

‘Culture’ in Authoritarian Transformations: Policies, Institutions, and Strategies of Resistance

International Workshop for cultural practitioners, artists, and scholars to reflect on the role of culture in the face of illiberal and authoritarian dynamics

6-8 October 2025

Brandenburg University of Technology, Cottbus (Germany)

Across Europe, illiberal, authoritarian, and right-wing movements are increasingly shaping the direction of cultural policy and redefining the frameworks in which cultural actors operate. In several countries democratically elected governments use their formal legitimacy to undermine the very foundations of cultural life in an open society. Through legal reforms, political appointments, or shifts in funding priorities they erode media pluralism, curtail institutional autonomy, and restrict the space for critical discourse.

In other contexts, it is right-wing grassroots movements or opposition parties that – with growing success – shape public debate, thereby narrowing the conditions under which cultural expression and engagement can take place. In both cases, cultural infrastructures – museums, theatres, festivals, initiatives, and more – have become key arenas in broader struggles over power, democracy, and cultural hegemony.

This international workshop invites 30 participants – working in the arts, museums, cultural institutions, civic initiatives, foundations, or academia – to reflect collectively on these developments. Drawing on concrete case studies from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Italy, and Germany, we will explore the following questions

- Why do authoritarian and illiberal governments and movements place such importance on cultural policy and the cultural field?
- How do these developments reshape the room for manoeuvre available to cultural practitioners and institutions?
- What coping strategies and practices of resistance have emerged – and which have proven effective – in keeping spaces for critical debate and cultural production open?

The programme will combine panel discussions, collegial exchange and joint reflection, as well as visits to local initiatives. It also aims to initiate a transnational network of mutual support and critical engagement among cultural actors facing increasing authoritarian pressure.

The event is jointly organised by the Chair of Cultural Management at Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg and the Project Group Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe at the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb).

Workshop Programme

Monday, 6 October 2025

Up to 17:00	Arrival in Cottbus
	Welcome Coffee & Registration Location: Atelier Mies, Lehrgebäude 2 C/D, Konrad-Wachsmann-Allee 8, 03046 Cottbus
18:00-18:15	Welcoming Remarks Kateryna Stetsevykh (Federal Agency for Civic Education) Jens Adam (Brandenburg University of Technology)
18:15–19:45	Talk & Opening Dialogue Authoritarian and Illiberal Practices Speaker: Marlies Glasius (University of Amsterdam) Chair: Jens Adam (BTU Cottbus – Senftenberg) Rather than treating authoritarianism as a fully developed system, this opening dialogue introduces a perspective on authoritarian and illiberal practices as situated, contextual, and often enacted incrementally across various fields – including culture.
20:00	Dinner Location: Restaurant Zelig, Friedrich-Ebert-Straße 21, 03044 Cottbus

Tuesday, 7 October 2025

09:30–12:00	Session 1 Cultural Policy on the Frontline of Authoritarian Transformations Speakers: Marco Baravalle , Vida Knežević , Kristóf Nagy , Piotr Rudzki Chair: NN This panel examines why right-wing political actors place such emphasis on culture and cultural policy, and how their agendas and strategies play out across Europe. Are these approaches a clear rupture with previous governments, or do they build on existing continuities? And what consequences do they have for public debate, cultural production, and the scope for action of cultural institutions? The session will begin with a panel discussion and move into a more collegial dialogue in smaller groups (with flexible coffee break).
12:00–13:30	Lunch Break

Workshop Programme

13:30– 16:00	Session 2 Cultural Institutions and Fields of Practice within Authoritarian Transformations Speakers: Matej Drlička, Karol Templewicz, Milena Berić Chair: Jana Binder This panel explores how authoritarian transformations permeate cultural institutions and reshape their internal dynamics. Across different countries, what kinds of legal changes, interventions in leadership structures, and funding shifts can be observed? What new institutions and museums are being established by national-conservative and right-wing governments, and how do they interact with the existing institutional landscape? And how do these measures, beyond their institutional impact, alter the working conditions and scope for action of independent curators and artists? The session will begin with a panel discussion and then continue with case studies introduced by the workshop participants (with flexible coffee break).
16:00	Break
17:00– 18:30	Site Visit Cultural Initiatives and Civil Society under Right-Wing-Pressure – The Case of Cottbus Losmachten – Association for the Strengthening of Civil Society in Lusatia is a civic initiative founded in February 2024. In a region marked by structural change and growing right-wing dominance, it works to unite local and newly arrived actors, strengthen civil society, and promote solidarity for a just future in southern Brandenburg. The association also takes an active part in connecting youth clubs, subcultural spaces, and social initiatives across the region, many of which have recently become renewed targets of right-wing attacks. In the association's premises in the centre of Cottbus, representatives of local cultural institutions and networks will share their experiences of dealing with this challenging constellation. How is the region being shaped by far-right mobilisations and attacks on cultural and social spaces? How are local politics, civil society, and cultural infrastructures responding? Location: Premises of Losmachten e.V., Brandenburger Platz 11, 03046 Cottbus Partner: Losmachten e.V. https://losmachten.jetzt
19:00	Networking Dinner with Cultural and Civil Society Actors from Cottbus Location: Restaurant Zelig, Friedrich-Ebert-Straße 21, 03044 Cottbus

Wednesday, 8 October 2025

Location: Atelier Mies, Lehrgebäude 2 C/D,
Konrad-Wachsmann-Allee 8, 03046 Cottbus

09:30– 12:30	Session 3 Counter Strategies for Cultural Actors in the Face of Authoritarian Transformation Speakers: Marijana Cvetković, Alessandra Ferrini, Roman Samotny, Agnieszka Rodowisz Chair: Kristóf Szombati This panel explores the wide variety of coping strategies developed by cultural institutions, artists, and curators to defend their scope for action in the face of political interference. Which approaches, alliances, or initiatives have proven effective across different countries and contexts in preserving space for critical debate and cultural production? And what forms of resistance to contemporary authoritarianisms can be found in art, artistic practice, and critical discourse? The aim is to use specific cases to identify recurring challenges and effective strategies, drawing lessons across contexts and allowing for cautious generalisations beyond individual cases.
12:00– 13:00	Lunch
13:00– 13:30	City Walk to the Brandenburgisches Museum für Moderne Kunst – BLMK (Brandenburg State Museum of Modern Art), https://www.blmk.de
13:30– 15:00	Museum Tour & Talk Location: Dieselkraftwerk, Uferstraße/Am Amtsteich 15, 03046 Cottbus Speaker: Ulrike Kremeier , Director of the Museum Conversation on the history, location, collection, and curatorial orientation of the museum, as well as on how it addresses right-wing, populist, and illiberal developments in its surroundings.
15:00– 16:00	Final session Exploring formats for future collaboration This closing session will focus on ways to sustain exchange and cooperation beyond the workshop itself. What kind of transnational networks could provide support and facilitate learning across contexts? How can the momentum generated here be carried forward? And what existing resources, platforms, or initiatives might be connected to strengthen ongoing collaboration?
16:00	Coffee & Farewell
16:00– 18:30	Post-Workshop: Recording of a Podcast

In cooperation with:

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Cottbus - Senftenberg



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