During the Cold War, a main motivation for Americans to study the “Russia” of the day, the Soviet Union, was that they feared and distrusted it as the seedbed of communism, the 20th century’s radical alternative to liberal democracy, and as a military and geopolitical rival. The end of Cold-War bipolarity and of the USSR reshaped the scene. Russia, downsized and shorn of its ideology, has reclaimed great-power status and retains its strategic location and a massive nuclear arsenal, and yet intellectual interest in it today draws on different sources than in the past.

Scholars continue to debate the collapse of the archetypal communist dictatorship and the multinational state that hosted it, and why changes in Russia and Eurasia took the arc they did. They further ask why post-Soviet Russia at first, on Boris Yeltsin’s watch, seemed to have bright prospects for a smooth transition to democratic rule, but then backtracked from initial gains. The shift to Vladimir Putin and his “power vertical” raises puzzles of its own: What drove this
de-democratizing transition within the transition? How does the current system actually function and what is its basis of support? The recent outbreak of mass protest against the system places a new core question on the agenda: how susceptible is the system to reform or overthrow?

Gov 1243 poses these questions comparatively and addresses issues relevant to other contexts and to the challenge of building comparative theories of the political process and of political change. The course opens with a preliminary attempt to situate Russia’s political regime in comparative perspective. After a brief review of the inheritance from the past, it examines turning points in, and causal influences on, the attempted reform and breakdown of the Soviet regime, the push to construct a democratic replacement for it, and the subsequent recentralization of power. We then explore the evolution and workings of political institutions, including constitutional and rule-of-law questions, parliament, the executive branch and hegemonic presidency, and federalism. The class then goes in depth into a series of topics at the intersection between state and society – identity dilemmas, political economy, parties and elections, and civil society. Gov 1243 concludes with projections of the future and reflections on what Russia’s troubled transition teaches us all.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

In addition to the two lecture slots per week, there will be a weekly undergraduate section (or two, if numbers warrant), led by Dr. Skalamera, and a graduate section led by Professor Colton.

The hour test on March 13, just before the spring recess, will count for 20 percent of the overall grade. Attendance and participation in sections will count for 10 percent for all.

In addition, undergraduates in Gov 1243 will write an essay of roughly 15 pages, with minimal extra reading required apart from the syllabus (40 percent of the grade). It is due at the end of the May reading period, which we will consider to be 12 noon on Thursday, May 8. Undergraduates will also sit a final exam in the May examination period (30 percent).

Graduate students may either follow the undergraduate model, submitting an essay of 15 pages and taking the final exam, or opt for a research paper of 25 to 30 pages and be exempted from the final examination. The research paper will count for 70 percent of the grade.

Essay and research paper topics are to be cleared with Dr. Skalamera, for undergraduates, and with Professor Colton, for graduate students. If time and numbers allow, outlines or drafts of
papers will be discussed in sections.

Students should be aware that in Gov 1243 collaboration of any sort on work submitted for formal evaluation is not permitted. This means that you may not work on your paper assignments or exams with other students. All work must be entirely your own and use appropriate citation practices to acknowledge the use of books, articles, websites, lectures, discussions, etc., that you have consulted to complete your assignments.

**BOOKSTORE AND MATERIALS**

Three volumes will be in stock for purchase at the Coop, all in paperback.


(2) Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale, eds., *Developments in Russian Politics 7* (Duke University Press, 2010). [Note: some chapters from edition 8 may be available online as we proceed – Professor Colton will advise.]


In addition, you are asked to purchase and read one of these the following three books on identity politics, for Topic 9:


The Coop will also have copies of as seventh book as recommended reading (several chapters are required and will be in the course pack):

The journal articles assigned will be available electronically through the Gov 1243 website. Several items will be downloaded from the Internet using the link indicated below. A selection of a few other materials will be collected in a course pack available for purchase from University Readers, Inc. Arrangements for purchase will be explained in class.

The location of specific readings is indicated by these symbols:

▲ Book available for purchase
■ Harvard electronic reserve (Gov 1243 website)
Ω Access directly from Internet
∞ Course pack from University Readers

**LECTURE SCHEDULE AND READINGS BY TOPIC**

1. **INTRODUCTION (JAN. 28)**

2. **RUSSIA’S POLITICAL REGIME IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE (JAN. 30)**
   ▲ Paul T. Christensen, “Russia as Semiperiphery,” chap. 8 in Robinson, *Political Economy of Russia*.

3. **RUSSIA IN SPACE AND TIME (FEB. 4)**

4. **SOVIET COMMUNISM, ITS COLLAPSE, AND DEMOCRATIZATION (FEB. 6, 11)**
   ∞ Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (HarperCollins, 2009), chap. 6 (“What Do We Mean by a Communist System?”).
   ■ Ivan Szelényi and Balázs Szelényi, “Why Socialism Failed: Towards a Theory of System

∞ Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin*, chap. 8 (“Birth of a Nation”).

5. **Leadership and the Main Political Narrative from Yeltsin to Putin . . . to Putin (Feb. 13, 18)**

Ω Vladimir Putin, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium” (December 1999); find at [http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm](http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm).
▲ Richard Sakwa, “Politics in Russia,” chap. 1 in White, Sakwa, and Hale, *Developments*.

6. **Stateness, Constitution, and Rule of Law (Feb. 25, 25)**

▲ Gerald M. Easter, “Revenue Imperatives: State over Market in Postcommunist Russia,” chap. 3 in Robinson, *Political Economy of Russia*.

7. **How the Sausage is Made: Parliament, Executive Branch, and Hegemonic Presidency (Feb. 27, March 4)**

■ Gerald M. Easter, “Preference for Presidentialism: Postcommunist Regime Change and the NIS,” *World Politics* 49 (January 1997), 184–211.

Thomas P. Remington, “Parliamentary Politics in Russia,” chap. 3 in White, Sakwa, and Hale, *Developments*.


Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell in and out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (Yale University Press, 2013), chap. 5 (“Putin’s Court”).

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8. Federation or Unitary State? (March 6, 11)


Gordon Hahn, “Reforming the Federation,” chap. 9 in White, Sakwa, and Hale, *Developments*.


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HOUR TEST (March 13)

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Spring recess – no lectures or sections week of March 17

9. Identity Politics: Ethnicity, Religion, and National Unity (March 25, 27, April 1)


Graney, *Of Khans and Kremlins*; OR Giuliano, *Constructing Grievance*; OR Hughes, *Chechnya*.

Charles King and Rajan Menon, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Russia’s Invisible Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs* 89 (July–August 2010), 20–34.


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10. The Politics of the Economy (April 3, 8)


■ Daniel Treisman, “Putin’s Silovarchs,” *Orbis* 51 (January 2007), 141–53.


11. Political Parties and Elections (April 10, 15)


12. Civil Society and Public Opinion (April 17, 22)


■ Julie Hemment, “Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and Potemkin NGOs: Making Sense of Civil


13. WRAPUP: LOOKING BACKWARD, FORWARD, AND SIDEWAYS (APRIL 24, 29)

Vladimir Gel’man, “Regime Changes in Russia: Trajectories of Political Evolution,” chap. 7 in Lipman and Petrov, Russia 2025.

Boris Makarenko, “Frameworks of Political System Development,” chap. 8 in Lipman and Petrov, Russia 2025.