



Concepts and Methods in International Relations – Spring 2026

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Alessandro Colombo

Instructors:

N. maximum participants: 30

Eligible participants: students from GOV, IPLE, REL and SIE

N. ECTS: for GOV, IPLE and SIE students, 3 ECTS as “further training activities” (“ulteriori attività formative”); for REL students, 3 ECTS as “elective courses” (“crediti a scelta libera”)

Final evaluation: attendance (at least **75%**) and **research proposal** or **academic essay** (Grade: ‘pass’ or ‘fail’)

Learning objectives: The overall objective of the course is to introduce students to research in International Relations, by focusing on different approaches. Throughout the course, students will familiarize with some of the **key concepts in International Relations** and with the main **components of an effective research design**; next, they will be presented with an overview of the most widely used **qualitative and quantitative methods** in International Relations and they will examine how these methods have been applied to fundamental research questions in the literature; finally, they will have the opportunity to put these concepts and methods into practice by undertaking the challenge of **developing an original research proposal** that reflects the structure of an academic research project. No previous knowledge of qualitative techniques and statistical analysis is required.

Expected results: Students are expected to possess the fundamental toolkit to theoretically and critically engage with concepts and ideas in the discipline of International Relations, and to possess the proper knowledge to independently conduct empirical research. The laboratory aims at providing students with basic tools to formulate a research question and develop the research design for their final dissertation.

Content of the course: The course is divided into three parts. The **first part** deals with some of the key IR concepts to problematize the intellectual building blocks upon which the discipline is constructed and represented. To do so, concepts ‘anarchy’, ‘enmity’, and ‘society’ are analysed with a critical and genealogical approach to emphasize the contextual and historical situatedness of such concepts. Specific readings (available beforehand online) are required as preparatory materials before each class. The **second part** introduces the core components of an effective research design in IR and presents the major research methods and related techniques used in the field. Finally, the **third part** engages students in a hands-on experience, guiding them through the process of formulating and structuring an IR research proposal.

Evaluation criteria: Students can **either write an academic essay** (3000 words max) on a topic discussed and agreed in advance with the instructors **or a research proposal** (3000 words max). This option involves crafting a structured proposal that mirrors the key components of an academic research study. Students will define a research puzzle, articulate precise research questions and hypotheses, conduct a brief literature review, outline their methodological approach and data collection plan, and provide an estimated timeline. This exercise enables students to select the most appropriate methods from those covered in the course based on their specific research question, gaining practical experience in developing a well-founded research design. In both cases, the final assignments must be submitted to the instructors **by July 1st, 2027**.

Course structure

- I. Introduction to the course
- II. Approaches to concepts and ideas in International Relations
- III. International anarchy: history and theory of a foundational concept
- IV. The concept of enmity in International Relations
- V. International society and its influence in International Relations
- VI. Detecting a Puzzle, Research Questions and Design in IR
- VII. Operationalizing complex concepts, levels of analysis, and units of analysis
- VIII. Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed-Methods Research in IR
- IX. The Geopolitical Lens: Spatial Analysis and Cartographic Representations
- X. Developing an original IR research project: practical challenges