A. Russia and Poland Compared (Prof Harald Wydra) MT 2023

Introduction

This course introduces students into central selected themes of Russian and Polish politics. The premise of the course is that historical trajectories of leadership and state-formation have been fundamental for understanding post-communist regime transformation and the evolution of new structures in politics and society. It applies historical, political, and sociological methods in order to elucidate ideological patterns, the evolution of nationalism and nationhood, the impact of communism on the modernisation of states and societies, as well as the more recent transformations of structures of government and political society. This course will develop conceptual tools that help understanding numerous family resemblances related to similar patterns of social development and state tradition but also highlight fundamental differences in political cultures, political identities, traditions of government, leadership, and commitments to different regime types.

Introductory reading:


Still a relevant and very gripping eye-witness account of the massive transformation undertaken by the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s.


An indispensable historical account for understanding the challenges of state-formation, ideological structures, and imaginaries of the Polish nation.


This is an excellent account of the empire-building in Russia throughout the centuries with particular focus on the interaction between the Tsarist states and its multinational and multi-ethnic subjects.


An excellent account of national identity and discourses regarding Russia’s status in the world from a perspective of challenges of identification in a globalising modernity. It ties Russia’s authoritarian politics to the disruptions and contradictions inherent in globalisation.


An indispensable and very readable guide to understanding the political frameworks, processes, and structures of the politics of the Russian Federation.

This book is still a very good guide to the unique political geographies of the post-imperial regions that constitutes ‘Eastern Europe’. It deals with structural challenges in the region by examining social, political, legal, and economic traditions.


This book explores the social and political sources of democratization processes prior to regimes transformations in 1989/91 and the challenges for new regime types in the first decades of post-communist transitions.


This book provides a historical sociology of Polish nationalism and the unique and central role of the Catholic Church in Polish politics. It also covers the challenges of the role to Polish nationalism in post-communist Poland.

**Lecture 1: State traditions and state formation**

This lecture looks at problems of territorial sovereignty, the rationales of centralised rule, and the fluidity of borders, which were characteristic for the ‘Eastern’ type of state-formation. Whilst there are common patterns of state development, this lecture also highlights the fundamentally different trajectories of state-building, in particular the imperial expansion of Russian statehood versus the statelessness and foreign domination in Poland.

**Key readings:**


The most relevant material is in the first part of the article. An important account of the genealogy of the concept ‘state’ in Europe and in Russia.


Gives an indispensable account of historical conditions of Russia’s state as well as the problems Russian nationalism, national identity, and state-building post-1991.
Further Readings:


A good account of Poland’s pre-modern status as a commonwealth and important power in Central and Eastern Europe.


A historically rich and comprehensive overview of the meanings and implications of imperial statehood both for Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.


A brilliant account of the background and problems of disrupted statehood in Central Europe, imperialism, and precariousness of territorial integrity.


A superb account of how the Soviet state structure was made by Russians but also worked against Russians before, eventually, Russian drive towards national sovereignty, destroyed the Soviet Union.

Lecture 2: Nationalism and Nation-Building

This lecture explores paths of nation-building, variants of nationalism, and meanings of nationhood. It attempts to make sense of the paradoxical trajectories of Poland as a ‘nation without a state’ and the Russian empire as a ‘state without a nation’. Crucially, it also relates nationalism in both countries to their perceptions of and self-assessments with regard to western ‘models’.

Key readings:


Provides a very good comparative assessment between Western and Eastern models of nationalism.


This article argues that the a tidal way of interconnected nationalist mobilisation were instrumental in the collapse of Soviet communism in Russia and Eastern Europe.

An excellent conceptual introduction into the idea of nationalism based on contingent events, including a case study of Soviet nationality policy and its unintended consequences of turning into demands for more autonomy (and finally independence) of autonomous republics.


This introduction provides an excellent analysis of the specifics of nationalism in Eastern Europe with a view to differences and resemblance with Western forms of nationalism.

**Further Readings:**


This is a first rate and concise analysis of different phases of Polish nationalism.


An up-to-date primer on key debates around Russian nationalism with a chapters on contemporary conflict zones including relations with the West and Ukraine.


Gives a detailed overview of different understanding of nation and national identity in the Russian Federation.


**Lecture 3: Leadership and Ideological Traditions**

This lectures examines key concepts of leadership and the attendant ideological traditions in both countries. Given the differences in state capacity, regime type, and religious-cultural traditions, the focus will on forms of political messianism, oriented towards the reconstitution of an independent state in Poland, and towards imperial expansion in the case of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, as well as the renewed attempts to neo-imperialism under state-led nationalism in the Russian Federation.
Key readings:


A study of the transformation of Polish Catholicism into an institution/movement supporting civil society and democracy.


An important historico-sociological overview of the genealogy of Polish nationalism and a critical account of Polish national identity.


A critical overview of the establishment of Putin’s power in the early 2000s, notably focusing on the interventionism in the economic elites and the reinforcement of the superpresidential regime.


Good analysis of the long-term ideological and political legacy Solidarity has had on the on-going conflict of values in recent Polish politics.

Further Readings:


A rich outline of Putin’s strategic choices in his first two terms of the presidency.


An interesting portrayal of Putin’s strategic mind and his different alliances across the network of Russian political and economic elites.

A strong and historically rich account of structural patterns in Polish politics.


A good analysis of the first presidency in Poland’s third republic, notably the role and legacy of former Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa who was president from 1990-95.
Lecture 4: Communism: Modernising States and Shaping Political Cultures

Whilst both Russia and Poland shared the experience of communism as a fundamental period of state modernisation during the twentieth century, this lecture identifies the different modalities of its implementation, key institutional characteristics, and modes of resistance against communist power.

Key Readings:


Taking a perspective of the longue durée, this article argues that long-term continuities have a greater impact in societies and states, which have undergone deeper and more frequent institutional changes.


A very readable and comprehensive history of communism, both with focus on ideology and events.

Wydra, Harald, Communism and the Emergence of Democracy, chapters 3 and 5.

A context-based analysis of the establishment of Soviet communism in Russia and its long-term ideological impact in the region.


A very concise account of the immediate reasons for the non-violent Soviet collapse.

Further Reading:


One of the best analyses of the political culture of late communism in Poland and the sources of Poland’s democratic revolution.


Lecture 5: Regime Transformation

This lecture explores different trajectories and meanings of democratisation in both countries. It embeds accounts of regime transitions into the different political cultures of each nation, illustrating how republican traditions and discourses dominated in Poland, whereas political transformations in Russia were dominated by centralized authoritarian legacies and state-oriented discourses. The focus of this lecture is on the elements that helped Poland to create a parliamentary multi-party system, whilst the Russian Federation developed a super-presidential system, a managed state democracy, and, eventually, a repressive dictatorship.

Key Readings:


An overview article and critical assessment of the first 20 years of post-communist regime transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.


This piece makes a case for the missed opportunity of introduction democratic pluralism in the very early days of post-communist in Russia.


This piece argues that post-communist transitions are not only regime changes but instances of state-formation.


A thorough account of the dissolution of the Soviet Union amidst the creation of Russian sovereignty.


A rich and readable evaluation of the longue durée of cultural legacies and their impact on state-formation and political society.

These chapters demonstrate how the political culture within authoritarian communism underpinned future democratic transformations, mainly pointing to memory, second realities, and civilising processes.

**Further Reading:**


One of the best analyses of constitutional change and the evolution of party pluralism in Poland post-1989.


An indispensable analytically rich account of the rebirth of politics in the Russian Federation, which points to the hybrid political structure between democracy and dictatorship.


A very critical assessment of the prospect of liberal politics in the Russian federation.


**Lecture 6: Paths to Democracy and Dictatorship**

This lectures assesses the fundamental differences in the democratic credentials of both systems and, more importantly perhaps, the divergent international anchorage of each country in different geo-political alliances. Outlining key elements of paths to democracy and to dictatorship, it looks at the internal controversies and dilemmas that accompanied Poland’s trajectory towards a fully-fledged representative democracy within the European Union. It then explores key stages of the transformation of Russian Federation from a super-presidential regime into an increasingly authoritarian ‘dual’ state and, eventually, into a repressive dictatorship. For this purpose, it also takes into account the positioning of both countries in international politics.

**Key readings:**

Provides a cultural approach to the disintegration of the Solidarity movement and the consequences for political processes in post-communist Poland, especially the lack of ‘symbolic closure’ in 1989.


This piece investigates the roots for the popularity of Putin’s authoritarianism by linking it to specific imaginations of the public political ideal from the Soviet period.


Quite up-to-date analysis of ideology and practice of the recent PiS government in light of wider options of Polish politics.


A very fine analysis of the cultural and social conceptions behind Russian and Polish discourses of democracy during transition period of the 1990s.


A very fine article differentiating the constitutional state in Russia and the administrative regime that exercises a tutelary regime outside the normative framework of the state.


A poignant analysis of the regime type and some policy implications in Russia.

Further Reading:


An excellent overview assessment of the changing patterns of influence of the Catholic Church in democratic Poland.


A critical account of the ideological shift in Polish politics after PiS achieved an absolute majority in 2015.

This article demonstrates how the political of memory and of the past has become a crucial cleavage line in party competition.


A good review of the achievements and problems of democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.


A very interesting account of the geo-political implications of Russia’s revisionism and the rising tensions with the West.

**Supervision essay questions:**

*Is there an Eastern European model of nationalism?*

*How did communist legacies influence regime transformations in Eastern Europe?*

*Do transition processes weaken or strengthen state power?*

*How has nationalism shaped state traditions in Eastern Europe?*

*Was authoritarian rule in Eastern Europe dependent on national particularities?*