The Polish Studies Center will host an international conference early this fall on the transformations to democracy and the market economy underway in Eastern Europe since the fall of communism. The event is scheduled for September 26-28 in the Indiana Memorial Union, and is titled “In Transition: A Conference on Society, Politics, and the Economy in East Central Europe.”

Besides integrating several disciplines and aspects of public life, the conference is a first for the Polish Studies Center in its regional focus. The transitions underway in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia will be viewed in comparison with the Polish experience, and scholars from all these countries, as well as western specialists, have been invited. “We selected the East Central European region as our particular focus because these are the most developed countries in terms of their political and economic possibilities,” said Director of Polish Studies Timothy Wiles. “They share some dramatic recent history, in their conflict with and resistance to communism. They also learned to accommodate in various ways, which means that the old centrally-managed system is ingrained in people’s minds and is a factor that the new systems have to combat—I mean new forces like entrepreneurship in business and grassroots citizens’ initiatives in civil society. These countries are in transition, but they are definitely moving forward.”

Since East Central Europe presents a greatly expanded market for western business interests, this conference will emphasize the economy, and several experts from banks, development foundations, and American businesses which have holdings in Poland will join the economic specialists at the podium. The keynote speaker, Ian M. Hume, Director of the World Bank Poland Residence Office, will give an account of his work over the last three years in channeling World Bank funds to Polish enterprises that are selected for their investment-worthiness. At the conference’s final session, business people, representatives of the governments and the public sector will join in a panel discussion about economic possibilities and their social implications in this region.

A number of Indiana University units have joined forces with the Polish Studies Center to organize this conference. One joint sponsor is the Russian and East European Institute, whose director, Owen Johnson, has assisted in organizing the sessions on society in transition. Major planning for the sessions on politics and the economy was provided by Jack Bielasiak (Political Science, and past Director of Polish Studies) and Paul Marer (School of Business).

The conference will bring together to the Bloomington campus over a dozen academics and specialists from East Central Europe. The chief exchange partner of the Polish Studies Center, Warsaw University, will send several scholars, as will the Academies of Sciences of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Specialists outside the academic world include: Joanna Starega-Piaiek, Vice Minister of Labor in the Polish government and the author of new welfare legislation; representatives of the Eurodollar-financed Cooperation Fund of Poland; a leading Czech press figure; American bank executives who do business with Poland; and the director of the Local Democracy in Poland Organization.

A wide range of topics will be surveyed, some in concurrent sessions. These include: privatization, entrepreneurship, and investment; the political economy of transformation; building local organizations and local democracy initiatives; social and environmental issues; problems of nationalism; military conversion; press, media, and public opinion; elections and political fragmentation; and constitution and parliamentary reform. The last topic comes in light of the fact that all these countries are re-drafting their constitutions at present to dismantle the negative legislative effects of communism, and this particularly involves reforming the legal frameworks for trade and business transactions. Both Polish and U.S. legal experts will participate in these sessions.

“For three days some of the most dynamic intellects on this region will gather at IU for our conference, and they include people who are the real change agents for these social transformations,” Timothy Wiles stated. “It’s great to see these societies in movement at last. Universities like IU can be proud of the role which we’ve played from the communist period to the present in keeping open some crucial academic exchanges, and in offering venues for teaching and research to people who are leaders in economic research and social change in Eastern Europe today.”