

# Political Science in Central and Eastern Europe: Current Trends and Challenges

## INTRODUCTION: CURRENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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This Spotlight examines recent transformations in the field of political science in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE),<sup>1</sup> with a particular focus on Poland and Hungary. Recent trends in the political life of these countries provide a meaningful lens for reflection on the relevance of political science for civil society and democratic policy making. These trends further recognize the diverse “ways in which the political world contributes to, and detracts from, our efforts to flourish as individuals and communities” in a region where the discipline of political science has traveled a shifting path from state subordination to rediscovery within an increasingly integrated, internationalized educational system (Schmidt 2019). Arguably, there are important trends and unique challenges for political science scholars and teachers in CEE relative to their counterparts in North America and Western Europe. Our goal for this Spotlight is to highlight these issues.

CEE countries have been the site of many transformations, including from authoritarianism to democracy, from planned to market economies, and from former communist bloc to European Union (EU) member states. Recent trends showing a decline in democracy and the emergence of right-wing nationalist governments in Hungary and Poland are troublesome, however. As pointed out by Rafał Szymanowski in this Spotlight, “democratic backsliding in the region, like asymmetric benefits of systemic transition, rising economic inequalities, nationalist sentiments, and growing sympathy for the authoritarian rule” are powerful undercurrents in CEE countries. Democratic backsliding as well as historical legacies, underinvestment, and the impact of communist rule on higher education present challenges to political science and the social sciences more broadly.

After the 1990 political and economic transition,<sup>2</sup> higher education in CEE underwent rapid changes, divided into two distinct periods. The first period (1990s–2000s) was characterized by an increasing popularity of social science and growing student enrollment in fields such as political science, international relations, economics, and law. These fields became especially popular because they required little additional infrastructure or investment (Dobbins and Kwiek 2017). However, faculty appeared ill prepared to meet the growing demands for teaching and research. Before 1989, social scientists—unlike their peers in mathematics and the physical sciences—were permitted limited travel and access to non-Marxist political science. Whereas other scholars

studied abroad, these professionals remained behind the Iron Curtain, largely unaware of theories and methods emerging in the West (Meredith and Steele 2014).

The second period in the evolution of higher education in CEE (early 2000s–present) is marked by decreasing enrollment in the social sciences due to declining demographics and increasing access to EU and international programs. Most notable are the Bologna process, which aims to make European higher education systems more coherent and accessible; and the European Higher Education Area, which is a collaboration among 49 countries for implementing structural reforms around common values including academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and free movement of students and staff (European Commission 2021; European Higher Education Area 2021). These processes provide the backdrop for understanding higher education reforms and the impetus for efforts to internationalize political science teaching and learning in CEE.

Our goal for this Spotlight is to explore ways in which political science research and teaching is practiced in CEE countries, considering national and regional trends; processes of internationalization, standardization, and competitiveness; and other issues vital to the region. In particular, we invited contributors to consider the following two questions:

- (1) What are the main challenges for political science research and teaching in CEE countries?
- (2) Which trends help to better understand the unique issues faced by CEE scholars?

Spotlight contributors draw on their unique involvement and familiarity with the discipline to highlight ongoing challenges and critical questions for political science in CEE. Jarosław Jańczak provides an overview of the shifting political contexts and research interests of political scientists in CEE. He describes the transformations in political science teaching and research during recent decades, underscoring the importance of political legacies, regional interconnections, and resource limitations. Zsolt Enyedi recounts the relevance of academic solidarity amid the culture war and radicalization of the Orbán government in Hungary after 2010. He analyzes the reactions of scholars to the Hungarian government’s decision to force the Central European University to Austria after criticizing state policies, and he illustrates how academics “can no longer count on the solidarity of those colleagues whose priority is to stop globalization and progressive cultural change.” Piotr Forecki and Marcin Starnawski address the implications of right-wing populism in Poland. They raise critical questions about the productive involvement of political scientists in the public sphere and the meaning of democratic education.

Current issues unique to political science in CEE involve increasing the international visibility of teaching and research, grant funding, financial restructuring, and curriculum development to better prepare students for the job market. In the area of teaching, Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves discusses the significance of

internationalization through development of English-taught degree programs in Poland, a common trend in other countries of the region (e.g., Estonia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary). Regarding research, Joanna Skrzypczyńska and Paulina Pospieszna review the individual and institutional challenges to publishing in international peer-reviewed journals in light of recent national expectations for Polish scholars to internationalize their research. Expanding the discussion, Rafał Szymanowski

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shows how CEE political scientists fare in the EU-wide competition for European Research Council grants. He argues that underrepresentation is rooted in discipline-specific conditions, such as research-to-teaching loads, diminished policy relevance of political science research, and oversight of “the harbingers of democratic backsliding in the region.” Using the case of Corvinus University of Budapest, Balázs Szent-Iványi and András Tétényi investigate a recent change in the funding structure of Hungarian universities, highlighting the implications for institutional autonomy and competitiveness. Finally, Adam Szymaniak describes his experience in Poland with strategies to better prepare political science students for the job market. He raises questions about the ability of the current curricula to meet market demands for competencies such as “soft skills” and the implications of making political science programs more “practical.”

A review of political science and higher education practices in CEE provides insights for the profession and for readers interested in international higher education systems. Unique changes have been taking place in CEE countries in recent decades, underscoring the need for political scientists to better understand political reality and to engage in problem solving. Each contributor to this Spotlight highlights the diverse ways in which these efforts can be channeled and in which “political science and politics can encounter one another productively [or less so] in the service of the public sphere” (Forecki and Starnawski, 2022).

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### NOTES

1. We adopt a broad understanding of the region consistent with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s definition for Central and Eastern European countries, which include Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001).
2. Economic, political, and social reforms in CEE have continued throughout the quarter-century since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. A major achievement was the peaceful nature of the political transition. Rapid economic reforms first undertaken by Poland set an example for other countries and soon were followed by Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States. Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia followed later, albeit more cautiously in part because they had more liberalized economies at the beginning of the transition (Roaf et al. 2014).

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### POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: SHIFTING POLITICAL CONTEXTS AND ACADEMIC INTERESTS IN THE 1990–2020 PERIOD

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There is a shortage of comprehensive reports about the development of political studies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Klingemann 2008, 272). Although there are unique differences among states and individual universities, several trends and tendencies can be distinguished. This article provides an overview of how political science evolved in CEE from 1990 to 2020, with particular emphasis on changes in the thematic focus of academic programs, institutions, and political science research.

Before 1989, political science departments in CEE depended on the official communist authorities, which often formed the intellectual and ideological base of those regimes. Academic autonomy, however, developed in some CEE states. The 1990–2000 interest in classical, non-Marxist political science also was fueled by democratization processes. Both autonomization and democratization were hindered by several factors, including the composition of faculty and underinvestment in the public sector during the economic-transformation period. At the same time, US- and EU-based private and public institutions supported the development of social science teaching in the region (Baskerville 1997, 35–36). As research into publication themes in CEE in the 1990s reveals,