The Dynamics of Communism:
Analyzing and Understanding the Communist System in former Czechoslovakia

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Course Description

The objective of this course is to help students understand how the communist system in Czechoslovakia functioned in practice and to explain why the system eventually collapsed. This course emphasizes the need for having a theoretical rather than purely empirical approach to the question, so that students gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of what happened. This course takes up some issues that are rarely discussed in such a course, such as what role the official mass organizations played in bringing down the regime, or how the regime developed a specific type of legitimacy that in some ways was historically unique; yet, this specific type of legitimacy had its own dynamics that contributed to the fall of the regime. This course emphasizes student participation, so each lecture will be followed by a discussion. To facilitate the discussions, each student will have to participate in one group presentation on a topic from the course based on the previous week’s reading. However, the presentation will be short and limited to 15 minutes.

Assessment and Grading

Students’ final grades will be composed as follows:

1. Class participation – 15%
2. Group Presentation – 15%
3. Midterm – 30%
4. Research paper – 40%
The midterm take-home exam takes places in week 7. Rather than a final exam, each student will write a research paper, which is due the final week. The paper can be on a topic of your choice, but must be based on one of the topics from the course. It must be 4,000-8,000 words.

Cumulative percentage points will be converted into grades.

**Attendance Policy**

Students are expected to attend every class and they have to comply with the attendance policy of the UPCES program. One excused nonattendance is tolerated; more than one has significant consequences for your grade. Students are responsible for catching up with the material they have missed.

**Academic Honesty**

 Needless to say, plagiarism and other forms of cheating are not tolerated.

**Course Outline and Reading Assignments**

**Week 1**

**UPCES Orientation Lecture Series** - Lectures and site visits on subjects of history, culture, politics, and the economies of the Czech Republic and Central Europe in order to establish a common interdisciplinary background and vocabulary for all courses.

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**Week 2**

**Introduction**

Overview of the course. Course requirements. Information on assignments.

Introductory lecture and discussion: Why was the communist party so popular after World War II? What made them attractive to Czech and Slovak voters?

**Readings (Optional)**


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**Week 3**

**Marxism and Marxist-Leninism: Democratic and Totalitarian Interpretations**

What did Marx mean by “dictatorship of the proletariat” and how was this concept further developed by Lenin and Stalin? How is it possible that Marx could both inspire totalitarian communist movements and democratic socialist/social democratic movements? The Czechoslovak Communist Party runs into problems with the Comintern for its democratic leanings.
Readings
Marx, Karl. "The Civil War in France" short essay available in many versions, including on-line.

Lenin, Vladimir, *The State and Social Revolution*, chapters 1-3, available in many versions, including on-line.


Optional:


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Week 4

**The Political Power Structure under Communist Rule:**
How was the communist system organized? What was the role of the Communist Party, the “support parties” and the state? How did the Party control the state? This week we take a close look at how the political system worked in practice.

Readings


Optional:
Analyzing the Communist System: totalitarian or pluralist?

Throughout the period of communist rule, there was an on-going debate about the nature of the communist system – was it totalitarian, or did it allow for some kind of pluralism within bounds? It is interesting to look back at this debate in light of the new evidence we have after the collapse of the system in Europe.

Readings

Optional:

The Communist Economic Model

This week we discuss how the communist economic system functioned in practice. How was the economy organized, and what were its main problems? Since economic problems played a major role in the downfall of the system, it is important to understand the systemic problems with the system in order to understand, first, why the regime made attempts at reforming the economy and then why the failure of these reforms helped pave the way for its collapse.

Readings

Optional:
Week 7

Midterm

Take-home exam.

Week 8

Reforming Communism: Why Did Reforms Fail?
This week we discuss the Prague Spring economic reforms and other attempts at reforms and discuss what problems they faced. If the communist regimes had succeeded in reforming their economies, then they might have stayed in power, as the Chinese and Vietnamese cases show. Thus, it is important to understand the reasons for this failure if one is to understand the dynamics of the system and the reasons for its eventual fall.

Readings


Saxonberg, Steven, *The Fall*, chapter 4 repeat.


Optional:


Week 9

The Warsaw Pact Invasion and Normalization

The Prague Spring represented the most daring attempt at reforming the system among the European communist regimes. The question, therefore, arises as to why the Soviet Union did not allow this experiment to continue, as well as why the Czechoslovak leadership caved in to Soviet pressure and eventually accepted the occupation. This week we will also discuss the process of “normalization,” that took place after the invasion and what it meant for the development of the country.

Readings


Optional:

Week 10

The Loss of Legitimacy
Some observers argue that the communist regimes never had any legitimacy at all, while others have argued that it was precisely the loss of legitimacy in the 1970s and 1980s that led to the downfall of the system. This week we discuss whether these two positions can be reconciled and we discuss what types of legitimacies can exist and which kind possibly existed under communist rule.

Readings
Saxonberg, Steven, *The Fall*, Chapters 5 and 6.

Optional:


Saxonberg, Steven. *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism*

Week 11

Civil society and semi-civil society

What did civil society look like under communist rule? What role did it play in bringing down the system? Has its role been exaggerated? Is it possible that scholars have concentrated too much on the illegal organizations comprising civil society, while neglecting the role of legal mass organizations comprising “semi-civil society”?

Readings
Saxonberg, Steven. *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism* 153-156, 179-206

Optional:

Week 12

**Perestroika light: the Jakes period and the demise of the system**

This week we will discuss how the Czechoslovak regime performed in the 1980s, including how it reacted to Gorbachev’s coming to power and why the regime eventually lost power.

**Readings**


Optional:


Saxonberg, Steven, *Transitions and Non-Transitions*, Ch. 5.


Week 13

RESEARCH PAPER DUE

We will have a discussion on the collapse of the system and a general discussion about the topics of the course.

All the texts cited in this syllabus are available from UPCES course materials and the reader, available to all students free of charge.

Additional literature: Many other readings on various course topics can be downloaded from UPCES online course materials or found in the CERGE-EI Library.

*The instructor reserves the right to alter the syllabus during the course of the semester if necessary.*