Ideas Behind Politics
Communism, Post-communism and Civil Society in Central Europe

Lecturer: Juraj HVORECKY, PhD
Time and Location: Tuesdays, 10am to 1pm, CERGE, room #2
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Course description

The objective of this course is to help students understand the recent political history of Central Europe and the local contribution to political thought that can be relevant on a global scale. Students will learn about the political systems that existed in the region before 1989 and get familiar with the various ways in which the predicament of these countries was reflected upon in the thought of the most prominent political theorists from the region. They will be invited to search in Central Europe of the 20th century and in its unique historical experience for ideas that shaped and articulated an understanding of politics that might be viewed as the specifically Central European solution to political problems faced by many societies across the world. A particular emphasis will be put on the concept of civil society, which arguably occupied a privileged place in the political imagination of Central European intellectuals. Students will also learn about the post-1989 political developments in Central Europe and about the challenges faced by the new democracies in the region.

The course will start with a short overview of Czechoslovak political history leading to the ascent to power of the Communist party and the developments during the first twenty years (1948-1968) of Communism. In the subsequent sessions, the topics discussed include the Communist reform movement of the 1960s and its culmination in the Prague Spring of 1968, the confrontation between the regime and the citizenry in the three Central European countries in the period 1969-1989, and the most relevant contributions of the anti-communist opposition to political thinking: most notably, the ideas of the Polish opposition activist Adam Michnik, the Hungarian writer György Konrád, the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka and playwright Václav Havel. In the concluding section of the course we will advance well beyond the so-called Velvet Revolution and deal with some of the most pressing problems of the newly emerging democracies, such as the psychological legacy of communism, the distortions of the liberal discourse in post-communist political debates, the problems of transitional justice, the issue of nationalism, and, above all, the idea and reality of civil society, a notion that emerged as central in the thought of the dissident and other intellectuals in the region and has remained influential until the present day.

In this course, lectures will be combined with interactive discussions and tutored readings from essential texts. Further contact with the subject matter will be provided through excursions to places of direct relevance for our topic and through historical documents (musical recordings, photos, films).
Assessment and Grading

Students’ final grades consists of the following components:

1. Class participation – 15%
2. Midterm – 30%
3. Research paper – 30%
4. Final paper – 25%

The midterm (in-class essay) takes places in accordance with the term calendar below, and it also marks the time your research paper topic is due. The full original paper is due the final week (min. 12 000 characters without space), as is the surprise final exam.

At the end of the term, 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 absence is tolerated; more than one absence 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
Academic Orientation

Week 2
Introduction and a brief overview of Czecho(-slovak) history 1918-1945

Week 3
Early days of communism 1948-1960s
After 1945: the Communists’ ascent to total power, the February 1948 coup. Phases of the Communist rule. Totalitarian stage of Communism in the early 1950s. Gradual liberalization in the 1960s.

Readings

**Week 4**

**The events and ideas of the year 1968 in Czechoslovakia**
An attempt at a socialist reform that failed. Political, economic and social transformations in Czechoslovak society. The role of the intellectuals and culture professionals. Soviet invasion in August 1968. 1968 in other countries of East Central Europe.

**Readings**


**Week 5**

**The “Normalization period” 1969-1989**
The so-called normalization in Czechoslovakia: Political consequences of the repression of the Prague Spring: restoration of censorship and party control over all aspects of social life, political purges, persecution of dissidents in the 1970's and 1980's.
The slow and difficult emergence of an independent civil society: human rights movements, Charter 77, civic initiatives in the 1980's.

**Readings**


**Week 6**

**Václav Havel's political writings in the 1970s and 1980s. Other influential political ideas in Czech dissident circles**


**Jan Patočka's political thought**


**Readings**


Optional:


**Week 7**

**Midterm and Museum visit**

In-class essay exam (lasting one hour), followed by a visit to the Vitkov hill museum (conditions permitting)

**Week 8**

**The birth of the idea of civil society in the period 1969 - 1989 in East-Central Europe**


**Readings**


Stefani Sonntag: Poland and Mate Szabo: Hungary, in *Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgosh

Optional:


Week 9
The language of Communism and its impact after 1989
An investigation of how one aspect of the communist system, its specific language, remained influential post-1989. Narratives and counter-narratives in public and private language use of the communist era.

Readings

Optional:

Week 10
The collapse of Communism in East-Central Europe. Why?
Different explanations of the end of the Communist system in East-Central Europe. Also, the question of possible scenarios of further development post-1989 and of the consequences of the sudden collapse of the old system will be discussed.

Readings

Optional:

Week 11
Right wing politics, extremism and populism
Emergence of the right-wing ideology, the rise of isolationism, xenophobia and anti-civil society sentiments. Ambivalence of the political right, nationalism and civil society. A case against civil society.

Readings

Optional:

Week 12
New Politics in Post-Communist Central Europe: The problem of transitional justice
The post-Communist justice: restitutions of property, criminal responsibility for acts committed during the Communist period, screenings, positions towards the former Communist elites, “de-Communization”, institutes for the preservation of national memory, truth commissions.

Readings
Optional:

Concluding discussion: The impact of the legacy of Communism on political ideas, civil society and democracy in East-Central Europe.

Week 13
Surprise final exam and research paper due

All the texts cited in this syllabus are available from CERGE’s course materials website.

Additional literature: Many other readings on various course topics can be downloaded from CERGE’s online course materials website or found in CERGE’s library.