

Spring 2025 Syllabus

Nationalism, Central Europe, and the Russia-Ukraine War

The idea of Central Europe, which originally had a strong German affiliation, is historically linked with the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On a 21st-century map, Central Europe is made up of Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and western Ukraine. After WW II most of Central Europe became a strategic part of the external Soviet empire, and all Central European countries experienced political oppression, economic underdevelopment, and social stagnation. Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary contributed to the final collapse of communist ideology in 1989-90 and collectively embarked on the path leading to full integration with the European Union. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, changed the political perspective of Central European countries. Poland and Hungary, once close allies, now view Russia's role differently, especially Moscow's imperial ambitions. Poland is trying to build ever stronger ties with the United States and is interested in strengthening NATO on the eastern flank. The other Central European countries are not so strongly motivated to focus on security issues. In this course, we examine the place of Central Europe in the EU, with a focus on immigration, ethnic minorities, democratic governance, and the role of religion in the state. Nationalism, authoritarianism, but also liberalism have become significant elements of the political message provided by various mainstream parties, though many Central European politicians claim that the region is going through a "strategic awakening". This "strategic awakening" may have different interpretations, especially vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine.

A typical class will usually consist of a Power Point presentation, discussion on a given topic and the instructor's sum-up. There is a compulsory reading/viewing list but the students are encouraged to step beyond the compulsory resources. Suggestions on the proposed topics and the reading list will be taken into consideration.

Course requirements and assessment

The students are obliged to actively take part in the classes and complete all assignments on time.

The course is graded as follows:

100 – 90 points: A

89 – 77 points: B

76 – 63 points: C

62 – 50 points: D

>50 points: F

The requirements are as follows:

1. Active participation in discussions: 0-20 points

All students are required to actively participate in the discussions, using their best knowledge of proposed topics.

2. One presentation: 0-20 points

Each student is required to prepare 1 presentation on a topic proposed by the instructor. The topics may be modified after consultations with the instructor. The presentation (PowerPoint or other) should last ca 15 minutes.

3. Midterm task: essay outline: 0-10 points

A 500-700 word outline of the final essay, with a preliminary bibliography and a list of sources. Essay topics should be consulted with the instructor. The outlines should be submitted by midterm.

4. Final essay: 0-50 points.

A 4,000 – 5,000-word essay, focused on Central Europe in international or regional perspectives. Nevertheless, it is also possible to analyze internal political/social issues of a Central European country in a historical context. The final essays should be submitted by Dec 12th.

Proposed topics for each class:

1. Defining Central Europe – what are various definitions of Central Europe? Where is the “starting point” of Central European identity? How has the concept of Central Europe changed over the years? Who may define himself/herself as a Central European citizen?
2. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences – part 1
3. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences – part 2
4. Central Europe and Its Political and Cultural Significance before the 19th Century. The Role of Kingdoms and Principalities in Shaping the Regional Tradition
5. The Process of Building National and Regional Identities in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The Legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – part 1 (Western Ukraine vs. Eastern Ukraine)
6. The Process of Building National and Regional Identities in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The Legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – part 2
7. The Concept of “Mitteleuropa” and Its Socio-political Implications before the End of WW I.
8. Imperial Germany and Its Role in the Process of Economic and Political Integration of Central and Eastern Europe before and during WW I
9. The Interwar Period in Central Europe. Foreign Policies of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary (1918-1939). The Phenomenon of “Appeasement Diplomacy”.

10. The Concept of “Intermarium” (“Międzymorze” in Polish) and Its Political Implications for Central and Eastern Europe.
11. WW II in Central Europe. The Role of Fascist and Nationalist Ideologies in Hungary, Austria and Slovakia. Soviet War Policies in Central and Eastern Europe. The Annexation of Western Ukraine.
12. WW II in Central Europe. The Issue of Holocaust in Poland, Ukraine and Hungary. Nazi and Soviet Occupation in Central and Eastern Europe.
13. Early Post-war Period (1945-1956) in Central Europe. Strengthening of Soviet Domination in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, GDR and Poland.
14. Anti-communist Rebellions and their Role in Creating of “National Memories”. Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968 and Poland 1956, 1968 and 1970.
15. The Role of Religion and Civic Opposition Groups in the Process of “National Awakening”. The Phenomena of “Secular Czechoslovakia” versus “Catholic Poland”.
16. The Fall of Nations and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire. Central European Contribution to the Final Demise of Communist Ideology.
17. The Controversies of German Re-unification and Its Consequences for Central European States. The Policies of Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel vis-à-vis Central Europe and Russia.
18. Post-communist Period of Independence – 1989 – 2003. Political and Social Transformation – Poland.
19. Post-communist Period of Independence – 1989 – 2003. Political and Social Transformation – Hungary.
20. Post-communist Period of Independence – 1989 – 2003. Political and Social Transformation – Czechoslovakia and Czechia/Slovakia
21. Reinventing Ukrainian Identity. The Clash of National vs Regional Identities in Western and Eastern Ukraine at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Polish-Ukrainian Relations.
22. The Convuluted Path to EU Membership. Foreign Policies of Central European States vis-à-vis the EU Member States before the Accession in 2004.
23. EU versus Central Europe. The Process of “Europeanization” of Central European Foreign and Domestic Policies.
24. The Visegrad Group and Its Political and Economic Initiatives. Reinventing the Concept of “Intermarium” and Its Variations (Central European Initiative).
25. NATO and the Problem of Regional Security. Russia’s Complex Policies in Central and Eastern Europe. The International Implications of Crimea’s Annexation and Russian Invasion of Ukraine.
26. The Migration Crisis and Its Consequences for Domestic and Foreign Policies in Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Eastern Part of Germany. The Examples of Growing Nationalist and Authoritarian Tendencies in Central Europe. The Consequences of Russian Imperialist Ambitions in Central Europe (including Ukraine).
27. Illiberal Democracy and Its Proponents in the European Union. The Phenomena of Victor Orban in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland.
28. Civic Society and Its Development in Central and Eastern Europe. European Liberalism as a Symbol of Civic Opposition against Authoritarian Rulers in a Formally EU Democratic State. D
29. Central Europe and Its Future Role in the European Union after the Russian-Ukrainian War – Revision and final discussion.

