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Course title: Political Paths of Post-Soviet Countries

Department, institutions and country: Institute for Political Science, TU Darmstadt, Germany

Rationale:

The collapse of the Soviet Union offers a unique lens for political scientists to study systems that, while emerging from similar institutional and economic foundations, have led to vastly different outcomes. This course explores these divergent paths by first analyzing the causes behind the Soviet Union's dissolution. We will examine various theoretical approaches to understanding regime change, particularly focusing on the post-Soviet context. Key questions include: why did countries with a shared institutional and socio-economic background transition toward democracy in some cases, while in others, a new form of authoritarianism took hold? To address this, we will consider a range of explanatory models, including economic structure, political culture, state capacity, and the influence of international actors, as well as approaches focused on domestic political actors and leadership.

The course will then delve into the institutional dynamics that have shaped post-Soviet states, particularly the interactions between presidents, parliaments, and governments. We will investigate how these relationships have evolved and how dominant party structures have emerged in certain contexts. Students will critically engage with case studies to understand how some countries, such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, have managed to foster more pluralistic political environments. What factors have enabled these countries to maintain a degree of political competition and openness, and how have their institutional frameworks supported or hindered these processes?

A key part of the course will focus on the phenomenon of the so-called "color revolutions"—popular uprisings that challenged entrenched regimes in several post-Soviet countries. We will explore the dynamics of elite conflicts, mass mobilization, and the factors that have determined the success or failure of these protest movements. Why were some of these movements able to achieve significant political change, while others were met with repression and resulted in authoritarian retrenchment? This naturally leads to the study of the consolidation of personalist authoritarian regimes, with a focus on Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. These countries have seen the entrenchment of autocratic leaders who use institutional mechanisms to secure their hold on power. In this context, we will study the role of constitutions, elections, and dominant parties in sustaining authoritarian rule. We will also explore the strategies and tools autocrats use to survive and maintain control over political and economic elites.

The course will conclude with an in-depth examination of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We will analyze how this conflict became possible, the justifications provided by the Russian government, and the attitudes of Russian society toward the war. In addition to examining domestic factors, we will discuss the broader implications of the war for European politics and international relations. This includes discussions on the geopolitical consequences of the invasion, the responses of Western powers, and the shifting landscape of European security.

The structure of the course combines lectures with interactive discussions, including group work and paired activities during class sessions. The course is designed as an intensive block format, consisting of four days, with four sessions per day, each lasting 2 hours. While students will be provided with a list of pre-assigned readings to refresh their knowledge of core concepts, the primary learning will take place during the sessions, with additional literature provided as a basis for the final exam.

This course is intended for master's students with a solid foundation in the social sciences and a level of English proficiency that allows them to read academic texts, engage in discussions, and deliver presentations. The course is designed to meet the needs of both comparative political scientists and interdisciplinary researchers in Public Administration, International Relations, and Conflict Studies.

Course outline

Learning outcomes

Level 1: Remembering

- Students will recall key facts about the Soviet Union's institutional structure and core concepts in communist ideology.

- Students will accurately define essential political science terms like political regimes, regime transitions, parliamentarism, and dominant party systems.

Level 2: Understanding

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of main theories explaining institutional differences in post-Soviet states, including democratization, authoritarianism, and national movements.

- Students will compare qualitative, quantitative, and quasi-experimental research designs in studying post-Soviet transitions.

Level 3: Applying

- Students will apply theories (e.g., presidentialism, parliamentarism) to analyze current political systems in post-Soviet countries, drawing from constitutions, academic texts, media, and databases like V-Dem.

- Students will use research designs (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) to conduct case studies on post-Soviet states' political developments.

Level 4: Analyzing

- Students will identify key research questions in scholarly work and analyze authors' arguments by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their theories.

- Students will articulate their alignment with or critique of theoretical frameworks, adapting them for their own research.

Level 5: Evaluating

- Students will critically evaluate different theoretical and methodological approaches to regime transitions in post-Soviet countries, assessing strengths and weaknesses.

- Students will argue for or against specific theories, supported by relevant case studies.

Level 6: Creating

- Students will formulate a research question on course topics, develop a theoretical framework or synthesize approaches, and propose a research design.

- Students will propose policy implications considering the state of political institutions and international relations in the post-Soviet region.

Flow of lectures/seminars

NOTE: The most important texts recommended for reading in advance are <u>underlined</u>.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Soviet Union collapse

What was communism? What were the main institutional features that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union? The concept of subversive institutions: Soviet-type institutions and changes in the political opportunity structures within socialist societies. Why did the introduction of reformist measures ("perestroika") fail to prevent the collapse?

- White, S. (2002). Communism and its Collapse. Routledge. *pp. 1-10.*
- <u>Bunce, V. (1999). Subversive institutions: The design and the destruction of socialism and the state. Cambridge University Press. *pp.1-20, 56-77, 127-164.*</u>
- The debate between Cohen, Kramer and others on whether the Soviet System was reformable, Slavic Review, Volume 63, Issue 3, Fall 2004: https://www-cambridge-org.eui.idm.oclc.org/core/journals/slavic-review/issue/DD84FA6FF05875736E23F5F257603F94

1.2. Models of post-communist political transformations and approaches to their explanation

How the communist system shaped post-Soviet regimes — strong presidencies, weak parties, and uneven state capacity. Regime outcomes: Democracies, autocracies, and hybrid regimes — conceptual and classification challenges. Explanatory approaches: The role of communist legacies, elite structures, nationalism and ethnic politics, and Western linkage and leverage.

- Way, L. A., & Levitsky, S. (2007). Linkage, leverage, and the post-communist divide. East European Politics and Societies, 21(1), 48-66.
- Way, L. A., & Casey, A. (2018). The structural sources of postcommunist regime trajectories. Post-Soviet Affairs, 34(5), 317-332.
- Pop-Eleches, G. (2007). Historical legacies and post-communist regime change. The Journal of Politics, 69(4), 908-926.
- Pop-Eleches, G., & Tucker, J. A. (2013). Associated with the past? Communist legacies and civic participation in post-communist countries. East European Politics and Societies, 27(1), 45-68.
- Darden, K., & Grzymala-Busse, A. (2006). The great divide: Literacy, nationalism, and the communist collapse. World Politics, 59(1), 83-115.
- Collins, K. (2004). The logic of clan politics: Evidence from the Central Asian trajectories. World politics, 56(2), 224-261.
- Gel'man, V. (2008). Out of the frying pan, into the fire? Post-Soviet regime changes in comparative perspective. International Political Science Review, 29(2), 157-180.

2. **Elite Conflicts and Mass Mobilization**

2.1. Political values, attitudes, and behavior in post-communist countries

The "lame duck syndrome" or when elections have a subversive effect. The common characteristics of "color revolutions" as modular democratic revolutions.

- Hale, H. E. (2005). Regime cycles: democracy, autocracy, and revolution in post-Soviet Eurasia. World politics, 58(1), 133-165.
- Beissinger, M. R. (2007). Structure and example in modular political phenomena: The diffusion of bulldozer/rose/orange/tulip revolutions. Perspectives on politics, 5(2), 259-276.

2.2. Tulip Revolution of 2003 in Georgia and Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine

Origins and nature of Ukrainian nationalism. Social composition of protests, participation models, role of media and social networks.

- Way, L. (2015). Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics. JHU Press. *Chapter 3 Pluralism by Default in Ukraine, pp. 43-91.*
- Onuch, O. (2015). EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine: Social media versus social networks. Problems of post-communism, 62(4), 217-235.5.
- Zhuravlev, O., & Ishchenko, V. (2020). Exclusiveness of civic nationalism: Euromaidan eventful nationalism in Ukraine. Post-Soviet Affairs, 36(3), 226-245.

2.3. Elite-led mass mobilization in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan vs. Uzbekistan

Exploring the Tulip Revolution and the emergence of democracy in Kyrgyzstan vs. unsuccessful instances of mass mobilization in Uzbekistan.

- Radnitz, S. (2010) Weapons of the wealthy: Predatory regimes and elite-led protests in Central Asia. *pp.15-29; 103-131; 132-167.*

2.4. "Failed" Revolutions and the Authoritarian Response: Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan

- Vladimir Gel'man (2013) Cracks in the Wall, Problems of Post-Communism, 60:2, 3-10, DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216600201
- Dollbaum, J. M. (2017). Curbing protest through elite co-optation? Regional protest mobilization by the Russian systemic opposition during the 'for fair elections' protests 2011–2012. Journal of Eurasian studies, 8(2), 109-122.
- Tertytchnaya, K., & Lankina, T. (2020). Electoral protests and political attitudes under electoral authoritarianism. The Journal of Politics, 82(1), 285-299.
- Artiukh, Volodymyr (2022). Dramaturgy of Populism: Post-Electoral Protest Ideologies in Belarus (2020-2021). 10.58367/NECY.PM.H.2022.2
- Way, L., & Tolvin, A. (2023). Why the 2020 Belarusian Protests Failed to Oust Lukashenka. Nationalities Papers, 51(4), 787-802.
- Kudaibergenova, D. T., & Laruelle, M. (2022). Making sense of the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: failing legitimacy, culture of protests, and elite readjustments. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *38*(6), 441–459. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2077060
- Anisin, A. (2024). Riots, Civil Resistance, and External Intervention in the Failed 2022 Kazakhstan Revolution. The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review, 51(3), 299-321. https://doi.org/10.30965/18763324-05103002

Additionally, see a special issue on Belarus:
https://www-cambridge-org.eui.idm.oclc.org/core/journals/slavic-review/issue/24C7A34E15C80661BD990428E984A21B

3. Authoritarian consolidation and resilience

3.1. Shock of the "Color Revolutions" and Authoritarian Learning

How the Color Revolutions served as a formative shock for post-Soviet autocrats, triggering processes of cross-regime learning, adaptation, and preventive counter-revolution strategies.

Hall, Stephen GF. The authoritarian international: Tracing how authoritarian regimes learn in the post-Soviet Space. Cambridge University Press, 2023. INTRODUCTION + CHAPTER 3

3.2. Consolidation of personalist authoritarian institutions

Theoretical foundations of authoritarian stability—legitimation, repression, and co-optation—and institutional mechanisms for consolidating power through presidents, parties, parliaments, and coercive state structures.

- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2002). Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. Journal of democracy, 13(2), 51-65.
- Gandhi, J., & Przeworski, A. (2007). Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats. Comparative political studies, 40(11), 1279-1301.
- Johannes Gerschewski (2013) The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes.
- Gel'Man, V. (2013). Party politics in Russia: From competition to hierarchy. In Power and Policy in Putin's Russia (pp. 35-52). Routledge.
- Petrov, N., Lipman, M., & Hale, H. E. (2014). Three dilemmas of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin. *Post-soviet affairs*, *30*(1), 1-26.
- Reuter, O. J. (2017). The origins of dominant parties: Building authoritarian institutions in post-Soviet Russia. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 4 The Emergence of a Dominant Party in Russia, pp. 107-158.
- Markowitz, Lawrence P., and Mariya Y. Omelicheva. "Disciplined and undisciplined repression: illicit economies and state violence in Central Asia's autocracies." Post-Soviet Affairs 34.6 (2018): 367-383.

Additionally,

Anceschi, Luca. "After Personalism: Rethinking Power Transfers in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan." Journal of Contemporary Asia 51.4 (2021): 660-680.

Abishev, G., Kurmanov, B., & Sabitov, Z. (2024). Authoritarian succession, rules, and conflicts: Tokayev's gambit and Kazakhstan's bloody January of 2022 (Qandy Qantar). Post-Soviet Affairs, 40(6), 429–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2377929

Lewis, D. G. (2021). Varieties of authoritarianism in Central Asia. Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia, 73-86.

3.3. Regime Support

Societal bases of authoritarian durability: state dependency among the middle class, public preference for stability, and the limits of leader control over popular legitimacy.

- Rosenfeld, B. (2021). The autocratic middle class: how state dependency reduces the demand for democracy. Princeton University Press. CHAPTER 2 (pp. 37–65), CHAPTER 4 (pp. 100–133)
- Matovski, Aleksandar. "It's the Stability, Stupid! How the Quest to Restore Order After the Soviet Collapse Shaped Russian Popular Opinion," Comparative Politics, v.50, no.3, 2018, pp.347-390.

- <u>Frye, T. (2022). Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia.</u> <u>INTRODUCTION + CHAPTER 4</u>
- Buckley, Noah, et al. "Endogenous Popularity: How Perceptions of Support Affect the Popularity of Authoritarian Regimes," American Political Science Review, v.118, no.2, May 2024, pp.1046-52

4. Russian Invasion in Ukraine

How did the Russian invasion of Ukraine become possible? The political and institutional origins of the war.

Does Russian society support the war? The emotional and cognitive mechanisms underlying Russian propaganda and public perceptions of the conflict.

The phenomenon of preference falsification.

- <u>Arel, D., & Driscoll, J. (2023). Ukraine's unnamed war: Before the Russian invasion of 2022. Cambridge University Press. *Chapter 1 A War Within the "Russian World, pp. 1-22.*</u>
- Driscoll, J., & Savelyeva, N. Beyond "bluffing": The weaponization of uncertainty in Russia's war against Ukraine. In Uncertainty in Global Politics (pp. 25-43). Routledge.
- Goode JP. Russian Propaganda from V to Z: Projecting Banal and Everyday Nationalism in Unsettled Times. Nationalities Papers. Published online 2025:1-21. doi:10.1017/nps.2025.28
- <u>Chapkovski, P., & Schaub, M. (2022). Solid support or secret dissent? A list experiment on preference falsification during the Russian war against Ukraine. Research & Politics, 9(2), 20531680221108328.</u>
- Alyukov, M. (2021). News reception and authoritarian control in a hybrid media system: Russian TV viewers and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Politics. https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211041440
- <u>Alyukov, M. (2023). Harnessing distrust: News, credibility heuristics, and war in an authoritarian regime. Political Communication, 40(5), 527-554.</u>

Important Dates

Class Schedule:

Date	From	Break	To

1	Wed, 19. Nov. 2025	09:00	12:30-13:30	17:00
2	Th, 20. Nov. 2025	09:00	12:30-13:30	17:00
3	Fri, 21. Nov. 2025	09:00	12:30-13:30	17:00
4	Sat, 22. Nov. 2025	09:00	12:30-13:30	17:00

Evaluation

Successful completion of the course requires three key components: 1) full attendance, 2) active participation in discussions and group work, and 3) either the submission of a final written paper or ORAL EXAM related to the course themes

Participation

Participation is crucial and involves three types of in-class activities:

1. Autonomous Learning

   Autonomous learning involves students taking responsibility for their learning process by setting personal goals and reflecting on their progress. This will include writing brief (100-word) reflections or brainstorms on assigned topics or course materials. These exercises encourage students to independently process and consolidate their understanding of the readings or lectures.

2. Experiential Learning

   Experiential learning emphasizes direct engagement with the course material. In this course, students will engage with excerpts from key texts during class, focusing on extracting specific information, comparing factors, and critically analyzing theoretical perspectives. This hands-on approach ensures students actively apply what they have learned in real time, fostering deeper understanding.

3. Collaborative Learning

   Collaborative learning will take place in pairs and groups, where students will work on specific tasks such as calculating the presidentialism index based on a given post-Soviet country's constitution. They will assess the strength of presidential power relative to the

parliament and present their findings in group presentations. This promotes teamwork and application of theoretical knowledge to practical cases.

After attending classes, students have the option to choose either a written or oral exam.

Final Written Paper

The final assignment will be an essay on a course-related topic, either from a provided list or a topic approved by the instructor. The essay should pose a clear research question, which could take several forms:

- A causal question, such as: How have presidentialism vs. parliamentarism influenced political regime development in post-Soviet countries?

- A debate-oriented question, aimed at reviewing scholarly discussions, such as: Was the Soviet system reformable?

- A policy-oriented question, requiring the student to reflect on contemporary issues and offer recommendations, such as: What does Russia's invasion of Ukraine mean for other post-Soviet states?

The essay should include an introduction that clearly presents the problem or question being addressed and explains its relevance (rationale), followed by a well-structured body and conclusion. The paper may be based on a literature review alone or incorporate some empirical analysis (either descriptive or causal). Alternatively, it could take the form of a policy memo, which focuses on offering practical recommendations based on a thorough analysis of current political or institutional conditions.

Volume: from 5000 to 6000 words, including a list of literature and sources. **Deadline**: **9 February 2026**.

The research essay will be graded according to the following rubric:

Grading	Assessment
90-100	Student writes in a very coherent and creative manner; usage of proper citation format (Chicago or APA); paper has a full introduction and a conclusion; few or no grammatical and/or spelling mistakes in student's work; student references scholarly articles/texts / adequate popular science, expert or journalistic

	materials outside of syllabus readings and critically analyzes the works of other scholars.
79-89	Student writes in an intelligible manner but his/her work is also lacking in creativity; citation format is evident but not fully consistent either; cursory introduction and conclusion; noticeable grammatical/spelling mistakes; student references some scholarly articles/texts/journalist or expert papers outside of syllabus in the form of a literature review to supplement his/her work; critical analysis of scholarly works is adequate.
60-79	Student barely writes in a satisfactory manner; paper is largely lacking in terms of an introduction and conclusion; citation format is inconsistent; grammatical/ spelling mistakes are prevalent; references to scholarly articles/texts/journalist or expert papers outside of syllabus are quite lacking; critical analysis of other scholarly works is inadequate.
40-59	Student writes in a largely unintelligible manner; citation format suffers from serious flaws; brief/no introduction and/or conclusion; many grammatical/spelling mistakes; virtually no references to articles/texts/journalist or expert papers outside of syllabus or critical analysis of other scholarly works.
0-39	Student writes in an unintelligible manner; citation format is nearly nonexistent; multiple grammatical/spelling mistakes; few/no references to scholarly articles/texts/journalist or expert papers outside of syllabus; critical analysis is wholly inadequate in scope.

Oral Exam

Students may opt for an oral exam, which will be held between ==2 and 8 February 2026==. Each student will receive three questions and must select at least one to respond to in detail. Additional follow-up questions may be asked by the instructor to probe further into the student's understanding.

Students' answers must demonstrate:

- knowledge of **key concepts and theoretical frameworks** covered in the course;
- familiarity with **assigned readings from the syllabus**;
- the ability to draw on **materials discussed in class sessions**, including case studies, country examples, and supplementary literature not explicitly listed on the syllabus;
- a solid grasp of **empirical contexts** across the post-Soviet region.

In other words, answers should integrate both **theoretical arguments** and **country-specific evidence** from the broader set of materials covered throughout the course.

Sample Questions:

1. **Causes of the Soviet Union's Collapse:** Describe the main explanations and their limitations. Address institutional design, subversive institutions, elite politics, and the failed logic of reform.

2. **How should we classify post-Soviet political regimes?** Do they fit traditional democracy–autocracy frameworks, or do we need alternative conceptual tools? Discuss in relation to transitology, minimalist vs. maximalist definitions of democracy, and hybrid regime approaches.

3. **What explains variation in regime trajectories across post-Soviet states?** Discuss democratization theories, including historical legacies, nationalism, geography/linkage, ethnicity/clans, or elite pacts.

4. **Perils of Presidentialism:** Why are presidential and semi-presidential systems particularly vulnerable to instability in post-Soviet contexts? Illustrate with constitutional and informal powers of presidents in at least two states.

5. **Succession Dilemmas and Lame-Duck Crises.** Why do lame-duck crises and succession dilemmas lead to regime breakdown in some post-Soviet countries but not in others? Compare cases of successful and failed transitions.

6. **Color Revolutions:** What makes post-Soviet "color revolutions" modular? Explain the debate between Beissinger and Way: diffusion vs. structural weakness.

7. **Why did mass protests in Russia (2011–12), Belarus (2020), or Kazakhstan (2022) fail to produce regime change?** Discuss coercive capacity, elite cohesion, and commitment problems.

8. **Ukrainian Politics from Kuchma to Russian Invasion:** Outline the political landscape and the dynamics of nationalization in Ukraine.

9. **Consolidation of Dictatorships in the Post-Soviet Space:** What are the core mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation in the post-Soviet space? Discuss legitimation, repression, co-optation, and the roles of parties, parliaments, constitutions, and coercive state structures.

10. **Institutional Aspects of Authoritarian Regime Survival:** How do specific authoritarian institutions—dominant parties, managed elections, legislatures, and security services—contribute to regime survival? Give examples.

11. **What is the "autocratic middle class"? How do state dependency and perceptions of mass support sustain authoritarian popularity?**

12. **Measuring Public Attitudes Under Autocracy:** What are the main methodological challenges in measuring public opinion in authoritarian contexts? Explain preference falsification, social desirability bias, and the spiral of silence, and describe methodological tools used to address them.

Each student's performance will be evaluated on clarity of response, accuracy of content, depth of analysis, and use of course material.