

From Communism to Democracy
Social, Political, and Economic Transition in Central Europe
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Comparative politics, by tradition, seeks to explain different routes to democracy. My course will explore the current democratic transitions in Central Europe through application of theories of democracy and comparison with the blueprints of Western democracy and capitalism. I will also use the extensive body of theory and data from other democratizing and developing areas, such as Latin America and Asia, which provide discussion of the problems facing late-democratizing nations. Issues like entrance into the global economy, institutional lessons for political stability, and effective representation by parties can be applied from other regions to Central European cases. I will challenge students to analyze the components essential for democracy, and to distinguish national and regional variation.

The political context of countries colors their political struggles over institutional styles and distribution of political influence. In the case of Central Europe, the communist legacy is important to the current style of transition and informs on the societal reception of particular changes in the political and economic spheres. The first third of the course will be devoted to exploring the structural and political components of the communist regimes, and their effects on society and culture. I believe that one of the best ways to help students understand the effects of communist politics on individuals is through film and biographical/fictional discussions. Therefore, I will include the novel Waiting for the Light, Waiting for the Dark, Ivan Klima. This Czech novel discusses one man's experience in the socialist system, and his subsequent adjustment to capitalism and democracy after 1989. Several movies also offer insight into the political and social repercussions of the communist systems, including The Witness (Hungary 1963) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (based on a novel by Milan Kundera). This section will extend to the period of resistance and democratic "revolutions" in the late 1980s.

After establishing the path which Central Europe has travelled, the class will develop conceptual explanations for the evolution and characteristics of democracy. We will address the debate over the essential cultural and institutional requirements for stable democracy, and study the examples of Western European democracy. The inter-dependence of democracy and advanced capitalism is important to understanding political evolution, as are the societal conditions resulting from this combination. This section will culminate in Central Europe's first elections and institutional design of the 1989-90 period.

My own research explores the political, social and economic dilemmas facing political parties in Central Europe. I investigate how new democratic institutions affect the preferences of voters and politicians, and how governments struggle to rationalize economic reform policies to societies that are cynical and distrusting of the market. These issues are important to the long-term success of democracy and capitalism in this region, and to the future shape of such regional organizations as the European Union. During the third section of this course, we will explore the political dilemmas of designing a system of advanced capitalism within the context of state-run economic institutions. Democratic theory will again be important as it links democratic culture and political competition and with policy and social outcomes. We will look at issues of political representation for minorities, women and social classes during the transitions in Central Europe. We will also discuss whether the new democratic systems have created and can resolve destabilizing problems like the war in the former Yugoslavia, the return of post-communist parties

to government, the "divorce" of the Czech and Slovak Republics, and possibility of membership in the EU, NATO, etc.

Grades will reflect two midterms (total 40%) following each of the first two sections, a final (30%), and three short papers (30%). These papers will be used as the basis of discussion in the class. The first will be an analytical discussion of lessons and insights from the novel. The second two papers will be country-specific discussions of particular problems or issues in the development of democracy in Central Europe, and will provide background for problem solving exercises in the class.

Syllabus

Week I: How Communism worked: institutional structures of the political and economic spheres.

Week II: Life under communism: social norms, state organized community, and the institutionalization of distrust. (films)

Week III: Individual adjustment (novel) and social resistance. Issue paper.

Week IV: Revolutions and the 1980s. Midterm.

Week V: Democratic theory and evolution: is it culture or institutional construction?

Week VI: Lessons from Western Europe: parties, parliaments, presidents, and societal response.

Week VII: Democracy and Advanced Capitalism: the problems of capitalism in Western Europe; the problems of democracy (nationalism and minority representation.) Issue paper and discussion exercise.

Week VIII: Central European transitions to democratic polities: the institutions and elections of 1989-90. Midterm.

Week IX: Institutional change in Central Europe: parties, governments, social organizations.

Week X: Society in transition. Repercussions from change: nationalism, women and minorities, fragmentation of states.

Week XI: Developing capitalism and democracy together: privatization, income disparities, foreign debts and social welfare problems. Issue paper and discussion exercise.

Week XII: Central Europe's future: possibilities for regional co-operation and finding a place in the international community. Final exam.