MODERN RUSSIAN HISTORY: PUTIN’S REGIME AND ITS ROOTS

Instructor: Prof. Nikolay Koposov

Tuesdays and Thursdays 3:05 – 4:25

D.M. Smith 207

Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:30 – 3:00

Course overview:

The course starts with an analysis of the recent events in Russia and the current issues in Russian-American relationships (from the Pussy Riot case to the Snowden affair, the law against homosexuality and the crisis in Syria). These events - taken together with other measures aiming at limiting civil rights in Russia – show that Vladimir Putin’s regime has entered into a new stage of its development characterized by strengthening of its authoritarian tendencies. The course gives an overview of recent Russian history (from the Communist period to the present) with a goal to explain the origins of the anti-democratic turn in Russian domestic and foreign policy since 2000. We shall examine the characteristic features of Soviet/Russian political culture, the reasons for the collapse of Communism, the promises and difficulties of the democratic reforms of the 1990s, the specificity of Russia’s transition to capitalism and the formation of Vladimir Putin’s regime.

Russia is a country where global trends often manifest themselves in extreme forms. We shall use the notion of exceptional/normal to account for this particularity of Russian history and explore what Russian case tells us about the prospects for democracy in the present-day world. A comparative approach will be fundamental for our discussion of Russian politics, economy, and society. We’ll be systematically comparing Russia with other countries of the former Soviet bloc, as well as with the West. We shall also reflect on the other countries’ experience of dealing with Russia over the course of its recent history.

Every class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. There will be no textbook. Powerpoints will be made available to students after lectures.

Students are required to attend classes and observe the Georgia Tech Honor Code.
Learning outcomes:

Students in this class will demonstrate:

- A knowledge of basic facts of Modern Russian history;
- The ability to describe the specificity of Russia’s development and the way in which world-wide tendencies manifested themselves in Russia;
- An understanding of the ways in which long-term tendencies of historical development interact with contingencies and human agency;
- The ability to analyze the problem of continuity vs. ruptures in Russian history;
- An understanding of the specificity of Russia’s culture and traditions (including business culture and political culture);
- The ability to critically assess various theoretical approaches to Modern Russian history (e.g., the theory of totalitarianism, revisionism or social history, post-revisionism);
- An understanding of Communism as a social system and the reasons for its collapse;
- An understanding of the role of the Soviet legacy in the present-day Russia;
- The ability to describe the specificity of Russia’s post-communist transformations as compared with other post-communist countries.

Requirements:

Grades for this course will be based on several criteria:

Class participation (10%): make sure you do the readings before the first class of each week and come prepared for discussion; the grade will be based on frequency and quality of your comments

Midterm (30%): short essay (approximately 2500 words); chose one of the books included in the list of recommended literature (see below) and give its analysis, including responses to the following questions: What is the author’s argument (single out several most important points)? What evidence the author relies upon? Which points of the author’s argument look convincing for you and where you would disagree with him? Why? MIND: your essay is NOT about Russia. It is about what the author you have chosen thinks about Russia.

Final essay (60%): essay (approximately 5000 words) on a topic of your choice (approved by the instructor) related to recent Russian history. You can use books listed in the bibliography as well as other materials. The expectation is that you will read no less than 400 pages to prepare the essay.

Week 1. Introduction: Putin is back.


Read:
- Sergey Belanovsky and Mikhail Dmitriev, *Political crisis in Russia and how it may develop*, [http://csis.org/files/attachments/110330_CSR_Political_Crisis_in_Russia.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/110330_CSR_Political_Crisis_in_Russia.pdf)

**Week 2. A road to terror? Political repressions in Russia, 2012-13.**

Recent legislation and the limitation of civil rights. Political trials. A struggle against corruption? Russian-American relationships today.

*Read:*


**Week 3. An overview of Soviet history (1917-1975)**

The making of the Soviet system. Stalinism: terror, war, and culture. Was the Soviet Union a totalitarian state? Stalin’s successors.

*Read:*


**Week 4. The crisis of the Soviet system (1975-1985).**

The stagnation of the Soviet economy. The ideal image of the West and the rise of the democratic movement. National politics and nationalisms in the USSR. Was the USSR reformable?

*Read:*


*Read:*

**Week 6. Perestroika (continued). 1991: The decisive year.**


Read:


**Week 7. The market reforms and the struggle for power (January 1992 – December 1993).**


Read:


**Week 8. Power, society and culture in Yeltsin’s Russia.**

Boris Yeltsin: a man in power. The Russian constitution of 1993. Privatization. The “New Russians” and the “Old Russians.” Everyday life as a post-modern experience: Russian society as seen by writers and cineastes. In search of a “national idea.” Russia, the “near-abroad” (former socialist countries), and the West in the 1990s. A comparative perspective on the market reforms.

Read:


**Week 9. The Chechen war and the crisis of Yeltsin’s regime (December 1994 – June 1996).**

Read:


Read:


Read:


The organization of power. The age of political technology: Russian media and public opinion. The oligarchs go to London… or to jail. The Khodorkovsky affair (2003).The rehabilitation of Stalin and the cult of the Second World War. The concept of “sovereign democracy.”

Read:


Read:

Week 14. Russian foreign policy, 2001-2013

A country without friends? Russia’s neo-imperial temptations and post-colonial failures. Russia in the post-Soviet space. Russia and the West. Russia and the US.

Read:

Week 15. Why Putin?

A comparative perspective on Russian reforms. Russian reforms in the global context: Neo-liberalism and democracy. Were (are) there other possible scenarios for Russia?

Read:

Suggested reading

Here are some more books in addition to those from which readings for classes are taken:

A competent journalistic history of the USSR and Russia, from 1953 to 1995, written by a former American Moscow correspondent for the Associated Press and other agencies, who worked in Russia under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin:
- Fred Coleman, The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire: Forty Years That Shook the World, From Stalin to Yeltsin (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

Memoires of Soviet/Russian leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin
- Mikhail Gorbachev, On My Country and the World, translated from Russian by George Shriver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000);

An important book on Russian nationalism:


A classical, very detailed account of perestroika:


A powerful, radically leftist stand on the “new Russian capitalism,” by an influential Russian political scientist and opinion maker:


Two extremely negative accounts of Putin’s rule, by Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya (who was murdered in 2007, right on Putin’s birthday) and by a long-time Eastern European correspondent for *The Economist*, Edward Lucas:

- Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin’s Russia*, translated from the Russian by Arch Tait (London: Harvill, 2004);

A pro-Putin account of present-day Russia by a right-wing German journalist and historian, typical of European, especially German, conservative opinion:


For a comparison with other Eastern European societies (in addition to Anders Åslund, see above)


Books on various aspects of post-Soviet history:

- George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002);
- Simon Clarke, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007);
- Herbert J. Ellisson, *Boris Yeltsin and Russia’s Democratic Transformation* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2006);
- Mark Sandle, *Gorbachev: Man of the Twentieth Century?* (London: Hodder education, 2008);