

Post-Soviet Conflicts and Political Transformations: A Comprehensive Study



SYLLABUS

VU Amsterdam Summer School

21 - 25 July, 2025

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



Course Details

You can recycle the information that can be found on the webpage to fill in the following sections. Please bear in mind that the syllabus is a key element of the course that helps students to decide whether this course is appropriate for them and can really help them when deciding to join. Make sure to be as detailed as possible.

Title	Post-Soviet Conflicts and Political Transformations: Comprehensive Studies in Conflict Resolution, Disinformation, and Hybrid Threats
Coordinator(s)	Dr Oleksandr KHYZHNIAK, Dr Bogdana CHERNIAVSKA, and Dr Maksym FOLOMIEIEV.
Other lecturers	Prof Aliaksei ZHURAU LI OU, MA Dmytro PROKUDIN, Prof. Dr Joris VOORHOEVE, As. Prof Aiden HOYLE, Dr Tina van der LINDEN, Hans van den BERG, Dr Yarin ESKI, PhD student, MA Oksana PROKHAVATILOVA.

Form(s) of tuition	On campus. We plan to use an active blended learning approach to mix working in class with online activities. We also plan to use onsite interactive lectures on campus in class, with guest lecturers, group work based on videos, real-life experience sharing, and case study discussions. Language of instruction: English
Approximate contact hours	30 contact hours
Approximate self-study hours	26 hours

Teaching staff

- Dr Oleksandr KHYZHNIAK
- Dr Bogdana CHERNIAVSKA
- Dr Maksym FOLOMIEIEV
- Prof Aliaksei ZHURAU LIU
- Dmytro PROKUDIN
- Prof. Dr. Joris VOORHOEVE
- Dr Yarin ESKI
- Dr Tina van der LINDEN
- As. Prof Aiden HOYLE
- Hans van den BERG
- Oksana PROKHVATILOVA

Course description

The course focuses on a number of armed conflicts and hotbeds of military and political tension in the states that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of the collapse of the USSR.

In particular, we are talking about 20 episodes of military conflicts, including revolutions for the last 34 years in former Russian colonies in East Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia (full list will be provided in the course syllabus). These episodes took place inside, between former colonies and in between Russia and former colonies.

We will focus on the last variety episodes that took place during last years: Russian Ukrainian war, Azerbaijan-Armenia war, Fergana Valley conflicts (Central Asia) with special attention to the situation in Moldova and Georgia.

The subject of the course is the study of the nature, course, consequences and narratives of armed conflicts and centres of military and political tension in the states that emerged from the collapse of the USSR. An important aspect is the definition of conceptual approaches to understanding political, ethnic, socio-cultural processes within these conflicts. In particular,

in the context of the concepts of neo-imperialism in the information and digital age, 'waves of democratisation', conflict of civilisations, post-communist transformations, democratic transit, etc.

One of the focuses is postcolonial studies on the example of Russia/USSR as an empire, in particular in the post-Soviet period, in the process of the collapse of the USSR:

- Russia's place and role in creating and moderating centres of destabilisation in post-Soviet countries (geopolitical, discursive, socio-cultural, legal, propaganda, historiographical aspects).
- Russia's imperial restoration projects (the concept of 'zones of influence' in the post-Soviet space, integration projects in the post-Soviet space, political and socio-cultural reactions of post-Soviet countries)
- Russia's use of the anti-colonial rhetoric to interact with the countries of the global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America) and military and political reverberations in Africa and Asia.

Another focus is the study of the possibilities of propaganda and information influence in digital society to provoke pockets of military and political tension in post-colonial countries and societies.

Through case studies, simulations, and guest lectures by experts with field experience, students will develop practical skills in conflict analysis, mediation, intercultural communication, and strategic response to disinformation. Particular attention will be paid to the role of law, ethics, and diplomacy in addressing hybrid warfare and advancing peacebuilding objectives.

Ultimately, the course aims to help shape a new generation of professionals and scholars who will prioritize conflict prevention and peaceful resolution grounded in international legal frameworks, contributing to a more stable and just global order.

Learning objectives

1. Apply theoretical frameworks: utilize key theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial theory, neo-imperialism, and waves of democratization to understand the transformation and conflict dynamics in the region.
2. Critique information warfare: evaluate the role of digital propaganda and information warfare in shaping political outcomes and provoking conflicts within societies with post-Soviet legacy.
3. Develop critical and soft skills: enhance critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills through group discussions and blog assignments, applying these to real-

world case studies and conflict scenarios while considering the role of international law in peacebuilding and accountability processes.

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. Assessment

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 than July 17th, 2025. Attendance of all classes mandatory and graded.

Retake

If your final grade is less than 5.5, you can improve by submitting a (revision of) individual writing assignment by email to the coordinators by a specified date that could be set individually, but not later than the final meeting, e.g. July 18, 2025.

Plagiarism

We take academic honesty and ethical standards very seriously and plagiarism is treated as a serious offence. Plagiarism is defined as “presenting as one’s own work submitted in another course (self-plagiarism) and/or the work of another without acknowledging its origins through full and accurate referencing”. Any form of plagiarism is considered to be Academic Misconduct and is punishable at the VU Amsterdam (also see the Academic and Examination Regulations).

Some suggestions to avoid the accusation of plagiarism:

- Accurately relay information, but rephrase in your own words
- Always cite your source (both in text and bibliography)
- Put direct quotes in quotation marks and cite the page number (though try to use quotes as little as possible).

AI tools use during the course

We follow VU Amsterdam policy on Generative AI, Copilot and ChatGPT as well as other regulations on the use of AI in education.

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>
- Plokhy 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=tx13iKfGXNp3Y0jL
- 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>

Course Schedule

21, Monday. Meeting 01.

10.00 — 11.20. Class #1-1. Welcome, getting to know each other, ice-breaking, course structure presentation, and assignments (by **Dr Bogdana CHERNIAVSKA** and **Dr Oleksandr Khyzhniak**).

11.20 — 11.30. Free (coffee break).

11.30 — 12.30. Class 1. **Introduction to the course content. What does it Mean “Post-Soviet”? Decolonial Knowledge about Former Soviet Regions and Russian Colonial Matrix.** (by **Dr Oleksandr Khyzhniak** and the guest-lecturer **Oksana PROKHAVILOVA**)

What do we understand as Post-Soviet? Just territory or beyond? Limitations of this “umbrella term”, different Soviet (and Russian) approaches to regions (Caucasus, Central Asia, Ukraine). Why is it possible to apply “coloniality” to this context? Madina Tlostanova and “Russian colonial matrix”. How Russia produces colonial knowledge about regions? Tools for Russian militarism: Language, Memory, Church, Art... How does it work? Case studies of such tools: “Katyusha” song, the ushanka hat, Immortal Regiment. “Newspeak”, the “Masha and a bear” cartoon and similar cultural products. The “Ruski Mir” Foundation and the role of state-run outlets like RIA Novosti.

12.30 — 13.30. Free (Lunch).

13.30 — 15.00. Class #1-2. Manufacturing Crisis: the Kremlin’s Chain of Wars against Sovereignty and Limits of “Ruski Mir” (by the guest-lecturer **Oksana PROKHAVILOVA**)

Events form a single chain, a system in which each link plays a critical role: (1) Moscow intervened in Moldova’s politics, facilitating the creation of a pseudo-republic in Transnistria, even before the incidents in Kosovo. (2) Then, in Chechnya, a region within Russia sought to break away, leading to the Chechen war and the genocide of Chechens. (3) In Georgia, the 8-day war tested the strength of international law and democracy, revealing the vulnerabilities of both. (4) Finally, Russia’s annexation of Crimea shattered the global legal system, signaling a major disruption to international order. This chain of events represents the ongoing

liberation of nations from Russian control, each region with its own unique challenges but all carrying the potential for further development.

15.00 — 15.15. Q&A, wrap-ups, feedback.

22, Tuesday, Meeting 02.

10.00 — 10.30. Welcome, take aways from the previous day and introduction for the day.

10.30 — 12.00. Class #2-1. “Conversation with an Arms Dealer. Conflict Narratives, Hidden Interests, and War as Transaction” (by the guest-lecturer **Yarin ESKI**).

Reflections After a Conversation with an Arms Dealer. Identifying Key Stakeholders. This lecture explores how narratives around armed and political conflicts are constructed, who influences them, and what interests lie behind the scenes. It begins with reflections after a personal conversation with an arms dealer — a symbolic figure of those who profit from war. We will examine who benefits from the continuation of the war in Ukraine, the role of arms manufacturers, how transactional politics operates, and why truth often becomes secondary to political or economic agendas. The session will also address how to identify key stakeholders in political and armed conflicts and uncover the power structures that shape public perception and policy from behind the curtain.

12.00 — 13.00. Free (lunch).

13.00 — 14.30. Class #2-2. Hybrid Warfare: Examination of Soft Power Methods for Destabilizing State Functioning — A Challenge to International Humanitarian Law (by the guest-lecturer **Tina van der LINDEN**)

This lecture examines the evolving nature of hybrid warfare, with a focus on soft power tactics—such as disinformation, psychological operations, economic pressure, and manipulation of civil institutions—used to destabilize states without direct military action. These non-kinetic methods blur the lines between peace and war, exposing gaps in the applicability of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Drawing on real-world examples from Ukraine and other post-Soviet regions, the session highlights how hostile actors exploit legal gray zones and civilian systems to pursue political or military goals. Participants will consider how IHL addresses these challenges and explore potential legal or doctrinal reforms to better protect civilians and uphold international norms in modern conflicts

14.30 — 14.40. Free (coffee break).

14.40 — 15.45. Class #4-3. Analysis of Rival Narratives as Weapons in Information-Psychological Warfare: Fact-Checking vs. Propaganda – How to Analyze the Information Around Us (by the guest-lecturer **Aiden HOYLE**).

This interactive lecture explores how competing narratives are constructed and deployed as tools of information-psychological warfare. It examines the mechanisms behind propaganda, disinformation, and strategic messaging, as well as the growing role of fact-checking, media literacy, and investigative journalism in resisting such influence. Through a combination of theoretical insights and practical exercises, participants will learn to critically assess the information environment, identify manipulation techniques, and distinguish between credible reporting and weaponized messaging. The session includes hands-on analysis of real-world example of War in Ukraine and a discussion lab to apply learned tools in evaluating contemporary information warfare.

15.45 — 16.15. Q&A, wrap-ups, feedback.

23, Wednesday. Meeting 03.

09.30 — 09.40. Welcome, take aways from the previous day and introduction for the day.

09.40 — 10.50. Class #3-1. Data session.

Analyze texts in the media or social networks, examining the influence tools mentioned in the course description, using specific media products as examples. This involve identifying how narratives are shaped, what strategies are employed, and how these tools are used to manipulate public opinion or advance particular agendas. This analysis will provide a deeper understanding of how media and social networks act as instruments of influence in contemporary political landscapes (by the guest-lecturer **Oksana PROKHAVATILOVA**).

10.50 — 11.00. Free (coffee break).

11.00 — 12.00 Class #3-2. International Law in Conflict Resolution: The Netherlands' Response to the War in Ukraine and other Post-Soviet Conflicts (by the guest-lecturer **Prof. Dr. Joris Voorhoeve**)

12.00 — 12.30. Q&A, wrap-ups, feedback.

12.30 — Free (lunch).

24, Thursday. Meeting 04

09.30 — 09.40. Welcome, take aways from the previous day and introduction for the day.

9.40 — 11.30. Class #4-1. Session on the impact of negotiation on conflict resolution. Interactive workshop in which students analyze the cases of Armenia, Ukraine as post-Soviet conflicts, including a brainstorm on which elements are important to include when doing negotiation on conflict resolution. Followed by Q&A/discussions (by the guest-lecturer **Hans van den BERG**).

11.30 — 12.30. Free (lunch).

12.30 — 14.00. Class #4-2. Subjects or Builders? Ukraine, Belarus, and the Soviet Myth of Brotherhood (by the guest-lecturer **Oksana Prokhvatilova**).

Issue of the agency of Ukraine and Belarus. According to researchers, due to the myth of the three brotherly nations, these countries have undergone (and continue to undergo) different approaches from Russia. This significantly impacts the processes occurring within Ukrainian and Belarusian societies. The “border” between Ukrainian and Soviet is difficult to draw. Ukrainians are not ready to fully accept or abandon their Soviet past. However, they struggle to differentiate between Ukrainian Soviet heritage (for example, Kharkiv modernists, Derzhprom, art, Alla Horska, etc.) and Soviet myths. If this is challenging for Ukrainians themselves, it is even more difficult for those outside Ukraine. What is Ukraine's place in Russia's colonial worldview? Why is Ukraine important? What is the war in Ukraine really about? Is Belarus the second Russia? What are Belorussian voices of resistance and do they have any chance to succeed?

14.00 — 14.10. Free (coffee break).

14.10 — 16.00. Class #4-3. Special session: Political Identity and Economic Agency of Belarus and Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Space (by the guest-lecturer **Dr. Aliaksei Zhurauliou**).

This session unpacks how the Soviet myth of “brotherly peoples” cloaked two very different post-1991 trajectories: Ukraine’s search for sovereign agency and Belarus’s drift into managed dependency. Combining Aliaksei Kazharski’s identity-focused concept of liminality with research on Ukrainian-Belarusian trade, energy and labour flows, we will ask whether Minsk and Kyiv act chiefly as passive subjects of Russian strategy or as economic stakeholders able to set their own terms. Participants will trace how identity narratives, protest cycles (2004, 2014, 2020) and asymmetric markets intertwine, producing either conflict (Ukraine) or compliant integration (Belarus). The goal is to give students a toolkit for analysing post-Soviet conflicts that integrates discourse, political economy and on-the-ground data.

16.00 — 16.30. Q&A, wrap-ups, feedback.

25, Friday. Meeting 5

09.30 — 09.40. Welcome, take aways from the previous day and introduction for the day.

09.40 — 10.50. Class #5-1. Russia's Crusade Against Freedom (by the guest-lecturer **Oksana Prokhvatilova and Dmytro PROKUDIN**).

Discussion the phenomenon of revolution itself, the Russian narratives associated with it, and how revolutions are viewed on various levels (structural, social, spiritual. How Russia not only acts as a spoiler of peace but also as a spoiler of change in the regions with Post-Soviet Legacy. Russia instrumentalizes local conflicts, influencing the course of events. This reflection will help highlight the value of freedom (which is the key idea that concludes the school) and expand the discussion to include more case studies from Central Asia (since previous lectures focused on the Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, etc.).

10.50 — 11.00. Free (coffee-break).

11.00 — 12.30. Class 5-2. Discussion: Peacebuilding Rhetorics in the Region: Peace versus Justice? (by the guest-lecturer **Oksana Prokhvatilova and Dmytro PROKUDIN**).

The topic of peacebuilding in the region. Usually, peace-making is either a prelude or part of peacebuilding, but Russian peacekeepers act as "spoilers" of peace. Is peace possible in the countries with the Post-Soviet legacy, and what are its prerequisites? Can territorial concessions or other compromises work? What are the conditions for peace? We can look at specific stories, discuss particular issues, and it is important to allow the participants of the school to express their views.

12.30 — 13.30. Free (lunch).

13.30 — 14.30. Assignment (Blog) presentations and feedbacks.

14.30 — 14.40. Free (coffee break).

14.40 — 15.30. Class 5-3. Conclusions. The Value of Freedom: Security, Justice, and Peacebuilding in Conflict Zones.

A format of lection with included discussions, open questions after each few slides. Freedom is a fundamental value, and for many nations, it is considered more important than life itself. In regions marked by conflict and colonial legacies, the pursuit of freedom often comes with immense sacrifices, and the quest for justice becomes intertwined with the need for security. As we reflect on the complexities of peacebuilding in this region, we must recognize that true peace cannot be achieved without addressing past injustices and healing deep-rooted divisions. The path to sustainable peace requires more than just territorial agreements or temporary compromises; it demands a commitment to restoring dignity, recognizing the agency of nations, and ensuring that the voices of the oppressed are heard. In discussing peacebuilding, we must consider not only political solutions but also cultural, social, and spiritual restoration. This is a crucial point as we conclude our summer school, where we've explored the intersection of revolution, conflict, and national identity, particularly in the context of Russian imperialism and its ongoing influence.

15.30 — 16.00. Wrap-up, feedback, farewell.

Worth to visit as extra study visits:

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

