

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

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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 Czecho(-slovak) 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 Gyorgy 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 consist of the following components:

1. Class participation– 15%
2. Midterm – 30%
3. Research paper – 30%
4. Final paper – 25%
5. Additional 10% for 2 short quizzes (5% each)

The midterm (in-class essay) takes place 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 double-space pages), 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 AEP 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.

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

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

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

Introductory lecture and discussion: The birth, development and fall of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Nazi occupation and anti-Nazi resistance 1939-1945. After the war.

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

- Jacques Rupnik. „Czechoslovakia: If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them.“ In Jacques Rupnik 1989. The Other Europe. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 87-108.
- Ivan Volgyes 1978. The Politics of Eastern Europe. Lincoln: Cliffs Notes 1978, 1-27.

Optional:

- „The Slánský Trial. Events of 1949-52 (report written in 1968).“ In Gale Stokes (ed.) 1991. From Stalinism to Pluralism. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 71-77.

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

- Ben Fowkes 1995. „Czechoslovakia in 1968: Climax and Defeat of Reform Communism“. Pp.118-141 in Ben Fowkes. The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. London: Macmillan.
- Václav Havel 1991. “On the theme of an Opposition.” Pp. 25-35 in Václav Havel. Open Letters. London: Faber and Faber.

Optional:

- Ludvík Vaculík. “Two Thousand Words.” Pp. 177-181 in Jaromír Navrátil et al. (eds.) 1998. The Prague Spring 1968. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Kolakowski Leszek 1970. “The Fate of Marxism in Eastern Europe.” Slavic Review 29 (2): 175-181.

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

- „Charter 77 - Declaration“. Pp. 209-212 in H. Gordon Skilling 1981. Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Jan Patočka 1981. „What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not“, Pp. 217-219 in Skilling 1981.
- Milan Šimečka, Selected chapters from The Restoration of Order, Verso Books 1984.

Optional:

- Kohák. „History and Transcendence“, „Thought and Deed: Charta 77“, „Jan Patočka: An Appreciation“. Pp. 119-135 in Erazim Kohák 1989. Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Aviezer Tucker 1996. “Shipwrecked: Patočka's Philosophy of Czech History.” History and Theory 35 (2): 196-216.

Week 6: Václav Havel's political writings in the 1970s and 1980s.

Other influential political ideas in Czech dissident circles

Havel's central concepts: post-totalitarian society, antipolitical politics, responsibility, living in truth.
Benda's idea of a parallel polis.

Jan Patočka's political thought Broader context of Patočka's political philosophy. Patočka's philosophy of history. Views of Czech history. Philosophical defense of the Charter 77.

Readings

- Václav Havel 1991. „The Power of the Powerless“. Pp. 125-214 in Václav Havel. Open Letters. London: Faber and Faber.

Optional:

- H. Gordon Skilling. „A Second Society: A Theoretical Framework“, „A Second Polity: Contrasting Patterns of Reality“. Pp. 157-176 and 177-191 in H. Gordon Skilling 1989. Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe. Columbus: Ohio State University.
- Jiřina Šiklová 1990. „The 'Gray Zone' and The Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia.“ Social Research 57 (2): 347363.

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

- Adam Michnik. „A New Evolutionism“. Pp. 135-148 in Adam Michnik 1987. Letters from Prison and Other Essays. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stefani Sonntag: Poland and Mate Szabo: Hungary, in Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe, ed. Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgosh

Optional

- Elemér Hankiss 1990. „The ‚Second Society‘ 1965-1985.“ Pp. 82-111 in: East European Alternatives. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Marek Skovajsa 2008. "Independent and Broader Civil Society in East-Central European Democratizations." *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 4 (2): 47-73.

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

- Fidelius, Petr (pseud.) 1992. 'The Mirror of Communist Discourse.' Markéta Goetz-Stankiewicz (ed.) *GoodBye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 193204.
- Yurchak, Alexei 2003. 'Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (3): 480-510.

Optional:

- András Körösényi. "Intellectuals and Democracy: The Political Thinking of Intellectuals." In András Bozóki (ed.) *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press 1999, 227-243.

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

- Ivan Szelényi and Balász Szelényi 1994. "Why socialism failed: toward a theory of system breakdown. Causes of disintegration of East European state socialism." *Theory and Society* 23 (2): 211-31.
- Gale Stokes 1993. „The glorious revolutions of 1989.“ In *The Walls Came Tumbling Down. The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 131-67.

Optional:

- Andrew Arato "Interpreting 1989." *Social Research* 1993, 60 (3): 609-46.

Week 11: Right-wing politics, extremism and populism

The emergence of the right-wing ideology, the rise of isolationism, xenophobia, and anti-civil society sentiments. The ambivalence of the political right, nationalism and civil society. A case against civil society.

Readings

- Ladislav Holy 1994. "Metaphors of the Natural and Artificial in Czech Political Discourse." *Man*, 29 (4), 809829.
- Sean Hanley 1998. "The New Right in the New Europe? Unravelling the Ideology of 'Czech Thatcherism, Revised and corrected [December 1998] script of an article accepted for publication by The Journal of Political Ideologies.

Optional:

- Klara Vlachova and Blanka Rehakova 2009. "Identity of non-self-evident nation: Czech national identity after the break-up of Czechoslovakia and before the accession to the European Union." *Nations and Nationalism*, 15 (2), 254279.

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

- Vladimir Tismaneanu 1998. "Is the Revolution Over? The Myth of Decommunization and the Quest for Political Justice." Chapter 5 in *Fantasies of Salvation. Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in PostCommunist Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 111-40.
- Lavinia Stan 2006. "The Vanishing Truth? Politics and Memory in Post-Communist Europe", *East European Quarterly*, XL, 4, 383-408.

Optional

- Nadya Nedelsky 2004. "Divergent Responses to a Common Past: Transitional Justice in the Czech Republic and Slovakia." *Theory and Society* 33 (1): 65-115.

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

Readings:

All the texts cited in this syllabus are available on AEP's course materials website.

Additional literature:

Many other readings on various course topics can be downloaded from the AEP online course materials website or found in the building's library.

- Barbara J. Falk 2003. *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Markéta Goetz-Stankiewicz (ed.) 1992. *Good-Bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Václav Havel 1991. *Open Letters*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Jacques Rupnik 1989. *The Other Europe*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Gale Stokes (ed.) 1991. *From Stalinism to Pluralism*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gale Stokes 1993. *The Walls Came Tumbling Down. The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vladimir Tismaneanu 1998. *Fantasies of Salvation. Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, *Parallel Politics: Essays from Czech and Slovak Samizdat* (Spring, 1981).