

Aleksandar Matovski
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science • Williams College
Schapiro Hall rm.223 • 24 Hopkins Hall Drive • Williamstown, MA 01267 USA
am30@williams.edu • (607) 379-9722 • aleksandarmatovski.com

Teaching Philosophy

I am fortunate that I have had many opportunities to teach throughout my entire professional and academic career. During my work in the Macedonian government between 2003 and 2006, I regularly appeared as a guest lecturer in a graduate seminar on international organizations at the Saints Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, discussing the challenges of post-conflict stabilization and NATO and EU integration as I was dealing with them professionally. As a think-tank research director in the 2006-2008 period, I taught in programs such as the Council of Europe School of Political Studies and I helped establish the M6 Educational Center in Macedonia, which provides a broad interdisciplinary curriculum for business leaders operating in emerging markets. During my graduate studies at Cornell University, I was a teaching assistant in introductory, intermediate and advanced undergraduate courses as well as in a graduate seminar, covering subjects in the subfields of comparative politics, international relations and political methodology. At Williams College, I had the privilege of teaching courses on Russian Politics under Vladimir Putin and Authoritarian Politics in the 2017/2018 and the 2018/2019 academic years. From these diverse experiences, I discovered that teaching is both something that I thoroughly enjoy and an opportunity to question, clarify and refine my own understanding of the phenomena I worked with and studied. In my intellectual and scholarly career, I have learned most about those subjects that I had an opportunity to teach. I therefore approach teaching as a fundamental part of my research and scholarship.

In the classroom, I seek to engage others in the process of interpreting the world, revisiting the fundamental puzzles of politics, critically assessing ideas and developing new insights. Many of the subjects that are of particular interest to me, such as authoritarian politics, contentious politics and political violence, lie outside the experiences of most students. Thus, my primary responsibility as a teacher is to immerse students in the issues and contexts they are studying. For this purpose, I place strong emphasis on rich ethnographic, literary and historical narratives, participant accounts, and audiovisual experiences in my lectures, discussion sessions and the readings and other materials I assign. To bring the relevant context to the classroom, I begin lectures and discussion sessions with conversations about relevant current events, and I regularly task students in my courses to follow and discuss pertinent stories in at least two major news sources of record. I also put them in the shoes of the political actors involved through role play and simulation as a means to promote a more intimate understanding of underlying motivations and rationales.

Well-understood concepts should also evoke vivid images. Accordingly, I believe that more abstract theories and empirical evidence, as well as subjects like statistics are best understood and learned visually, through intuitive and interactive graphics that connect meanings to theory and methods.

More broadly, I believe that effective teaching is a process of casting away molds. Above all, the student needs to be transformed from a passive digester of facts to critical thinker and contributor of well-reasoned arguments. The crucial step in this direction is to make students comfortable with deconstructing and challenging the ideas they encounter. To this end, I think that students should be given every opportunity to articulate the concepts they are exposed to and apply them in other contexts. In my discussion sessions, I strive to encourage students to assume as much responsibility as possible for introducing and rehearsing new material, while I step back somewhat and steer the debate. Where appropriate, I prompt students to articulate, apply and critically assess class readings through assignments like written summaries and presentations, and by inviting them to apply theories to interpret current events. But above all, I believe that the most effective way to advance students' critical thinking is by cultivating the habit and skill of asking questions. Critical thinking starts by asking clarifying questions, which every student encounters while assimilating new material. I take advantage of this by organizing lectures and discussion sessions around questions that I ask students to contribute beforehand. When lecturing or moderating class discussion, I build upon these questions by encouraging students to both fashion responses to their own queries and develop new routes to interrogate ideas and evidence.

The essential role of the instructor in this process is that of a mentor: serving as a source of guidance and encouragement as the student learns by articulating puzzles and developing arguments to address them. Effective mentoring requires a lot of personalized interactions with the student, so I make every effort to offer additional advising opportunities outside the classroom, particularly in preparation of writing assignments and projects. Writing is the most difficult and important task students perform, and I believe they should be carefully coached in the subtle and challenging art of revising. For this purpose, I award participation credit to students who invest the effort to produce multiple substantive revisions of their texts, and discuss these during office hours. I believe that mentoring does not end here. In my advising sessions, I provide information about career, internship and further educational opportunities, suggest resources and possibilities for research, facilitate contacts with people that possess relevant knowledge, and discuss current events. From the great teachers I have been fortunate to work with, I learned that scholars leave their mark not only through their own research, but also through the scholarship they inspire and the opportunities they facilitate for their students. I owe my personal, scholarly and intellectual growth to this insight and generosity of my mentors, and my purpose in teaching is to provide nothing less to my own students.