

Hybrid Warfare and Peacebuilding in Countries Influenced by the Soviet Legacy: Political Transformations and Conflict Resolution in the Digital Era



SYLLABUS

VU Amsterdam Summer School

20-31 July 2026

Any general questions for the Summer School support team? Contact amsterdamsummerschool@vu.nl.



Course Details

Title	Hybrid Warfare and Peacebuilding in Countries Influenced by the Soviet Legacy: Political Transformations and Conflict Resolution in the Digital Era
Coordinator(s)	Dr Oleksandr KHYZHNIAK, Dr Bogdana CHERNIAVSKA
Other lecturers	
Form(s) of tuition	On campus. We also plan to use interactive lectures on campus in class, with guest lecturers, group, real-life experience sharing, and case study discussions. Language: English
Approximate contact hours	45
Approximate self-study hours	39

Teaching staff

- [Dr Oleksandr KHYZHNIAK](#) is the project manager at the **Centre for International Cooperation (CIS-VU)**, has broad experience in international collaboration, management project education, and research. He prefers to use interdisciplinary approaches and is open to international relations that grounds on his two MA degrees in Sociology and International Economics at Karazin University (Ukraine). During his academic research career, he did his internships in 2009 at Warszawa University (Poland) for the PhD devoted to tolerance issues and at Ariel University (Israel) in 2016-2017 for the post-doc project devoted to collective actions and its determination. During his work experience, he combined educational, research, and management activities. In 2010 he started lecturing at Applied Sociology and Social Communication Department As a project manager at CIS-VU, now he focuses on the implementation of international projects in Global South countries and developing new fields and opportunities in Central Asia and East Neighborhood countries.

- [Dr Bogdana CHERNIAVSKA](#) is a Ukrainian-qualified lawyer with a PhD, combining academic research with practical legal experience. She is currently a **Visiting Academic at the University of Oxford** (former Research Officer at Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice) and a **Guest Fellow at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam** (Department of Criminology). Her research interests include AI in investigation of the war crimes, information security, and hybrid conflict dynamics. She has worked with the Ukraine Legal Network (Nuhanovic Foundation – Centre for War Reparations), supporting individuals seeking redress for conflict-related harm, and has been involved in humanitarian volunteer engagement with the Red Cross in The Netherlands. In the academic and educational field, she co-developed interdisciplinary courses on modern conflicts, hybrid warfare. As a legal practitioner, she has experience in corporate and contract law, cross-border advisory work, and business relocation projects.

- [Prof. Dr. Joris VOORHOEVE](#), [Dr Yarin ESKI](#), [Hans van den BERG](#), [Dr Tina van der LINDEN](#)
- Other guest lecturers – to be confirmed

Course description

The course provides students with a comprehensive understanding of political, social, and military conflicts in states influenced by the Soviet legacy. Some of these states emerged as a result of the collapse of the USSR, while others were already independent but remained politically and militarily aligned with the Soviet Union through the Warsaw Pact framework. In total, the course examines approximately twenty episodes of armed conflict. Particular attention will be given to cases such as the **Russian–Ukrainian war, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, and the ongoing tensions in Moldova, Georgia, and other tensions caused by Russian hybrid influence.**

One of the central focuses is **postcolonial analysis of Russia and the USSR as imperial formations**, particularly in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Another focus is the study of propaganda and information influence in the digital society, including how hybrid information strategies provoke or sustain pockets of military and political tension in post-colonial contexts.

The subject of the course is the study of **the nature, consequences, and narrative framing of these conflicts**, along with the political, ethnic, and socio-cultural processes driving them. The course engages with conceptual frameworks such as neo-imperialism, postcolonialism, post-communist transformation, waves of democratization, and civilizational conflict.

The course addresses the nature, consequences, and evolving narratives of contemporary conflicts, including the shift toward the **“war of narratives”** and the growing role of drone, cyber, and remote warfare technologies in shaping both military practice and public perception.

Finally, the course examines peacebuilding and **negotiation strategies**, including contemporary approaches and practical peacebuilding initiatives in the region.

Learning objectives

By the end of the Summer School, participants will be able to:

1. Apply theoretical frameworks

Apply key theoretical frameworks (postcolonial theory, neo-imperialism, and democratization theory) to analyze political transformation and conflict dynamics in post-Soviet and post-colonial regions.

2. Analyze hybrid conflict environments

Analyze the structure of hybrid conflicts, identifying how military, economic, political, and informational instruments are combined within contemporary warfare.

3. Evaluate information and narrative strategies

Critically evaluate how digital propaganda, strategic narratives, and information warfare shape political processes and conflict escalation.

4. Assess the role of emerging technologies

Assess how emerging technologies — including drones, cyber operations, and digital evidence — transform both the conduct of warfare and the information environment.

5. Examine peacebuilding challenges

Examine peacebuilding and negotiation strategies in hybrid conflict settings, considering geopolitical competition and contested sovereignty.

6. Demonstrate analytical and communication skills

Demonstrate critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills through case-based discussions and analytical writing

Assignments and Assessment

To achieve a passing grade for the course, students will need to pass at least 50%+ of all assignments (1-10 scale grade at the end of the course).

The results consist of:

- the Blog is 60%
- peer review of the blog is 30%
- attendance of the classes is 10%

Individual Blog assignment: Each participant should write a blog about 1 of the topics/lectures. A blog will be shared with all participants digitally. A table and schedule will be provided on the first day who will write a blog on which day and how peer review of blogs will be practically implemented. Feel free to create a cartoon, craft a photo story, record a spoken column, or produce a video if that suits your style!

- Your blog should establish a connection between the lecture's content and something beyond the program, such as ongoing debates, personal anecdotes, multimedia content, exhibitions, or parliamentary discussions.
- Whenever possible, include website links as references. Keep your content concise and engaging.
- Additionally, ensure your blog includes an accompanying picture (at least 800x500 px) with a clear label for reuse and a relevant title.
- Submit your blog via email no later than the next day's lecture. Blogs will not be presented during class unless requested/required. A brief introduction and background are given by the creators and there will be a brief moment for Q&A and feedback.

Compulsory (mandatory) reading list (before the course):

- Tlostanova, M. V. & Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Global coloniality and the decolonial option. *Kult: Postkolonial Temaserie*, 6, 130–147. Retrieved from http://postkolonial.dk/artikler/kult_6/MIGNOLO-TLOSTANOVA.pdf
- Kazharski, A. (2022, June 7). Kremlin's Rhetoric on 'Slavic Civilisation' and 'Brotherly Peoples' Is Akin to the Nazi 'Blood and Soil'. *Visegrad Insight*. <https://visegradinsight.eu/kremlins-rhetoric-on-slavic-civilisation-and-brotherly-peoples-is-akin-to-the-nazi-blood-and-soil/>
- Snyder, T. (2024). *Why should we know the history of Ukraine?* Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xc64yG8TPzM>
- Plokhly S. and Fridman L. *Historian explains origin of Russia and Ukraine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egofszm8Oxo>

Provisional reading list

- Beissinger, M. R. (2022). *The revolutionary city: Urbanization and the global transformation of rebellion*. Princeton University Press.

- Bennett, W.L., Livingston, S. (2023). *A Brief History of the Disinformation Age: Information Wars and the Decline of Institutional Authority*. In: Salgado, S., Papathanassopoulos, S. (eds) *Streamlining Political Communication Concepts*. Springer Studies in Media and Political Communication. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45335-9_4 (accessible with a VU account).
- D'Anieri, P. (2023). *Ukraine and Russia: From civilised divorce to uncivil war* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Snyder, T. (2010). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books.
- Walt, S. M. (2018). *The hell of good intentions: America's foreign policy elite and the decline of U.S. primacy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Zhurzhenko, T. (2014). A divided nation? Reconsidering the role of identity politics in the Ukraine crisis. *Die Welt des Islams*, 52(3-4), 449–466. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-05234P09>
- Laruelle, M. (2021). *Is Russia fascist? Unraveling propaganda East and West*. Cornell University Press.
- Etkind, A. (2024). Can memory be decolonized? *Baltic Worlds*. Retrieved from <https://balticworlds.com/can-memory-be-decolonized/>
- Kazharski, A. (2021). Belarus as a liminal space for Russia's ontological security before and after the 2020 protests. *New Perspectives*, 29(2), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X211032900>
- Griffin, G. E. (2020, August 22). FULL INTERVIEW with Yuri Bezmenov: The Four Stages of Ideological Subversion (1984) [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yErKTVdETpw>
- Reitschuster, B. (2014). Putins Demokratie: Ein Machtmensch und sein System, *Econ*. Retrieved from <https://www.getabstract.com/de/zusammenfassung/putins-demokratie/22393>
- Eski, Yarin. 2022. *A Criminological Biography of an Arms Dealer*. Routledge Studies in Crime and Society. London: Taylor & Francis. (will be delivered to the students upon request).
- A "Frozen Conflict" Boils Over: Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and Future Implications Landgraf, W., & Seferian, N. (2024, January 18). *A "Frozen Conflict" Boils Over: Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and Future Implications* [Special Report]. Foreign Policy Research Institute. youngdiplomat.org+2youngdiplomats.me+2linkedin.com+2
- Berg, v.d. H. B. (2021). *On Strategy and Tactics*. *PINPoints*, 50. Processes of International Negotiation. Retrieved from: <https://www.scribd.com/document/823807435/Strategy-Tactics-H-B-van-den-Berg-1-1>
- Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines Droin, M., Dolbaia, T., & Edwards, A. (2023, September 22). *A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Kudaibergen, D. (2024). *The Kazakh Spring: Activism and challenge to dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Kazakh-Spring-Activism-Challenge-Dictatorship/dp/1009454226>

- Snyder, T. (2022). *The Making of Modern Ukraine*. Retrieved from: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLh9mgdi4rNewfxO7LhBoz_1Mx1MaO6sw_&si=tx_13iKfGXNp3Y0jL
- Snyder, T. (2024). *Why This War is Much Bigger Than Ukraine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf18KorSdpk>
- Plokhly S. and Fridman L. *Putin on unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egofszm8Oxo>

Working formats & structure

Attendance

Lectures will be made available on Canvas (under modules). The lecture sessions start with a review of previous lectures, feedback on assignments, and / or practical course matters, followed by the lecture(s) of the day, and closed off with a Q & A session. So, your active involvement is requested and we therefore count on your attendance. In case of missing two sessions (one meeting day) it is possible to do additional task for missed day. Contact coordinators via Canvas for details, but no later then July 17th, 2025. Attendance of all classes mandatory and graded.

Course Schedule

Week 1

Monday, 20 July | 10:00–13:00

Course introduction.

Getting to know each other. Expectations and assignments.

What Does “Post-Soviet” Mean?

Decolonial knowledge and the Russian colonial matrix.

Colonial narratives, language, memory, and cultural tools.

Tuesday, 21 July | 10:00–13:00

Manufacturing Crisis: The Kremlin’s Chain of Wars.

Limits of the “Russkiy Mir” concept.

Hybrid warfare: soft power, disinformation, economic pressure.

Challenges to international humanitarian law.

Wednesday, 22 July | 09:30–11:30

Conflict narratives and hidden interests.
War as transaction: stakeholders and power structures.

Information-psychological warfare.
Fact-checking vs propaganda workshop.

Thursday, 23 July | 10:00–13:00

Data session: media and social network analysis.
Narrative construction and influence tools.

International law and conflict resolution.
The Netherlands' response to the war in Ukraine.

Friday, 24 July | 10:00–13:00

Negotiation and conflict resolution workshop.
Cases: Armenia and Ukraine.

Ukraine, Belarus, and the Soviet myth of “brotherhood.”
Agency, identity, and post-Soviet liminality.

Week 2

Monday, 27 July | 10:00–13:00

Political identity and economic agency in Ukraine and Belarus.
Identity narratives and asymmetric markets.

Protest cycles (2004, 2014, 2020) and geopolitical positioning.

Tuesday, 28 July | 10:00–13:00

Russia's narratives of revolution and change.
Russia as spoiler of sovereignty and transformation.

Emerging technologies: drones, cyber operations, digital evidence.

Wednesday, 29 July | 09:30–11:30

Peacebuilding rhetorics: Peace vs Justice?
Russian peacekeeping and conflict management.

Conditions for sustainable peace in post-Soviet conflicts.

Thursday, 30 July | 10:00–13:00

Student-led case discussions.
War in Ukraine and other regional conflicts.

Group analysis and debrief

Friday, 31 July | 10:00–13:00

Blog presentations and feedback.

The Value of Freedom: Security, Justice, and Peacebuilding.

Conclusions, takeaways, farewell.

External visits

- EUROJUST (The Hague)
- International Criminal Court (The Hague)

Worth to visit as extra study visits:

- **National Military Museum.** The exhibition *War Stories. Ukraine.*
<https://www.nmm.nl/en/warstories/>.
- **Soviet War Cemetery (Ereveld Experience) - critique observation**
<https://sovjet-ereveld.nl/>

