

Geography 3882  
Spring 2023

**Geography of the Former Soviet Union. (revised 22Feb)**

Professor John O'Loughlin

[johno@colorado.edu](mailto:johno@colorado.edu)

*Office Hours:* 2:30-3:30pm Mondays and Wednesdays or by appt

Office Hours: In person in Guggenheim 201h or via Zoom (email for appt before)

Zoom link for office hours: <https://cuboulder.zoom.us/j/99887435623>

**Background and course goals:**

This introductory undergraduate class will survey the post-Soviet space with a focus on economic, ethnic, political and resource developments since 1991. We will begin with background physical and historical geography before delving into these subjects. We will devote a couple of weeks on the identity/nationalism puzzle and the Soviet legacy, and then to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its background. Later we move to the regions from Central Asia to the Caucasus (North and then South).

Since the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, there have been violent conflicts in almost all of the 15 successor republics. Most of these have been based on competitive nationalist beliefs about control of territory and many of them have become implicated in external geopolitics, such as the current conflict in Ukraine. While the conflicts have waned from earlier violent peaks, all of the disputes remain unresolved and the legacies of the conflicts are enduring in massive displacements, huge housing and infrastructural damages, irreconcilable beliefs about territorial control and worsening of relations between Russia and its neighbors, and between Russia and the West. These conflicts as well as other major developments since 1991 (Arctic oil exploitation, political developments to democracy in some countries and autocracy in others, oil and gas booms in central Asia and the Caspian, guest worker and other migrations to Russia, switching from the Soviet style economy to capitalist production, etc) need to be examined from a holistic perspective and that is where a geographic approach is very helpful.

Obviously, there is a lot of renewed interest in Russia and Putin due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the current bloody conflicts, ongoing tensions with the United States/NATO and future geopolitical relations between the nuclear superpowers. We will examine these evolving relationships as the semester develops.

Each class will begin with discussion of some key news developments relating to the geography of the post-Soviet area. Students are expected to come with 1-2 items of interest, importance or quirkiness. Please pay attention to news items from reliable sources – e.g. BBC, Washington Post, New York Times, etc. Students will be called upon to share the information.

**Format and Readings:**

The format will be the lecture-discussion style which means that the reading preparation is completed before the class. Its success depends on student preparation through completion of the readings, being prepared to give responses in class, and engagement in the class discussions.

*Readings:* All of the readings are in the folder of required readings on Canvas. Some of the background readings are from **Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation**. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019.

E. Holland and M. Derrick (eds) **Questioning Post-Soviet**. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies, 2016.

Available for free download from

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/questioning\\_post-soviet.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/questioning_post-soviet.pdf)

Other readings on the syllabus scanned from the source materials and PDFs of the articles/chapter will be uploaded to the class folder on Canvas. Some of the background readings are from **Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation**. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. Some selected chapters from Mikhail Blinnikov's **A Geography of Russia and its Neighbors** (2011) will be assigned in the semester.

### **Course Requirements and Grading:**

The course is organized as a lecture-discussion, where the acquisition of new material is partly the responsibility of the student outside the meeting time; this process relies on the student coming to class having read the text materials and prepared to discuss them. After initial updates (15 minutes or so) on contemporary developments in the former Soviet space, the instructor will present materials for the first 30 minutes or so, and usually after a very short break (a few minutes), we will have about 30 minutes discussion that the instructor will introduce but will call on all students to participate. This format is often referred to as a 'flipped classroom'.

I teach the course from the perspective of human, especially political, geography but it is truly an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complexities of the post-Soviet Union. With my close colleagues Gerard Toal (Virginia Tech) and Vladimir Kolossov (Russian Academy of Sciences), I have been engaged with research on the post Soviet Union since 1992 when field work and access to former conflict zones became feasible. Our work has been consistently funded by the National Science Foundation and it is solely academic work without a specific policy bent. This stands in sharp contrast to most of the writings on the former Soviet Union which tend to carry a strong political orientation, and the bias has ramped up dramatically in the years since the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict. One key issue to keep in mind is that you can pick your opinions but you can't change or perjure facts. Obviously, you will be selective in emphasizing certain features of the topic of interest that you consider most relevant but you should not be closed to alternative perspectives and opinions. Certainly, be prepared to argue your case effectively and forcefully.

I believe that political geography offers a valuable entree into study of conflicts because of its integrative character. Territory – its marking, its competing claims, its historical antecedents, its absolute and relative location and its peoples - is at the core of our discipline. As Toal writes: "We typically consider a triangle of conflict: population collective identity formation (as a 'nation' or a 'people'), power (struggles over control of the state, political authority, and violence) and geography (struggles over territory, resources and whose conception of homeland dominates over competing understandings)." The territorial nation state, as the dominant organizational form of power on the world political map, represents this triangle: territory

(geography), nation (population and identity) and state (power) in a synthesis that produces identity-territorial power complexes.

We will generally review the readings and discuss them in the second half of each class but the format is free flowing, lecture-discussion. Class presentations and discussions follow/match the weekly readings closely

**Class Schedule:**

Jan. 18 - Course Introduction

Jan . 23 - The Soviet Legacy

*Readings:*

Laruelle and Radvanyi, pp. 1-4; *Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 5-14

Map Knowledge - all 15 former Soviet republics, names, locations (memorize them)

Jan. 25 – Physical Geography – Relief and Climate

*Readings:*

Blinnikov, pp. 21-50

Map Knowledge – major landforms, rivers, seas, climate zones, major biomes (Blinnikov -Figs. 2.1, 3.2 and 4.1)

Jan. 30 - Expansion of Russian Empire to 1917

Feb. 1 - Population - nationalities geography of the Former Soviet Union

*Readings:*

Blinnikov, pp.67-95

Laruelle and Radvanyi, 5-33

Map/History Knowledge: expansion of Russia (Figs. 6.1 and Table 6.1 in Blinnikov)

Feb. 6 - Communist Era, 1917 to 1991 Legacy – housing, industry and urban developments

Feb. 8 — Post-Soviet Years – Yeltsin to 2000 = **Quiz 1**

*Readings:*

Political Structure knowledge – Fig 8.2 in Blinnikov

Snyder – “The war in Ukraine is a colonial war”

Lieven “The history behind the war in Ukraine.”

Feb. 13 – Post-Soviet Years – Putin after 2000

Feb. 15 - “Russkiy mir (The Russian World)” concept and implications

*Readings:*

Laruelle, pp. 9-24 (pp.1-8, optional). – now available as PDF on Required readings

*Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 5-19, 75-92

Feb. 20 – Invasion of Ukraine I- background Putin’s geopolitical vision

Feb. 22 - Invasion of Ukraine II – internal dynamics

*Readings:*

Wilson *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West*, 2014. Chapters 4-5.  
Wilson *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* 3rd ed. 2014. Chapters 12-13.

Feb. 27 – Invasion of Ukraine III – war outcomes/negotiations/ceasefire?

Mar. 1-- **MIDTERM. (in-class)**

*Readings:*

Radchenko “Russia’s tragedy is a warning to us all”

O’Loughlin, Toal and Bakke *The Conversation* June 2022 “Ukraine – most people refuse to compromise”

Mar. 6 - Putinology I – “What Putin really wants”

Mar. 8 – Putinology II – Using the “Great Patriotic War” for Identity Building

*Readings:*

*Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 103-126;

Ioffe “What Putin really wants.” *Atlantic Monthly* Jan-Feb 2018

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/putins-game/546548/>

Mar. 13 - Putinology III – What now for Russia – Domestic conditions?

Mar. 15 - Putinology IV - What now for Russia – International dimensions?

*Readings:*

Adamsky “Russia’s menacing mix” *Foreign Affairs*

*Questioning Post Soviet* pp. 127-142

Mar. 20 – Future of Crimea - **QUIZ 2**

Mar. 22 – Political Geography meeting on Campus – alternative class options

*Readings:*

O’Loughlin, Toal and Bakke “To Russia with love” *Foreign Affairs*

Petro “The tragedy of Crimea”

### **SPRING BREAK**

Apr. 3 – Diverse Regions of the former Soviet Union - Caucasus and European FSU

Apr. 5 -- Diverse Regions of the former Soviet Union - Central Asia

*Readings:*

De Waal and von Twickel book *Frozen Conflicts* pp.15-51

Apr. 10 –Post-Soviet Conflicts I – North Caucasus

Apr. 12 – Post-Soviet Conflicts II – South Caucasus

*Readings:*

Tom de Waal *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. Chaps 2-5

Apr. 17 - Territorial Fragments – de facto states

Apr. 19 - Donbas as a 'de facto' state

Readings:

*Questioning Post-Soviet* pp. 103-126

O'Loughlin, Toal and Sasse "Do people in Donbas want to be liberated by Russia"

Apr. 24– Belarus – authoritarianism and protests

Apr. 26 – Climate change in Russia & The Scramble for Arctic resources

Readings:

*New York Times* "How Russia wins the climate crisis" December 16, 2020.

Antsey "Arctic rivalry" Bloomberg

Toal, O'Loughlin, and Bakke "What's driving the Belarus protests?"

May 1 - War in Ukraine and likely outcomes

May 8 – Russia and future relations with the WEST

Readings:

Lieven "War in Ukraine could lead to nuclear war"

Charap "Ukraine's best chance for peace"

McFaul "How to contain Putin's Russia"

**Final exam - Monday May 8th, 7:30pm-10pm (Do not make any travel plans before this time)**

### **Assignments and Grading:**

*Grades:*

Midterm Exam (75 minutes in the March 2 class) = 25%

Final Exam on May 8<sup>th</sup> = 35%

Three Quizzes (in class, 8%, 6% and 6%) = 20%

In class participation 5% and attendance 15% = 20% (Attendance taken frequently via sign-in sheet)

Total = 100%

*In class participation:* Obviously class attendance is expected and you should let the instructor know if you cannot attend class for an excused absence. The usual expectations for excused absences apply. Discussion should be free-ranging and open. Again the usual expectations of proper decorum, speech (please no slang), and respect apply. The instructor will call on all students to respond and in some case, informal debates will be organized with the class divided into 2 to 3 groups for this purpose.

*Summary of CU expectations – see Canvas folder for details*

### **Honor Code and Plagiarism**

The College of Arts and Sciences passed an Honor Code more than a decade ago. All students of the University of Colorado at Boulder are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of

academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Code Council ([honor@colorado.edu](mailto:honor@colorado.edu); 303-725-2273). Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member ( a possible grade of F) and non-academic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion) <https://www.colorado.edu/sccr/honor-code>. Papers uploaded to CANVAS will use turnitin.com for plagiarism checking.

**Disability Accommodations:**

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact: 303-492-8671, Willard 322, and [www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices](http://www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices). This office will give you a letter for the instructor that lists the accommodations.

**Religious Accommodation:**

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to reasonably and fairly deal with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. If you believe that you might have such a conflict, please let the instructor know.

**Class Behavior:**

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Students who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline, including exclusion from the class. Faculty have the professional responsibility to treat all students with understanding, dignity and respect, to guide classroom discussion and to set reasonable limits on the manner in which they and their students express opinions. Professional courtesy is especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with the politically-sensitive subject matter of this class. Diversity of opinion is welcomed.