

Putin, Power, Populism: Russia and Eurasia in Global Politics (L2071S)



3rd year Undergraduate option

Module convenor: Dr Stefanie Ortmann

Contact me under s.ortmann@sussex.ac.uk for any questions about this module!

You should take this module if...

- you want a module that deals with current global shifts. Eurasia and Russia illustrate both the crisis of Westernization and what may come in its place.
- You want to learn about the messy 'new geopolitics' (of identities, economic and political entanglements etc) that shape the region and the world
- you want to understand how the legacies of non-Western empires and the alternative modernity of the Soviet Union continue to shape the region and world politics
- you want to explore your interest in particular issues (security, development or international politics) in in a specific regional context.



The world is changing....

....and Eurasia is (once again) at the centre of these developments.

After the Soviet collapse, the region was supposed to symbolize the triumph of Western democracy and capitalist development. A few decades later, the Kremlin has invaded Ukraine, and Russian and China have aligned to challenge the Western-centric liberal international order. Regional dynamics underpin all of this.



Overview of the module

This module will explore the role of contemporary Russia and Eurasia in global politics, with particular attention to the current 'crisis of the liberal West'. The module has an empirical focus, but you'll also learn about geopolitical assumptions that have long shaped Western understandings of Russia and of global politics— and how the new 'messy geopolitics' of the region challenge us to rethink some of these assumptions.

In a first part, we will explore post-Soviet patterns of state formation, their implications for international politics, and how they are shaped by the enduring legacies of empire and Soviet modernity. What is the 'Putin system', what role is played by transnational oligarchic networks, and why is there a new 'geopolitics of identity'? How does the conflict between Russia and the liberal West feed into the rise of Trump and the 'return of geopolitics'?

We'll then turn to some of the most important current issues in the region and learn about the smaller states of the region in the process – conflicts (from the Caucasus to Ukraine), non-Western institutions, Central Asia and the Russian-Chinese relationship, and the geopolitics of oil and gas. We'll explore Russia's role as 'illiberal beacon' and 'authoritarian Great Power' and the new tools it's using to promote this agenda – how is this contributing to the crisis of the liberal West?



Session plan

1. What is Eurasia? Orientalism, Eurocentrism and the post-Soviet
2. Post-imperial and/or post-Soviet? Historical legacies, the end of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a region
3. Domestic-external linkages I: state-building and the international politics of the Russian network state
4. Domestic-external linkages II: geopolitical imaginaries and identity
5. Russia, Ukraine and the West: new geopolitics?
6. Wrecks of empire: frozen conflicts and de facto states
7. Sanctions and the changing geopolitics of energy in Eurasia
8. Central Asia, Russia and China
9. Russia and the global Far Right



Module organization and prerequisites

There are no particular prerequisites for this module - if you liked Politics of Foreign Policy, you'll enjoy this module and recognize some themes, but we'll cover concepts and theories as well as historical background in class.

Teaching will take place in a weekly 3-hour interactive seminar format, involving student presentations, discussion of the readings and group work. This includes everything from working with primary sources to guided debates.

- I will introduce the week's topic and will often give short background lectures to put issues into context, but there is no formal lecture element. The focus is very much on student activities, which requires reading in preparation for class.
- The module covers the post-Soviet period – the emphasis will be very much on current issues, though we will often look at this through the lens of historical legacies (Soviet and imperial).



Assessment

- The module is formally assessed by a final essay of 3500w and a mid-term exercise in preparation for the essay, on which you will receive written feedback.
- There will also be assessed presentations, with topics reflecting current policy problems in the region.
- For the final essay, you have a choice between a list of essay questions or developing your own topic and question based on your personal interests (with the tutor's help). We will discuss research techniques specific to this module and how to find a topic in class.



About me and my research

I'm an Associate Professor in IR and many of you may know me from my 2nd year module, Politics of Foreign Policy. In my research, I'm exploring in current 'de-westernization' of global politics, which is partly expressed in the return of geopolitical imaginaries, such as the concept of 'Great Power' and the figure of the 'strongman', now a global phenomenon but anticipated by the rise of Putin. I'm also interested in how this intersects with the transformation of state power in a world where boundaries between domestic/external are blurred and core domains of sovereign statehood are privatized. I have explored this in my research on the production of sovereignty in Kyrgyzstan, the role of conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space, and the Russian network state as Great Power.

...if you want to explore more!

- Peter Pomerantsev, Nothing is True and Everything is Possible
- Daniel S. Markey, China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia
- Viktor Pelevin, Generation Babylon (a great novel that captures post-Soviet 'virtual politics')
- Charles Clover, Black Wind, White Snow: the Rise of Russia's new Nationalism
- (TV series): Servant of the People (Ukraine), Silver Spoon (Russia).



If you have any questions, I'm happy to tell
you more! s.ortmann@sussex.ac.uk

