

Evaluation-form

Course-code: STV2380

Course title: Between Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Post-communist Region

Language: Norwegian English

Course convener's evaluation of the course:

This course was held for the first time in 2022, and combines insights into specific cases (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine & Georgia) with a comparative take on some key political issues in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: political trust, support for and satisfaction with democracy; democratic backsliding; the influence of oligarchs and grand corruption; the international context (EU and Russia), and populist radical right parties.

Teaching consists of 10 lectures and 5 seminar meetings. We tried to vary the format of the seminars: presentation of country cases with slides and summaries (seminar meeting 2); literature review of contributions on democratic backsliding (seminar meeting 3); mock debate on whether Ukraine should join the EU (pros and cons, with students representing the EU, Ukraine, Russia, and Hungary) (seminar meeting 4); and review of a selected far-right party, group, or movement in the post-communist region, followed by discussion of whether it should be banned (seminar meeting 5).

We are four colleagues who teach the course together, and we have split lectures and seminars between us. Rather than having one seminar leader per seminar group, we have each taught one seminar meeting across all groups, with one of us taking responsibility for the first seminar meeting in all groups. Because the course was new, we did not know how many students to expect. The administration set up 7 groups. I asked for two of them to remain closed for students until further notice. It turned out that group 5 had only 5 students, so we asked them to move to one of the four other groups. However, despite this two of the four groups ended up having only 7 students (due to dropouts), with attendance as low as 5 students in some meetings. Those meetings did not work as well as meetings in larger groups.

Summary of feedback from student contact-point:

We asked all students to fill in a net-based survey. 25 of the 33 students who were qualified to sit for the exam did. We also recruited one student from each seminar group to take part in the evaluation meeting. Two of them did.

Survey: the overall impression is that the students liked the course. 88% answered that they learned 'very much' or 'a lot', and the remaining 12% learned 'a fair amount'. 84% answered that lectures helped them understand the topic to a 'very large' or a 'large' extent. 60% answered that the difficulty of the lectures was 'about right', with 32% rating them as 'somewhat difficult'. A majority of 56% found lectures engaging to a very large or large extent. Students found lectures on far-right parties and the international context most

interesting, and (not surprisingly) the introduction least interesting. Students were most satisfied with seminar meeting 4 (mock debate on Ukraine's EU membership), but a large majority of those attending were satisfied also with the rest of the seminars. Some of the comments (freely formulated) suggested that better structure/more direction and better prepared students would make seminars even better. A majority (56%) found the amount of readings excessive. A clear majority (72%) found the difficulty of the readings 'about right'. The students were also asked to mention readings they found particularly helpful and readings that should be replaced. We have noted the ones mentioned by several students. A couple of students wanted a textbook (and fewer articles).

In the evaluation meeting, we especially asked the contact students about the seminars. Their answers confirmed the results of the survey: the students liked the format and the variation in types of assignments, but both mentioned that the groups were too small, and that the students (apart from those that had an assignment for that particular meeting) were not well enough prepared.

Suggestions for improvements:

I do not think it is necessary to make major changes to the course. The course seems to have worked rather well as a whole, but we will of course make adjustments to the syllabus, as suggested in the survey, and perhaps also reduce the amount of readings. However, I am not optimistic about finding a textbook that covers the topics and countries we are interested in here. It will probably have to be articles also the next time.

Seminars: Since the students liked the format and the variation in types of assignments, I think we should keep the main elements. However, we should open fewer groups at a time, perhaps as few as three, to have better sized groups. There should be a two week gap between the first and the second seminar to allow for better preparation. We should also consider increasing the requirements, for instance by making students do two assignments each, by increasing the number of meetings they need to attend, and/or by enforcing that all need to come prepared.