

Geography 3882  
Spring 2021

## Geography of the Former Soviet Union

Professor John O'Loughlin

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Zoom link for office hours:

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### **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 move to the regions from Central Asia to the Caucasus (North and then South), and then to Ukraine.

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 eastern 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 ongoing tensions with the United States and geopolitical relations between the two countries. We will examine this evolving relationship 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:* There is one required text book, Marlene Laruelle and Jean Radvanyi's **Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation**. New York: Rowman and Littlefield,

2019. We will read this whole book. This book should be started on week one of the class. There will be occasional short quizzes about this material and other readings.

Additional required readings:

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 selected chapters from Mikhail Blinnikov's **A Geography of Russia and its Neighbors** (2011) and small sections from E. Holland and J. O'Loughlin "Russia and its Neighbors" in K. Olds and J. Agnew (eds) **Global Regions**. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2020 will be assigned later 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. The instructor will present materials for the first 35-40 minutes or so, and after a very short break (a few minutes), we will have about 30 minutes discussion that the instructors 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 Kolosov (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. 14 - Course Introduction

Jan . 19 - The Soviet Legacy

*Readings:*

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

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

Jan. 21 – Physical Geography – Relief and Climate - Fedor Popov

Jan. 26 - Population geography of the Former Soviet Union – Fedor Popov

*Readings:*

Blinnikov, pp. 21-50

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

Jan. 28 - Expansion of Russian Empire to 1917

Feb. 2 - Communist Era, 1917 to 1991 Legacy 1– housing and urban developments – Fedor Popov

*Readings:*

Blinnikov, pp.67-95

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

Feb. 4 – Communist Legacy – Legacy 2 - Environmental Destruction/MegaIndustry

Feb. 9 – Post Communist Nostalgia – Quiz 1

*Readings:*

Laruelle and Radvanyi, 5-33; *Questioning Post Soviet*, pp. 39-64; 93-102

Political Structure knowledge – Fig 8.2 in Blinnikov

Feb.11 – Post-Soviet Years – Yeltsin to 2000

Feb.16 - Post-Soviet Years – Putin 2000 – 2018

*Readings:*

Laruelle and Radvanyi 34-47; *Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 19-38, 75-92

Feb. 18 – Russian Geopolitics -Eurasianism

Feb. 23 - Russian – Western Alliance relations

*Readings:*

*Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 127-152; Laruelle and Radvanyi, 93-104.

Feb. 25 – NO CLASS (Wellness Day)

Mar. 2 – **MIDTERM EXAM** (in class)

Mar. 4 – “Russkiy mir (The Russian World)”

*Readings:*

Laruelle, pp. 9-24 (pp.1-8, optional)

<http://globalinterests.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-CGI-Russian-World-Marlene-Laruelle.pdf>

***March 8 – 5pm – Paper proposal should be uploaded to CANVAS folder***

Mar. 9 - Nationalities in the former Soviet Union

Mar. 11 – Territorial Fragments

*Readings:*

*Questioning Post-Soviet*, pp. 103-126; Laruelle and Radvanyi, 44-66.

Mar. 16 - Putinology I – “What Putin really wants”

Mar. 18 - Putinology II – Using the “Great Patriotic War” for Identity Building

*Readings:*

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

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

Laruelle and Radvanyi, 67-92

Mar. 23 – Putinology III – What now for Russia – Domestic conditions?

Mar. 25 – Putinology IV - What now for Russia – International dimensions?

*Readings:* Laruelle and Radvanyi, 93-133

Mar. 30 – Diverse Regions of the former Soviet Union - Caucasus and European FSU

Apr. 1 -- Diverse Regions of the former Soviet Union - Central Asia

*Readings:*

Blinnikov, pp. 368-382

Apr. 6 –Post-Soviet Conflicts I – North Caucasus

Apr. 8 – Post-Soviet Conflicts II – South Caucasus

*Readings:)*

Tom de Waal *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. Chaps 2-5 (PDF on CANVAS)

Apr. 13 - Post-Soviet Conflicts III – Ukraine (Crimea)

Apr. 15 - Post-Soviet Conflict IV – Ukraine (Donbas) -Quiz 2

*Readings:*

Andrew Wilson *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West*, 2014.Chapters 4-5. 2014 (PDF on CANVAS).

Andrew Wilson *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* 3rd ed. 2014. Chapters 12-13. (PDF on CANVAS).

Apr. 20 – Climate change in Russia -  
Apr. 22 – The Scramble for the Arctic resources

Readings:

Blinnikov, pp. 261-290.

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

**Final paper due via CANVAS on Monday April 26<sup>th</sup> at 8am**

Apr. 27– Lightning presentations I  
Apr. 29 - Lightning presentations II

Readings:

Laruelle and Radvanyi, 133-136

**Final exam - May 4<sup>th</sup> 7:30p-10pm**

**Assignments and Grading:**

*Grades:*

Midterm Exam (75 minutes in the March 2 class via Canvas) = 20%

Final Exam = 25% (via Canvas)

Quizzes (in class) = 10%

In class participation and attendance= 15% (Attendance taken every class via Zoom screen grab)

Paper proposal =5%

Written Term paper = 25%

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.

*Paper:* The paper should be 2500-3000 words in length, including bibliography (about 10-12 pages). The topic should be agreed with the teaching assistant (Fedor Popov) **by March 8** and short meetings with each student in office hours are encouraged to help topic selection and focus, suggest readings and alternative perspectives. It would be ideal to have these meetings by early March.

The written paper should have these elements that will constitute the basis for the paper grade: Approximate percentages for each element are indicated – please ask for help with sources and/or check with the instructor if unsure.

✓ Quality of Argumentation: Ability to make an informed and persuasive argument using

the specific paper readings and other course materials. Documentation of points made by explicit references to passages in the texts. (40%)

- ✓ Organization: clear set of points, clear introduction and conclusion. (30%)
- ✓ Quality of the writing: clarity, grammar, spelling, referencing (e.g. open parenthesis, author, date, page number, close parenthesis and then period), etc. (10%)
- ✓ Bibliography – mix of academic research and more accessible (newspaper articles, NGO reports, etc) accounts. About one-quarter –one-third (no more) could be popular sources and the total bibliography should be at least 15 sources (20%)

### **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.

As the course has moved to remote teaching and online platforms exclusively, it is very important that all students demonstrate appropriate online behavior. Avoid disruptive

engagements and use your best judgement to minimize background noise (turn off audio), distracting videos or problematic use of the chat option. Repeated violations of these requests will be called out for a conversation with the instructor. **Video must be turned on during class.**

Use the chat option to ask questions or use the 'raise hand' option in Zoom so that the instructor and TA can see you and respond to the question.