Social and Political Change in Eastern Europe

This course focuses on Eastern Europe as the first “relatively backward” region in the world capitalist system. We will begin with a historical introduction to the region that raises questions about the causes and consequences of this relative backwardness. Next, we will turn to communist revolutions, Stalinism, reform communism, the rise of dissent, and the revolutions of 1989. Finally, we will discuss the problems of the post-communist era, including attempts to build democracy and capitalism, the rise of nationalism, and social problems such as increasing inequalities and the shifting politics of gender and labor.

It is our hope that in studying the developmental history of Eastern Europe, students will acquire not only historical knowledge of the region and its problems, but also develop new conceptual tools for studying social change in the non-Western world. As a region that has undergone several cycles of economic and political transformation and tried out a variety of different developmental models, but which still faces the challenge of modernization, Eastern Europe provides a good starting point for analyzing the problems of social change and political transformation more generally.

Plan of the Course

The course is divided into three parts.

1. In the first part of the course, we will explore how Eastern Europe became the “other Europe.” Specifically, we will examine some of the main factors that impeded the growth of capitalism and liberal institutions in Eastern Europe, relegating its peoples to a “peripheral” status in the world capitalist system. What were the reasons for the “relative backwardness” of Eastern Europe vis-à-vis the Western countries and what were the political consequences of its economic lag? We will also take a look at the developmental problems faced by the predominantly peasant societies of inter-war Eastern Europe.

2. In part two, we will explore the rise of Communism as a developmental alternative to Western capitalism, beginning with an examination of the social base of communist movements and the sources of its attraction to intellectual elites. We will then move on to the reasons of discontent with the Stalinist model which led to the Polish and Hungarian revolts of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968. Why did so many intellectuals become disillusioned with “real, existing socialism” and why did they become dissidents? How was it that a multi-million working-class
movement (*Solidarity*) arose in a socialist country ruled in the name of the interests of that very working class? Finally, how did communism collapse so quickly throughout Eastern Europe?

In part three, we explore the dilemmas posed by the demise of communism as an alternative to Western capitalism and liberal democracy. In particular, we focus on three distinct challenges that face post-communist Eastern Europe: building democracy, market transformation, and the construction of viable nation-states. More specifically, we try to show that these goals are not always compatible and are sometimes contradictory, with the consequence of exacerbating national and social tensions in the region. One tragic example of the obstacles which nationalism has posed to socio-economic and political transformation along liberal lines is the war in former Yugoslavia whose roots and course we explore in some detail. We then move on to a consideration of post-communist social problems, especially those relating to gender relations and the politics of labor. Finally, we conclude with some theoretically and historically grounded speculation on the future of this troubled and fascinating region of the world.

**Required Books**


These books are available for purchase in the bookstore and have also been placed on reserve at the reference desk in Mudd Library. All other required readings can be located on the Blackboard site for the class under “course documents.” They can be downloaded and printed *for personal use only.*

**Course Requirements**

Requirements for this class include regular attendance (including at the three film screenings), a short film response paper (4 pages), two 6-7 page essays, and a final examination. Grades will be determined on the following basis:

- Class attendance, participation, film screenings: 10%
- Film response paper: 15%
- 2 essays: 25% each
- Final examination: 25%

**Course Policy**
We ask that you not use laptop computers or other electronic devices during class time. While some use laptops solely to take notes, the temptation to do otherwise is great and it distracts other students. A small number of exceptions may be made only upon official notification. We think that Eastern Europe is best experienced unplugged: put on your school uniforms and sharpen your pencils, comrades!

**Honor Code**

This course and all its assignments are covered by the Oberlin College honor code. This means, most importantly, that—unless otherwise indicated—you are to produce your own work and honor the rules and conventions of scholarly quotation, attribution, and citation. While you are allowed to ask advice and help from librarians and official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Any case of (suspected) plagiarism will be reported to the Honors Committee. For more details, see [http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/10-Policies-Honor.pdf](http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/10-Policies-Honor.pdf)

For further clarification of the potential consequences see J.V. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism* (any edition).

**Part One: Eastern Europe Before Communism**

**Week One: What is Eastern Europe? Introduction to the Region and Modernization Theory**

*Tues. 9/6*


*Thurs. 9/8*

**Week Two: Modernization vs. World System Theory**

*Tues. 9/13*

*Thurs. 9/15*

Week Three: Relative Backwardness and Eastern Europe in the Interwar Period

Tues. 9/20:


Thurs. 9/22:


Week Four: World War Two and the Rise of Communism in Eastern Europe

Tues. 9/27:

Vladimir Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, pp. 1-22.


Film Screening: Istvan Szabo, Sunshine [Tues. 9/27, 7:30 pm]

Thurs. 9/29:


Part Two: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe

**Tues. 10/4:**


Gale Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, pp. 19-32; 43-77.

**Film Screening:** Goran Marković, *Tito and Me* [10/4 at 7.30 p.m.]

**Thur. 10/6:**

Guest speaker: Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić

Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies* (short selections)

**Week Six: Reform Communism and Its Dilemmas: From 1956 to the Prague Spring**

**Tues. 10/11:**

**Short Film Response Paper** (4 pages due in hard copy in class).

Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, pp. 54-111.


**Thurs. 10/13:**


Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, pp. 80-87; 94-114; 126-134.

**Week Seven: The Crisis of Communism and The Rise of Civil Society: The Case of Poland**

**Tues. 10/18:**


**Thurs. 10/20:**

David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, chapters 1, 5 (1-17; 75-111)

**Fall break 10/22-10/30**
Week Eight: The Collapse of Communism and the Revolutions of 1989

*Tues. 11/1:*

*Thurs. 11/3:*


**Fri. 11/4: First essay due in hard copy by 4 p.m. in King 305a or Rice 211**

Part Three: Post-Communism and Its Challenges

Week Nine: The Challenge of Capitalist Transformation

*Tues. 11/8:*


*Thurs. 11/10:*


Week Ten: The Challenge of Democratic Transformation

*Tues. 11/15:*
Valerie Bunce, “The Political Transition,” in Curry and Wolchik, eds., *Central and East European Politics*, pp. 31-51.

**Film Screening:** Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, “The Lives of Others” [11/15 at 7.30 p.m.]

Thurs. 11/17:


**Week Eleven: Post-Communist Gender, Labor, and Social Politics.**

**Tues. 11/22:**


David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity* (Cornell University Press, 2005), Introduction (pp. 1-12).


[Thurs. 11/24: Thanksgiving - no class]

**Week Twelve. Post-Communist Gender, Labor, and Social Politics (continued).**

**Tues. 11/29:**


[Second essay assignment distributed]

**Week Thirteen: Post-Communist Nationalism: The Yugoslav Catastrophe**


**Week Fourteen: Small States in a Big World**

*Thurs. 12/8:*


*Fri. 12/9: Second essay due by 4pm in hard copy in King 305a or Rice 211*

*Tues. 12/13:*


*Final exam: Tuesday, December 20, 7-9 p.m.*