

Undergraduate Program in Central European Studies

CERGE-EI and the School of Humanities at Charles University



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

Instructor: Marek Skovajsa, Ph.D.
Time and location: Wednesdays 10 a.m.-1 p.m., CERGE
Office Hours: Wednesdays after the class at CERGE, Mondays at 12:00 at the
Faculty of Humanities campus in Jinonice, at other times by appointment
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Course Description

The objective of this course is to help the students better 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 Czech(oslovak) 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, and 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 discussions, commented readings from essential texts and student presentations. More direct contact with the past will be provided through excursions to places of relevance for our topic and through historical documents (musical recordings, photos, films).

Assessment and grading

Students' final degrees will be composed as follows:

1. class attendance – 15%
2. presentations - 25%
3. reflection papers – 30 %
4. final paper – 30%

Reflection papers are due in weeks 3, 6 and 9, final papers (maximum length 3000 words) in week 12.

Cumulative percentage points will be converted into grades according to this table:

<u>Points total</u>	<u>Grade</u>
98-100	A+
93-97	A
90-92	A -
87-89	B +
83-86	B
80-82	B -
77-79	C +
73-76	C
70-72	C -
67-69	D +
63-66	D
60-62	D -
0-59	F

Policy on Attendance

Students are expected to attend every class and they have to comply with the attendance policy enforced in the UPCES program. Students are responsible for catching up with the material they have missed.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are not tolerated.

Course outline and reading assignments

Week 1

Introduction

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

Introductory lecture and discussion: The meaning of communism today. What is post-communism and are we still living in post-communism?

(Post-)communism or (post-)socialism?

A brief introduction to the concept of *civil society*. Civil society and democracy. What kind of democracy do the post-communist countries have today?

A brief overview of the Czech history 1918-1969

The birth, development and fall of the First Czechoslovak Republic; leadership and legacy of Th. G. Masaryk. Nazi occupation and anti-Nazi resistance 1939-1945. After 1945: the Communists' road to total power, February 1948 coup. Terror in 1950s, 1968 reform movement.

Reading

Jacques Rupnik. „Czechoslovakia: If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them“. Pp. 87-108 in Jacques Rupnik. *The Other Europe*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1989.

Week 2

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.

Reading

Ben Fowkes. „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 1995.

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.). *The Prague Spring 1968*. Budapest: Central European University Press 1998.

Kolakowski Leszek 1970. „The Fate of Marxism in Eastern Europe.“ *Slavic Review* 29 (2): 175-181.

Week 3

The “Normalization period” in Czech history 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 rising of an independent civil society: human rights movements, Charter 77, civic initiatives in the 1980's.

Reading

„Charter 77 - Declaration“. Pp. 209-212 in H. Gordon Skilling. *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1981.

Václav Havel 1991. „Dear Dr. Husák“. Pp. 50-83 in Václav Havel. *Open Letters*. London: Faber and Faber.

Week 4

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.

Reading

Jan Patočka 1981. „What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not“, „What Can We Expect of Charter 77?“, Pp. 217-219 and 220-223 in Skilling 1981.

Erazim Kohák. „History and Transcendence“, „Thought and Deed: Charta 77“, „Jan Patočka: An Appreciation“. Pp. 119-135 in Erazim Kohák. *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989.

Optional:

Aviezer Tucker 1996. „Shipwrecked: Patočka's Philosophy of Czech History.“ *History and Theory* 35 (2): 196-216.

Week 5

Václav Havel's political ideas in 1970s and 1980s I.

Havel's central concepts: post-totalitarian society, antipolitical politics, human responsibility, living in truth.

Reading

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

Week 6

Václav Havel's political ideas in 1970s and 1980s II. cont.

Reading

... Václav Havel „The Power of the Powerless“. (complete)

Václav Benda. „The Parallel Polis“. Pp. 35-41 in H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson (eds.). *Civic Freedom in Central Europe. Voices from Czechoslovakia*. London: Macmillan 1991.

Václav Havel. „Václav Havel“ (*Havel's response to Václav Benda*). Pp. 60-63 in H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson 1991.

Projection: *Largo Desolato* (a play by Václav Havel)

Week 7 mid-term projects due

The period 1969 - 1989 in East Central Europe

Emergence of an independent civil society in Poland, Hungary and East Germany during the 1970's and 1980's. Polish protest movements and the arrival of Solidarity in 1980. Intellectual dissent in Hungary.

Reading

Adam Michnik. „A New Evolutionism“. Pp. 135-148 in Adam Michnik. *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1987.

György Konrád. „Antipolitics“. Pp. 175-180 in Stokes 1991.

Optional:

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

Jiřina Šiklová. „The ‚Gray Zone‘ and The Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia.“ *Social Research* 57 (2): 347-363.

Barbara J. Falk. „The dissident contribution to political theory.“ Pp. 313-364 in *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press 2003.

Evening film projection: options include The Plastic People of the Universe (Jana Chytilová), Citizen Havel Goes on Vacation (Jan Novák) or an ideologically biased film from the Normalization era.

Week 8

The language of Communism and its impact after 1989

Fidelius, Petr (pseud.) 1992. 'The Mirror of Communist Discourse.' Markéta Goetz-Stankiewicz (ed.) *Good-Bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp. 193-204.

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.

Week 9

Central Europe

The history of the concept. Discussions about Central Europe in 1980s and after.

Reading

Milan Kundera. „The Tragedy of Central Europe“. Pp. 217-223 in Stokes 1991.

Tony Judt 1990. “The Rediscovery of Central Europe.” *Daedalus* 119 (1): 23-54.

Optional:

Milan Kundera. „A Nation Which Cannot Take Itself for Granted“. Pp. 151-155 in Stokes 1991.

Week 10

The political role of Intellectuals in Central Europe: a post-Communist exception?

Philosopher, or King?: The Former Dissident as the Head of the State. Václav Havel's new role as the Czechoslovak and Czech president.

Reading

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

Václav Havel: *Harvard Speech*. Cambridge, Mass., June 8, 1995.

Slavoj Žižek: „Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism.” *London Review of Books* 21 (21), October 28 1999.

Optional:

Ernest Gellner. „The Price of Velvet: Thomas Masaryk and Václav Havel“. *Czech Sociological Review* 1995, 3 (1): 45-57.

Week 11

New Politics in Post-Communist Central Europe: the case of transitional justice

The post-communist justice: screenings, positions towards the former Communist elites, restitutions, institutes for the preservation of the national memory, truth commissions.

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

Concluding discussion: The impact of dissident political thought on civil society and democracy in post-Communist Europe

Week 12

No class session. Final papers due.

Literature: Many other readings on different course topics can be downloaded from CERGE's online study materials library. Almost all the texts cited in this syllabus are also available from there.

Recommended fiction books that can be read as an accompaniment to the course:

Milan Kundera : *The Joke* or *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Bohumil Hrabal: *I served the King of England*

(alternatively, you can watch films based on any of these books)

Václav Havel: *The Garden Party, Audience, Largo Desolato, Redevelopment, Leaving*

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