The Czech Republic in a Global Context

Instructor: Jiri Pehe, guest lecturers

Objective of the Class

The purpose of this class is primarily to discuss the history and culture of the Czech Republic and Central Europe—the intersection of many international influences—in the context of globalization and, conversely, to discuss globalization in the local context. An important dimension of the class will be a discussion about how international students should use their experience abroad (in this case Prague and, more generally, Central Europe) to better understand complicated developments on the global level and back at home.

Methodology

The class will form the core of the intensive two-week orientation period that students will undergo upon arrival in Prague. Mornings will be comprised of a series of lectures and both small-group and large-group discussions of shared readings; early afternoons will emphasize other modes of learning, including city tours, film screenings, guest lectures and other cultural events. Late afternoons will be given over to the very successful, very popular intensive (“survival”) Czech language course which has been a staple of the NYU Prague program since its inception. In sum, then, the course will consist of 14 hours of lecture by Professor Pehe, 8 hours of reading recitation and discussion, and 12 hours of guided tours, film screenings, guest lectures and cultural events. During the same period students will have 15 hours of “survival” Czech language instruction. At the end of the orientation period students will be required to take an exam covering the content of the lectures, discussions, films, guest lectures, and tours.

A key rationale for this course is the fact that students need at least some notion of the complicated history of the region in order to better understand the questions discussed in most of the courses offered at NYU Prague. This introductory course, then, will provide students with a basic, shared knowledge of the ideological origins of Communism, the functioning of the totalitarian regime, the lessons of post-communist transformation, and the complex ways in which “global” issues play out in the regional context. It is our expectation that, with all students introduced to these basic concepts, our regular-semester course instructors will be able to spend less time sketching this sort of necessary background, and will be able to more readily and quickly launch into the heart of their respective courses.

Classes

**Session 1- Origins**

*Part One: A lecture (two hours)*
The lecture will look at the historical, political, and cultural influences which formed today’s Czech Republic: The Holy Roman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, democratic Czechoslovakia 1918-1938, the Munich dictate, World War II.

One of the key notions discussed in this context will be the concept of Central Europe, in particular the coexistence of the Czechs, Germans, and Jews. In this context, we’ll also discuss what constitutes a culture, how culture is formed and why the notion of culture is important. All cultures are simultaneously local and global, and Prague, which is historically an intersection of many cultures, is a perfect example of this notion as well as a good laboratory.

Reading:
Kundera’s “The Tragedy of Central Europe”
Excerpts from Peter Demetz’s *Prague in Black and Gold*

*Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)*
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

*Part Three: tour and lecture (two hours)*
This session will consist of a guided tour of the Old Town, with emphasis on various aspects of Central European culture.

*Part Four: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)*

**Session 2 – Communism (I)**

*Part One: lecture (two hours)*

This lecture will focus on the ideological origins and practice of Communism. The communist ideology will be discussed as one of the “global” ideologies originating in the West that significantly influenced the entire world. The lecture will also focus on how this ideology played out locally, and how the practice of Communism in the Soviet bloc influenced the rest of the world. Various stages of Communism in Central Europe (early idealism, Stalinism, socialism with a human face, neo-Stalinism) will be discussed, including the rise of various opposition movements (Solidarity, Charter 77, etc.)

*Reading:*
Marx: The Communist Manifesto
Excerpts from Hannah Arendt on totalitarianism

*Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)*
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

*Part Three: tour (two hours)*
Part Four: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)

Session 3 – Communism (II)

Part One: lecture (two hours)

This lecture will continue elucidation of the history and practice of Communism. The focus will be on the various stages of Communism in Central Europe (early idealism, Stalinism, socialism with a human face, neo-Stalinism), the rise of various opposition movements (Solidarity, Charter 77, etc.), and the various ways in which the end of the communist era unfolded in the region.

Reading:
Vaclav Havel: Power of the Powerless

Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)

Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

Part Three: films (two hours)

Two films will be screened: The Fighter and Velvet Revolution.

Part Four: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)

Session 4 – Transition & Transformation

Part One: lecture (two hours)

This lecture will focus on the transformation process after the fall of Communism, namely democracy-building, the creation of a market economy, the introduction of the rule of law, and building of a civil society. Various global aspects of this process will be discussed—ranging from the dominant concept of liberal democracy to the theories of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. How those ideological and political influences played out locally will also be discussed. We will further focus on the role of consumerism, boosted by the global advertising industry, and the struggle of a reborn civil society to claim the public sphere for itself despite attempts of powerful private interests to colonize the public sphere. Broader questions (relevant especially in light of the world financial crisis) of whether democracy and global capitalism are still compatible, what to do about democratic governance, and whether global political governance is feasible will be discussed.

Readings:
A selection of articles on the subject, including an analysis of post-communist transformation by Ralph Dahrendorf.
Excerpts from Tony Judt’s Ill Fares the Land.
**Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)**
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

**Part Three: films (two hours)**
Screening of two documentary films by directors Klusak and Remunda: The Czech Dream and the Czech Peace.

**Part Four: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)**

**Session 5 -- Integration**

**Part One: lecture (two hours)**
This lecture will focus on the process of political and economic integration in Europe, in which the Czech Republic and the Central European region came to play a role. Political opposition in the Czech Republic against some aspects of such integration processes will be discussed, with emphasis on the ideological, cultural and political roots of such attitudes (provincialism versus a global outlook, defensive nationalism, etc.). The lecture will also focus on various aspects of the region’s integration into other international organizations, as well as on various intellectual efforts to bring into the Czech discourse difficult global issues (multiculturalism and its supposed crisis, immigration, religious fundamentalism, etc.). We will also discuss the developing relationship between the US and the region.

*Readings:*
Selected texts on anti-Americanism

**Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)**
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

**Part Three: tour and lecture (two hours)**
A guided visit (with a short lecture) of the EU Information Center in Prague.

**Part Four: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)**

**Session 6 – Globalization (I)**

**Part One: lecture (two hours)**
This lecture will focus on various aspects of globalization on both individual and societal level. We will discuss some of the questions that have emerged as part of the intellectual reflection of the process of globalization and how
some recent theories are viewed locally and globally. In addition, we will discuss the visions of global governance.

Readings:
Excerpts from Fukuyama (End of History), Huntington (Clash of Civilizations), Friedman (The World is Flat), etc.

Part Two: Discussion and Questions (one hour)
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

Part Three: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)

Session 7 – Globalization (II)

Part One: lecture (two hours)

This lecture continues the discussion of globalization as both a global and local, social and individual phenomenon. A key question discussed will be how the global becomes the local, and vice versa, and which experience (and in what way) international students can use to understand better not only the host culture, but also their own culture after they return home.

Readings:
Saskia Sassen, “Global Cities and Survival Circuits,” Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy, Barbara Ehrenreich, Arlie Hochschild (eds.)

Part Two: Discussion and Questions (two hours)
Small-group discussion will identify central elements of the readings and lecture, and generate questions for large-group discussion.

Part Three: Intensive Czech Language (two hours)

Session 8 – Final Exam

One hour, in the form of a written test.

Final session of Intensive Czech language (one hour)
Criteria for Grading

Participation: Mandatory

Test: 70 percent of the grade

Czech language test: 30 percent

Each unexcused absence will be penalized by losing half a grade