin Garner, 2021. "Is pro-Kremlin Disinformation Effective? Evidence from Ukraine," *The International Journal of Press/Politics 28*(1): 5-28.

Week 14 (April 13)
Reflections on Russian Politics

Important Information

Course Grading Scale

Grade	*Grade Points*	*Grade Range*
A	4.0	>3.85
A-	3.7	3.50-3.85
B+	3.3	3.15-3.49
B	3.0	2.85-3.14
B-	2.7	2.50-2.84
C+	2.3	2.15-2.49
C	2.0	1.85-2.14
D	1.0	1.0-1.84
F	0.0	<1.0

This course uses the standard 4.0 system for grading for all assignments. An A on an assignment is worth 4 points, an A- is worth 3.7 points, etc. To calculate your final grade, the instructor will first multiply the grade points you earned on each assignment by the relative weight of that assignment (e.g., 0.4 for the final exam), and then add the scores together to get your final grade-point average. That average will determine your final letter grade for the course (refer the grade range column). For example, if your overall grade-point average is a 3.4, you would earn a B+ in the course.

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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 also McGill's guide to academic honesty.)

On Generative AI
Learning to synthesize and evaluate readings independently is a fundamental goal of this course. Students may not copy or paraphrase directly from any generative artificial intelligence applications, including ChatGPT and other AI writing and coding assistants, for the purpose of completing any of the assignments in this course.

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