A. Russia and Poland Compared (Dr Harald Wydra) MT 2022

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, the evolution of republican government structures, and trajectories towards democracy and dictatorship. 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 regimes. 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.

Essential reading:


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 multi-national 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.

Plokhy, Serhii (2017) Lost Kingdom: A History of Russian Nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin (New York: Basic books)

A very readable and recent history of Russian nationalism with specific focus on the new meanings of nationhood in the Russian federation.


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

Although quite dated, 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 provides a discourse analysis that examines the workings of networks of political elites that have dominated Russia ever since the late 1990s.


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.


A very readable and gripping account by a foremost Russian journalist, portraying the rise of Vladimir Putin and the consolidation of his power through the prism of the networks of political elites that have shaped the last two decades of Russian politics

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.


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’.


Richard Sakwa (2020) Russian Politics and Society, part III.

Tolz, Vera ‘Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia, Europe-Asia Studies, Vol.50, No.6, 993-1022.


Lecture 3: Leadership and Ideological Traditions

This lecture 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.


**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.


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

**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.


Lecture 6: Paths to Democracy and Dictatorship

This lecture 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.


**Supervision essay questions:**

*Is there an Eastern European model of nationalism?*

*How did communist legacies influence democratisation processes 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?*

*Can legacies of the past explain the evolution of post-communist democracies?*