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Cultural Policies in European Autocratising Democracies: Hungary and Poland as Case Studies

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Manfredi De Bernard

Graduand
Emma Bellentani
Matriculation Number 880743

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role of cultural policies in contemporary processes of democratic erosion, situating its inquiry within the broader phenomenon of autocratisation. Focusing on European contexts where democratic institutions formally endure yet increasingly display illiberal tendencies, it examines how culture and the arts are instrumentalised as tools of political governance. Through a comparative perspective, the study explores the divergent functions attributed to culture in democratic versus autocratising settings, highlighting the political significance of cultural policy frameworks.

Methodologically, the research combines qualitative and quantitative – V-Dem and Freedom House – approaches, drawing on international democracy indicators as well as on scholarly literature centred on Central and Eastern Europe. Two case studies, Hungary and Poland, are employed to assess the democratic quality of cultural governance and its implications for artistic freedom. By integrating policy analysis with insights from cultural professionals, the paper contributes to EU cultural policy debates by emphasising the centrality of artistic freedom, cultural pluralism, and institutional safeguards in sustaining democratic resilience amid rising illiberalism across Europe.

Table of Contents

Introduction **7**

Chapter 1 – Cultural Policies and Practices in Illiberal Regimes **11**

1.1 Definition of Cultural Policies 11

1.2 Cultural Policies in Non-Democratic Settings: Function of Cultural Policies in Totalitarian and lliberal Regimes 23

1.3 Democratic Backsliding and Autocratisation in Cultural Policies 31

Chapter 2 – Case Studies Analysis and International Directives **45**

2.1 Criteria to Identify Autocracies in Democratic Setting 45

2.2 Case Studies 55

2.2.1 Hungary 56

2.2.2 Poland 66

2.3 A Comparison of Cultural Policy Practices: PiS and Fidesz 75

Chapter 3 – Lived Experiences **78**

3.1 State-of-the-artist 79

3.1.1 Hungary 79

3.1.2 Poland 85

3.1.3 Summarised Overview: Poland and Hungary 90

3.2 Recommendations 91

Conclusion **99**

Bibliography and Sitography **102**

An unreliable narrator.

"Every narrator by its very definition is unreliable because when you tell a story, there is always an essential distance between the story itself and the *telling* of that story.

[…] Therefore, every story that has ever been told has an unreliable narrator…"

INTRODUCTION

Governments across Europe have increasingly shifted their political and cultural orientations towards traditionalism, closure, fear, and stricter regulatory frameworks. Nationalistic narratives are promoted through the redefinition of cultural meanings, while right-wing ideologies gain prominence within institutional discourse. In this context, propaganda has re-emerged as a central mechanism through which governments shape public perception and consolidate political consensus.

Governments thus operate as unreliable narrators: they construct and disseminate narratives that selectively frame reality, obscure dissent, and legitimise political agendas. Cultural policies play a crucial role in this process, functioning not merely as administrative tools but as strategic instruments through which governments articulate, reinforce, and normalise ideological narratives.

This thesis investigates how such narratives are constructed through culture, which practices are most frequently employed, and how these strategies affect democratic standards and artistic freedom.

Thus, the research is situated within the broader scholarly debate on democratic decline and autocratisation in Europe. Recent literature has highlighted the erosion of democratic institutions and norms even within formally democratic states, conceptualised as processes of autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Within this framework, culture and the arts emerge as particularly sensitive arenas, given their capacity to shape collective identities, values, and political imaginaries.

Zamorano and Bonet (2018; 2020) specifically address the rise of illiberal cultural policies within proclaimed democracies, arguing that cultural governance increasingly serves political objectives rather than democratic pluralism. Cultural policies, traditionally associated with participation, diversity, and access, are thus reconfigured as tools of ideological control, national homogenisation, and political legitimation.

Different paradigms have historically shaped the development of cultural policies.

The analysis of international datasets – in specific Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Freedom House – identifies European countries in which democracy formally persists but substantively declines, revealing the emergence of illiberal practices within democratic frameworks.

Therefore, this thesis first claims that culture and the arts are commonly instrumentalised to promote illiberal mindsets, and then asks which cultural policy practices are most frequently employed to sustain these narratives. In doing so, the research examines how cultural governance becomes a strategic space for reshaping collective values, identities, and political loyalties.

Building on this analysis, the study explores what distinguishes cultural policies that are compatible with democratic principles from those that undermine them. It considers whether shared international standards or guidelines exist to support democratic cultural governance, and to what extent such frameworks are effective in countering illiberal tendencies.

It further investigates the role of international and supranational institutions – particularly within the European Union context – in responding to the misuse of culture for political control. Finally, by reporting the perspectives of cultural professionals, the discourse examines how these policies affect artists directly, focusing on their working conditions, freedom of expression, and capacity to resist or adapt to increasingly restrictive political environments.

Therefore, the primary objectives of this research are to identify the strategies of governments that employ cultural policies to implement illiberal practices, to analyse the political and cultural contexts from which these policies emerge, and to assess the current state of cultural governance in Europe, with a specific focus on Central Europe. Furthermore, the thesis aims to foreground the lived experiences of artists operating within autocratising democracies, thereby raising awareness of their role, vulnerability, and agency in the present historical moment. Ultimately, it seeks to provide a detailed and reliable account of governmental unreliability as narrators of democratic culture.

The analysis begins with an overview of cultural policies, tracing their historical development and theoretical foundations, followed by an examination of their implementation in autocratic and illiberal contexts. It then analyses international datasets that offer updated and comparative assessments of democratic standards across Europe. The empirical core of the study consists of two case studies – Hungary and Poland – complemented by a qualitative focus on the lived experiences of artists from these countries. The final chapter formulates recommendations for national and international actors operating within the cultural and artistic sector.

CHAPTER 1 – CULTURAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN ILLIBERAL REGIMES

The first chapter of this dissertation establishes the conceptual and historical framework for the analysis by providing an overview of cultural policies, tracing their origins, definitions, and institutional development.
Particular attention is devoted to cultural policy paradigms that are grounded in democratic principles, including participation, pluralism, and freedom of expression, in order to clarify the normative foundations against which contemporary practices are assessed.

Building on this framework, the chapter examines cultural policy practices implemented in illiberal and autocratic regimes, with a specific focus on Russia and Türkiye.
These cases are introduced as illustrative examples of how culture can be strategically instrumentalised for political control, ideological consolidation, and the restriction of artistic autonomy. By analysing these contexts, the chapter lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussion on cultural policy backsliding, enabling a clearer understanding of how similar dynamics emerge within formally democratic European states.

1.1 Definition and Scope of Cultural Policies

"National cultural policies historically emerged with the general purpose of reinforcing the constitutive grounds favourable to the nation-state project through the construction and dissemination of a specific national identity linked to heritage and artistic expressions." (Zamorano & Bonet, 2018) [1]

The importance of culture as a universal right was already acknowledged in 1948 by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirmed that everyone has the right to "freely […] participate in the cultural life of the community"[2].

[1] Zamorano, M.M., & Bonet, L. (2018). A conceptual framework on right and left-wing populist cultural policies: similitudes and differences from the Argentina case. in M. Dragićević Šešić & J. Vickery (eds.) Cultural Policy Yearbook 2017-18. Cultural Policy and Populism: the rise of Populism and the crisis of Political Pragmatism. Istambul: İletişim Yayıncılık, p. 75-87.
[2] United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 27

Cultural policy can be defined as the system of regulations and directives at both national and international levels aimed at protecting, promoting, developing, and supporting culture and, consequentially, the arts. It also aims to advocate citizens' participation in cultural events while managing cultural resources efficiently. For this reason, cultural policy encompasses a broader spectrum than arts policies, which is primarily concerned with aesthetic and artistic practices.

Historic past

The origins of cultural policy as a distinct field can be traced back to the post-World War II period, particularly with the founding of the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1959 (Alasuutari and Kangas, 2020). Currently, their aim is fostering cultural democracy.
Before analysing it, it is important to understand why governments began to institutionalise national cultural policy frameworks.

The devastation of heritage during the World Wars increased societal awareness of the need to protect cultural identity and history. This led to a growing emphasis on individual state responsibility in cultural matters. Indeed, from the 1960s onward, UNESCO began calling on nation-states to take responsibility for developing and implementing cultural policy agendas, both independently and through collaboration with private institutions.
Later, the accelerating forces of globalisation and their accompanying homogenising effects created new imperatives for cultural policy. These included safeguarding cultural diversity and heritage within an increasingly interconnected world.
In 1982, UNESCO Director-General M'Bow explicitly stressed the importance of defending culture at the national level within the global arena. In the same year, the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies was adopted by UNESCO, marking a pivotal moment in international cultural governance. Emerging in a historical context characterised by rapid technological change, persistent inequalities, and recurring conflicts, the declaration sought to strengthen bonds between nations through cultural cooperation. It recognised that international dialogue could foster collaboration, mutual understanding, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

The definition of cultural policy – culture and policy

Within this framework, culture was defined as a "whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs".[3]

Culture, in this sense, transcends artistic production to encompass the broader systems of meaning and identity that shape collective life. According to the declaration, culture also fosters critical judgment, moral commitment, self-expression, and self-analysis, core principles of humanity.

Beyond the definition of culture, the Mexico City Declaration outlined a set of principles that should guide cultural policy:

- Cultural identity – ensuring recognition of the values, traditions, and forms of expression that define a community;
- Cultural dimension of development – promoting self-development and independence through culture;
- Culture and democracy –ensuring free participation.

Additional principles concern cultural heritage, art education, artistic and intellectual creation, the relation culture-science, the planning and financing processes of cultural activities, and international cultural cooperation.

On the other hand, as Bell and Oakley (2014) observe, the definition of culture is neither static nor universal, it varies across geographical contexts, political regimes, and institutional actors.

Initially, culture was conceived in two distinct ways: as a collection of artistic products and practices; and as an anthropological system, through which human beings adapt and develop from nature. Only later did scholars adopt a more integrated perspective, framing culture as way of living, encompassing everyday practices, beliefs, and meanings – a shift that also began to incorporate media and digital forms.

[3] World Conference on Cultural Policies Mexico City. (1982). Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies

Institutions such as the British Arts Council were among the first to recognise and support emerging cultural forms, highlighting the need to adapt policy frameworks to evolving cultural realities.

Building on these debates, Bell and Oakley (2014) define cultural policy within the broader framework of public policy. As a public policy, the 'policy' of cultural policy refers to governmental activities, in this case concerning culture, shaped by social, economic, and political dynamics such as funding priorities, regulatory frameworks, and broader development strategies.

Thus, cultural policies are deeply embedded in their historical and political context. They are not neutral but reflect shifting ideas about what culture is, who it belongs to, and how it should be supported.
As Mulcahy (2006) and Dye (2005) summarise, cultural policy encompasses "what governments choose to do or not to do in relation to culture" [4]. Yet, the apparent simplicity of this definition conceals a complex interplay of actors, levels of governance, and strategic approaches.
Policymaking in this field can follow top-down models, where state institutions dominate, or bottom-up models, where community participation drives decision-making.

To understand these dynamics, Bonet and Négrier (2018) identify four paradigms that have historically shaped cultural policy, each associated with specific time frames, objectives, and logics of citizens' participation.

Cultural policy as an evolving concept – paradigms and models

The first one named cultural 'excellence'[5] (Post-World War II) emphasised freedom of expression and supported avant-garde artistic production free from political forces. In the meantime, it prioritised artistic quality over marketability, often requiring significant governmental or philanthropic support. Participation was limited to a selective audience, where cultural legitimacy depended on subjective aesthetic criteria.

[4] Bell, D. & Oakley, K. (2015). Cultural Policy. Key ideas in Media & Cultural Studies. Routledge
[5] Bonet,L. & Négrier,E. (2018) The participative turn in cultural policy: Paradigms, models, context

The second paradigm is 'cultural democratisation' (1950s–1970s). Aimed to broaden access to high-quality cultural products, it was heavily reliant on state financing to make elite culture accessible to wider audiences. These latter were treated primarily as passive consumers, and cultural hierarchies remained largely intact.

From the 1970s onwards, the 'cultural democracy' paradigm emerged as a critique of both excellence and democratisation paradigms. Thus, it advocated for the equal representation of diverse cultural practices, including those previously excluded for lacking excellence or profitability. It positioned individuals as both consumers and producers of culture – 'prosumers' – but faced challenges in transforming institutional practices and balancing creative inclusivity with standards of selection.

The very last paradigm identified by these scholars is the 'creative economy' (1980s onwards). They acknowledge the strong link between cultural production and economic growth and innovation. It is mainly focused on the economic value of creativity, intellectual property rights, and the role of arts and heritage in driving urban regeneration and competitiveness.

Figure 1 presents the key points of each paradigm and how they are interlaced among each other.

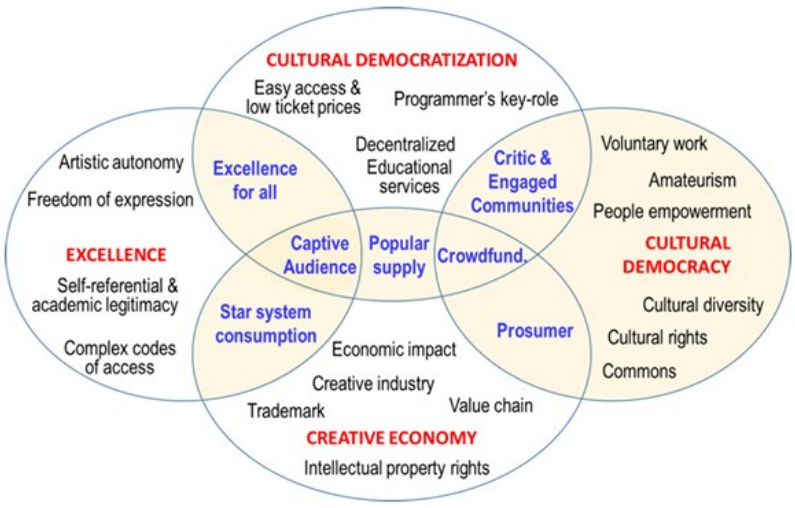


FIGURE 1

Source: Bonet,L. & Négrier,E. (2018) The participative turn in cultural policy: Paradigms, models, context

In response to this diversity of paradigms and processes, UNESCO has provided frameworks and recommendations, encouraging the creation of institutional infrastructures such as ministries of culture. At the same time, the organisation emphasised the importance of heterogeneity: while providing international guidance, it encouraged and supported national specificity. Consequently, cultural policy frameworks vary across countries, necessitating comparative analyses of their structure and goals.
Nonetheless, some criticism arose from UNESCO's interference and role in managing culture across Europe. Various researchers and scholars have claimed that UNESCO's directives impose a more globalised and universal concept of culture within Europe, limiting national expression and heterogeneity of practices.

Cultural policy strategies still differ among specific countries, and, in this regard, Bustamante (2015) categorises countries into four types: omnipresent, state-centred, decentralised, and non-existent. Similarly, Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey (1989) proposed the well-known "arm's length model" [6], which outlines one of the main four state roles in cultural governance: the patron state, while the others being the facilitator state, the architect state, and the engineer state.

Here, the main categorisation logic is the involvement of the government in countries' cultural activities.

According to Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey, the "arm's length model" is specific to the British government: a more direct, but still non-political, influence on arts funding. The latter is allocated via arts councils. The government determines the total budget to dedicate to the arts, while a peer-review system, based on the expertise of artists and professionals, selects the recipients of the funds. This formally separates political authority and artistic decision-making. This typology belongs to the definition of the patron state model.

[6] Hillman Chartrand, H., & McCaughey, C. (1989). The arm's length principle and the arts: an international perspective - past, present and future. In Cummings, M. C. & American Council for the Arts (Eds). (1989). Who's to pay for the arts? The international search for models of art support. ACA Books

The US, on the other hand, are an example of the facilitator state model, where the state funds the arts through tax incentives as private donations are tax deductible. This means that donors may exercise control over the artistic programmes of cultural organisations, though with little political influence.

The architect state model, the most common within Europe, involves a more direct and centralised approach. According to this model, the Ministry of Culture is the principal institution responsible for allocating public funds to the arts. Financial support for cultural activities is part of the national social welfare strategy, aiming to meet community standards. Unlike the UK model, granting decisions are made by bureaucrats; therefore, the government has stronger and more direct claim and influence over national cultural activities.

Finally, the engineer state model is mostly common in totalitarian regimes, such as North Korea. As the state owns all the means of artistic production, it only supports those cultural expressions that conform to political ideology. Artistic merit or diversity of expression is subordinate to ideological alignment, and cultural policy is used as a tool for state propaganda and social control.

Illustrative national examples of cultural policy common practices

In 2022, UNESCO published the Global Report on Cultural Policies that, among other focus points, lists general goals core to the democratic implementation of cultural policies. On the right column of Table 1 some practices visible throughout Europe have been recorded, thus underlying the main tools used by European governments in cultural discussions.

Other common practices include the Loi du Pacte Culturel approved in Belgium in 1973 (modified 2009), safeguarding the rights of ideological minorities and granting protections to autonomous communities. In France, the Constitution (Preamble, 1958) guarantees equal access for all citizens to education and culture, while in Portugal, the government explicitly recognises cultural creation as a fundamental element of quality of life (Article 78 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic).

UNESCO GOALS	EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL POLICIES IMPLEMENTED FOR EACH GOAL IN DEMOCRATIC SETTINGS
SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS OF GOVERNANCE FOR CULTURE	Public funding schemes, tax incentives, sector-based grants, creation of Ministries of Culture, decentralisation of cultural governance (e.g., Belgium's federal cultural sovereignty).
ACHIEVE A BALANCED FLOW OF CULTURAL GOODS AND SERVICES AND INCREASE MOBILITY OF ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS	Residencies programmes, bilateral cultural exchange (e.g., Goethe-Institut), EU-backed funding, such as the Fair Culture Initiative in Germany, promoting mobility and equitable participation.
INTEGRATE CULTURE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS	Adherence to EU programmes like Creative Europe and Horizon Europe, embedding culture into the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting heritage preservation projects, and funding creative economy initiatives aligned with sustainability.
PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS	Legal frameworks protecting artistic freedom (e.g., UNESCO Aschberg Programme support), constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression, policies promoting media pluralism and gender equality in cultural participation.

TABLE 1

Source: personal elaboration based on 2022 Global Report on Cultural Policies, 2022

Together, these examples highlight that recognising and respecting the coexistence of diverse cultures – both within and across countries – constitutes a cornerstone of democratic cultural policies.

Although each Member State operates its own administrative system, most adhere to some degree of decentralisation and provide subsidies to support cultural initiatives. Among the institutions most commonly involved we find the Ministries of Culture and Ministries of Foreign Affairs, as well as delegated offices tasked with coordinating and promoting cultural strategies. For instance, in Germany, as indicated by Neumann (2012), this role is fulfilled by the State Minister for Culture and the Media (BKM), while in Belgium and Austria, where federal systems prevail, cultural sovereignty largely rests with the regions and provinces (National Policies Platform). Nonetheless, collaboration and partnerships between different administrative levels are actively encouraged through the principle of subsidiarity.

In one more case, as previously discussed, the United Kingdom pioneered the "arm's length" principle, which ensures that governments fund and support cultural initiatives without exerting direct control over artistic content. Other countries, such as Denmark and Finland, have also successfully integrated this principle into their cultural policy frameworks since the 1960s (*Curated Conversations*, 2022).

Taken together, these practices reflect the core democratic principles underpinning cultural policies: guarantee accessibility to cultural events and practices for all citizens, protect minority rights and promote diverse cultural expressions, defend freedom of expression and ensure that governments support, rather than restrict, cultural production, and facilitate coordination between central, regional, and local administrations while respecting institutional autonomy.

Cultural democracy

In contemporary democracies, the paradigm of cultural democracy is supposedly the dominant framework guiding policy strategies. The European Union, as a strong advocate of democratic values and human rights, encourages its Member States to foster creativity, ensure freedom of expression, protect cultural heritage, and facilitate cross-border cultural exchange.

While each Member State adopts its own specific approaches to cultural policy, a clear *fil rouge* emerges across their democratic processes with respect to totalitarianism: a shared commitment to pluralism and the respect for diversity. Nonetheless, even democratic contexts are influenced by elitism and some degree of conservatism, still privileging high arts and cultural heritage over other artistic and cultural forms, indicating a stronger alignment to democratisation of culture (Booth, 2014). As Hadley and Belfiore (2018) reports, cultural authority is profoundly rooted in the Western European tradition of what is considered great art by one bourgeois group. On another note, Stein and Werber (2023) underline how cultural capital is still a matter of privilege, being unequally distributed within the society. Granting access to cultural capital may foster a fairer distribution of resources among different art forms, directly tackling the definition of what is and what is not art, overcoming strict and stiff traditions.

However, cultural democracy sees the publicly funded arts organisations as the gatekeepers to the accessibility to arts and culture, when they still are the main recipients of public and private funds. Cultural democracy does not deny formalism and professionalism, it believes in the power of individual expertise and that excellence may arise from a collaboration of those. It proposes a simple proposition: "we are culture"[7]. This reasoning turns the spotlight from the artistic outcome, final product, to the artistic and cultural process.

In the 1990s, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard identified the central three components of cultural democracy: co-existence of many cultural traditions without domination of one over the others, free participation to an existing cultural life, and democratic control to cultural life to assess the direction of cultural developments.
Differently from democratisation of culture, where the notion of culture is pre-defined by a small circle, under the cultural democracy paradigm everyone is empowered in their artistic and cultural expression.
The report of Arts Council England provides an interesting overview of how cultural organisations might shift from one paradigm to the other (Table 2).

...from (the democratisation of culture)	...to (Cultural Democracy)
asking your audience or stakeholders for feedback on your ideas	facilitating the ideas of your stakeholders, or co-creating together
launching a programme or product and marketing it far and wide	working with stakeholders from the outset to co-create a programme
employing professional artists to come up with ideas for community programmes	employing professional artists to work with communities to co-create ideas
convening a youth board who give feedback but don't hold decision making power	supporting young people to play an active role in governance and decision-making
a leader with all the ideas who disseminates them to others	a leader who facilitates others to have ideas
defined limits for culture such as visual art, theatre, dance, music etc	a recognition that all of that, and much much more (including gardening, cooking, knitting, fashion etc) is part of culture, even if it isn't funded.
community outreach, engagement and participation 'departments'	communities and engagement at the heart of arts and cultural organisations
selling cheaper tickets to encourage broader audiences	connecting with broader audiences to better understand what they might want
a learning and community team leading on engaging people	making engagement a core organisational value
people as audiences	people as participants

TABLE 2

Source: Cultural democracy in practice, Arts Council England (2018)

Interesting is the application of cultural democracy in cultural policies.
In theory, instead of relying on peer review based on aesthetic expertise – where experts judge art mainly on professional or artistic standards – a cultural democracy approach

[7] Henley,D., Hunter, J., Micklem, D., & Ikin, E. (2018). Cultural democracy in practice. Arts Council England

would focus on: whether an organization's mission supports arts and creative expression; whether it is a responsible and trusted steward of public funds; whether it has strong, long-term partnerships that represent and serve its local community.
Among the core principles of cultural policies in cultural democracy practices, participation, co-creation and pluralism are fundamental to counterbalance the instrumentalization of culture within soft power strategies. For the sake of this paper, a brief overview of the notion of soft power provides a clearer picture of the state-of-the-art of culture in illiberal societies.

According to the political scientist Joseph Nye's definition, the term 'soft power' refers to the ability of the nation to attract and influence through culture, policies and political agendas (Nye, 2004).

It is a key component of cultural diplomacy, which seeks to foster the exchange of ideas and cultural practices among nations in order to promote mutual understanding.
Unlike hard power, which operates through military and economic coercion, soft power functions through persuasion and attraction, aiming to shape the preferences and behaviours of individuals to achieve specific political goals. According to Nye (2011), a country's soft power is rooted in its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. Yet, art is very likely to encounter politicisation.

As Castellini Curiel observes in his study 'Soft power and the art of cultural diplomacy' (2022), the current historical moment requires a specific attention for cultural diplomacy expertise. As will be discussed further in the paper, culture is a strong and accessible asset that governments use for imposing their values nationally and internationally, nonetheless, it can be argued whether, by doing so, they exercise soft power with transparency and without harming human rights and freedom.

An illustrative example is the case of South Korea explained by Gooyong Kim (The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy, 2018, chapter 33). There, the government actively promotes and supports the global rise of pop culture idols. This cultural phenomenon is not merely a commercial strategy aimed at supporting the local economy

and art market, but also serves as a form of behavioural influence, presenting idealised models of citizens.
In doing so, the state employs soft power as a means of shaping citizens' behaviours and reinforcing certain national values. This strategy is framed within nation branding policies. In this context, artistic products – such as films, sporting events, and music – function as tools of attraction that eventually influence international audiences.

At the national level, art has also proven to be an effective means of fostering voluntary alignment with national interests, thereby cultivating resilient alliances.
On the other hand, when employed as part of a cultural diplomacy strategy, soft power can foster empathy and peacebuilding at the international level, while supporting the domestic economy by attracting foreign investments.
For this reason, soft power should not be seen solely as a harmful mechanism that states implement to control and manipulate their citizens, although current academic literature presents a recurring trend in non-democratic regimes in the use of such practices.
In this context, cultural democracy counterbalances the manipulative practices of soft power strategies by empowering the individual and fostering collaboration among citizens. An illustrative example is the Goethe-Institut that serves as a bridge among countries by giving accessibility to cooperation through language courses and grants for international mobility.

The line between cultural democracy and the instrumentalization of culture can thus be very thin. A key determinant in whether cultural policy leans toward the empowerment of citizens or toward manipulative attempts at political consensus or monolithic identity-building lies in a country's recent history and the health of its democratic institutions. The following section elaborates on illiberal practices in cultural policy.

1.2 Cultural Policies in Non-Democratic Settings: Functions of Cultural Policies in Totalitarian and Illiberal Regimes

According to the V-Dem Institute (2025), autocracies are defined primarily by the absence of electoral integrity, the erosion of civil liberties, and the restriction of freedom of expression. Building on this, Linz (2000) offers a comprehensive conceptualisation of totalitarian regimes, identifying several defining characteristics: a centralisation of power that secures a monistic – though not necessarily monolithic – centre of authority, where institutional pluralism is absent; an exclusive, autonomous and dominant ideology; and controlled participation and mass mobilisation. Interestingly, citizens are encouraged to participate in collective political and social tasks giving a misleading appearance of democratic engagement.

An additional dimension concerns the tension between intellectuals, artists, and political authorities. Cultural production frequently becomes a contested arena where state-imposed ideologies conflict with individual creative autonomy. Finally, coercion and terror play a central role in sustaining totalitarian power.

As seen in the previous section, the definition of culture varies according to time, space and political regime.

In totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies, cultural policy often establishes a clear hierarchy among official, unofficial, and underground cultural expressions. As researcher Elena Ivanova (2000) observes, this deliberate separation is itself indicative of authoritarian control, privileging state-approved narratives while marginalising alternative forms of expression.

Official culture refers to cultural practices endorsed by the regime, performed in public spheres, and disseminated widely across societal layers. Whereas, unofficial and underground cultures, by contrast, exist primarily in private spaces. These often include collective expressions, such as folklore, local traditions, and myths, which are excluded from institutional frameworks and denied visibility. This structural dominance of official culture consolidates state authority while systematically suppressing diversity in cultural expression.

Building from this definition of culture and the role of the government in an engineer state, cultural policies under totalitarianism are characterised by a set of recurrent mechanisms that align arts, media, and education with the political agenda of the ruling elite: censorship and propaganda, full compliance with state ideology, state monopoly over cultural institutions, and suppression of minorities and cultural forms not aligning with the predominant ideology. As Balint (2025) highlights, these strategies position culture as a political instrument, subordinating creative autonomy to state objectives.
On the other hand, the state uses democratic measures to establish an apparent sense of democracy through cultural diplomacy mechanisms. Indeed, in totalitarian regimes, cultural diplomacy exists, but mainly to polish the international image of the regime, not to encourage mutual exchange.

Zamorano (2016) defines cultural diplomacy as "the systematic intervention of governments in the arts, sciences, and other cultural expressions as the basis of an official categorization of national identity"[8], moreover, it shares certain features with propaganda and nation branding when these strategies are framed as neo-propagandist.

Another means through which totalitarian regimes shape cultural diplomacy measures to enforce ideological conformity and nation branding is soft power. Recently, the influence of media on individuals' behaviours has amplified the effect of these strategies.

According to Global Web Index data (Çetinkaya, 2025), as of October 2024, 64% of the global population actively engages with social media, creating a high risk of exposure to misinformation and ideological manipulation. Indeed, propaganda acts through specific algorithms and influencers. The new type of propaganda that Professor Samuel C. Woolley presents is characterised by an army of influencers as promoters of political ideologies that are part of larger groups of real people combined with semi-automated social media accounts. This is the reason why he names this new kind of propaganda 'semi-organic'.[9]
According to Professor B. Rahmanij (2025), it relies on proxy media and political ownership of private media. Türkiye is a perfect example, as 80% of private owned media

[8] Zamorano, M.M. (2016). Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory. Culture Unbound, 8 (166-186). Linköping University Press.
[9] Woolley, S. C. (2022) Digital Propaganda: The Power of Influencers. John Hopkins University Press

outlets have a strong liaison with the Turkish government. This strategy allows media to be perceived unbiased and detached from the ruling parties, whereas, at the same time, governments limit freedom of expression and circulation of specific data and information.

Before the analysis of illustrative examples that support these statements, an overview of the difference of cultural policy mechanisms in totalitarian and in non-democratic regimes will complete the discussion.

Unlike totalitarian systems, which rely on outspoken propaganda, ideological education, and full state monopolisation of cultural production, non-democratic or illiberal regimes use subtler mechanisms: the centralisation of funding, controlled heritage initiatives, censorship of independent spaces, and the rewriting of cultural narratives.

As Linz (2000) notes, another fundamental difference lies in the degree of control: while totalitarian regimes impose an all-encompassing ideology and subordinate every aspect of cultural life to the directives of the ruling elite, non-democratic or illiberal regimes adopt a more nuanced strategy, maintaining the appearance of pluralism while strategically instrumentalising culture to reinforce their authority.

Illiberal governments often preserve the formal structures of democracy, including competitive elections, representative institutions, and constitutional guarantees, and they also frequently appropriate policy tools commonly associated with democratic governance, such as audience development programmes, heritage preservation initiatives, and international collaborations, but repurpose them to advance ideological goals rather than to promote cultural pluralism. This strategic manipulation of culture has profound implications for democratic governance.
By restricting diversity, undermining institutional autonomy, and narrowing the space for public discourse, illiberal regimes progressively erode the foundations of pluralism. Analysing cultural policy within these contexts thus provides a critical lens for understanding democratic backsliding, revealing how governments can maintain electoral legitimacy while simultaneously dismantling the very freedoms and participatory mechanisms that sustain democracy.

Table 3 provides an overall summary of the main aspects of cultural policy practices in the three analysed regimes.

Regime	ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT	SOFT POWER STRATEGY	FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION	FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT IN CULTURAL POLICIES
DEMOCRACY	Supportive and regulatory; facilitates access to culture while respecting institutional autonomy and decentralisation	Used to promote cultural diversity, foster international cooperation, and strengthen diplomacy through mutual exchange.	Broadly protected; pluralism and diversity of cultural expressions are safeguarded.	Promotion of diversity, inclusivity, accessibility, and participation; culture is treated as a public good rather than a tool of control.
TOTALITARIANISM	Centralised and absolute; monopolises all cultural institutions and production under state control.	Soft power overlaps with coercion; cultural diplomacy exists primarily to polish the regime's image internationally.	Severely restricted; art, media, and education are aligned with state ideology.	Culture is instrumentalised for propaganda, loyalty-building, and mass mobilisation; minority expressions are suppressed.
ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES	Selective and manipulative; maintains democratic structures but uses them to promote regime-aligned narratives.	Used domestically to shape national identity and ideological conformity; internationally projects modernity and vitality.	Formally protected but practically constrained; dissenting voices are marginalised.	Cultural policies are used to privilege dominant narratives, centralise funding, rewrite history, and stigmatise minorities while maintaining a façade of inclusivity.

TABLE 3
Source: personal elaboration

The following section will be devoted to examples of autocratic practices in cultural policy management and implementation, with a specific focus on Russia and Türkiye.
According to Professor C. Woolley (2022), Ukraine represents one of the primary case studies in the contemporary use of propaganda and misinformation.

The case of Russia

Throughout much of the XXI century, social media platforms have been deployed to influence public behaviour within the country, shaping opinions and fuelling conflict dynamics. Woolley's research attributes this phenomenon largely to Russia's strategic information campaigns, in which the Kremlin has sought to mobilise pro-Russian groups and extremists in the Donbas region through targeted propaganda. These strategies have been further intensified by the outbreak and escalation of the war in Ukraine.
At the same time, Ukraine has attempted to counter these narratives and ensure transparent communication with its citizens. These efforts include the use of platforms such as Signal, WhatsApp, and Telegram, alongside the dissemination of videos and reports documenting Russian violations of human rights. By circulating this content via platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, Ukraine aims to reach a broad international audience in order to strengthen resistance and global support. In recent years, emerging platforms such as TikTok have become particularly influential channels for the dissemination of information, providing new avenues for civic engagement in the digital sphere.

More interestingly, the Russian government is actively using the war against Ukraine as an integral part of national cultural policy. Therefore, now more than ever, the government has a strong control over national arts, and in order to maintain it, it wants to rely on Soviet-era strategies. In 2023, the head of the Presidential Directorate for Social Projects of the Russian government Sergey Novikov shared a written document confirming this including a list of artists who actively criticised the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus artists to be banned from any kind of artistic and cultural expression within Russia. Active support of the war against Ukraine is part of the national identity promoted by cultural policies in the country, therefore it is used to foster social cohesion.

Cultural institutions are required to promote traditional values related to patriotism and the Fatherland, and to foster citizens' devotion to the "special military operation".
In order to ensure loyalty within the cultural field, the Kremlin promised for those complying with the new policy a new distribution of grants through governmental institutions, such as the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives, the Education Ministry,

and the Regional Cinema Development Fund. The main actors behind this ideological control are the Deputy Minister of Culture Andrei Malyshev, the Deputy General Director of Channel One Andrei Pisarev, Tikhon Shevkunov, and the aforementioned Novikov.
Without explicitly refusing and abolishing apolitical art and especially, unofficial culture, they do not grant any fund to artistic practices that do not praise the war. Indeed, the "special military operation" should figure in artistic productions as "integral part" of the project and should represent the meter of evaluation of the value of a work of art – war becomes the hero of the cultural policy narrative.
Artists are now required to visit and portray occupied territories if they wish to be granted government funds.

This reasoning accommodates Ivanova's theory on official culture and unofficial culture. The latter reportedly represents only 5% of the culture industry in the country (Arkhangelskiy, 2017). To further secure its strategy, the Kremlin relies on creative unions and state-funded artistic institutions, as theatres and orchestras. Among the relatively few examples of this new trajectory, the sitcom 'The Donbas Palace Battalion' tells the stories of people living and working in occupied territories, portraying war as a glorious part of ordinary life.

Since the start of Putin's presidency, freedoms have been strongly constrained over creative events and cultural productions. Censorship, compliance with governmental ideologies and rejection of western influence are the foundations of cultural policies, limiting the growth of Russian culture. Among the main artistic forms that have been restricted are music, film, and theatre. Indeed, the Russian government has developed a "securitised conception of culture"[10] (McCay, 2019) – culture as a set of fixed and static doctrines, eliminating any kind of artistic expression deemed as disrespectful and offensive for the traditional Orthodox creed.

By limiting freedom of cultural expression, the government is undermining social cohesion: its policies foster a specific kind of national culture, increasing discrimination. Existing policies see personal liberties as a threat to national interests. Moreover, these

[10] McCay, I. (2019). Without Freedom, There Is No Creation – Liberating the Arts in Russia to Stimulate Cultural Development. Durham University

documents present a lack of specificity, enabling a broad interpretation of the content as well as creating general confusion regarding the regulation. This implies that officials have the right to react as they think most suitable depending on the situation and the artistic form to suppress. Indeed, artists remain confused about what practices the government permits, leading to a loss of innovation and creativity. A slight change occurred in the late '90s when governmental control over policies decreased, even though not sufficiently enough to prevent the damaging consequences of its involvement. There is no environment where Russian culture can freely develop and innovate.

In 2022, a new turning point emerged. The Concept (Romashko, 2023) was approved and signed by President Vladimir Putin.
The Concept was first introduced in 2016 by Federal Law as a policy-making procedure to foster a marketable picture of the country abroad. Even though it is not a Federal Law *per se*, it rules over previous Federal Laws, functioning as a normative act and acting as a supreme authority, without being part of the Russian Constitution. It concerns the Russian humanitarian policy abroad, aiming to promote the "Russian World".
The term was first coined by the philosophers Shchedrovitsky father and son. The government grants legal status to this terminology, and President Vladimir Putin himself used it when referring to the "special operation" in 2014 during the first Russian interference in Ukraine. The goal of this strategy is to make Russian culture appealing in the eyes of others living outside the country.

This policy underlines the traditions and values of the country, fosters a positive image of the national federal structure, and promotes the use of the Russian language abroad. To accomplish that, the Concept relied on soft power strategies implemented in a limited geographical area, namely those non-Western countries, with particular attention to areas where Russian is spoken, deliberately separating from Western Europe, and then later restricting its scope to illiberal countries.

The case of Türkiye

Similarly to Russia, Türkiye promotes a specific type of culture: *yeril ve milli* – 'homegrown and national' (Çolak, 2024).

Over the years, Turkish cultural policy programmes have changed considerably, shifting from the influence of Western cultural production in the latter half of the XX century to frameworks required for accession to the EU. In the 1970s, the Ministry of Culture based the concept of national culture on the doctrine of "official Ataturkism", establishing governmental councils and official lists to identify what qualifies as national culture.
The new policy included mandatory military service as an example of national cultural identity and aimed to consolidate national unity in the face of Western influence. Importantly, this policy excluded non-Turkish and non-Sunni communities, withholding institutional protection for those communities.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) marked a turning point in the strategic use of cultural policy as a political tool. Recognising its potential to consolidate power, the AKP invested in promoting the image of a "New Turkey," a campaign most visible during the 2015 parliamentary elections. While the party's early years displayed relative tolerance toward Kurdish cultural expression, this openness was later revealed to be instrumental – employed as an electoral strategy – before returning to a unifying national culture aligned with President Erdoğan's motto: "*Tek Millet, Tek Vatan, Tek Devlet*" ("One Nation, One Flag, One Homeland, One State").
This period also saw a reinterpretation of Islam to align with the state's redefined nationalist framework.

The AKP consolidated regulatory power over the arts, establishing the government as both gatekeeper and promoter of liberal-democratic and neoliberal policies in relation to EU relations. Despite this liberal façade, state control over local administrations remained significant. Resistance to this hegemonic cultural control was most visibly expressed during the Gezi Park protests of 2013, which began as a movement against the replacement of a public park with a commercial mall and evolved into a broader civil opposition. The protests sparked a wave of artistic production critical of the government and were met with a forceful police response.

Similar to the Russian model, the AKP has sought to ensure ideological alignment within cultural institutions. This alignment is reinforced through state-sponsored awards – including the Presidential Culture and Arts Grand Awards, the Necip Fazıl Awards, and

the İlim Yayma Awards – granted to individuals and organisations that promote yerli ve milli cultural values.
Recent events have further highlighted the erosion of cultural and academic freedoms. On 18 March 2025, the Turkish government took measures against opposition leader Ekrem İmamoğlu, invalidating his bachelor's degree. Two days later, approximately 90 individuals, including İmamoğlu, were arrested on charges of corruption and terrorism. These actions sparked nationwide protests and led to the detention of increasing numbers of citizens on unfounded charges, representing a significant assault on freedom of expression. Nonetheless, the persistence of demonstrations demonstrates the resilience of Türkiye's civil society in the face of authoritarian pressures.

These examples of cultural policy manipulation in authoritarian settings provide a foundation for understanding a broader, and increasingly relevant, political phenomenon: how illiberal tendencies can infiltrate and reshape cultural governance even in states that maintain electoral structures.

1.3 Democratic Backsliding and Autocratisation in Cultural Policies

According to a recent editorial by the French journalist Alain Frachon (*Le Monde* 2025), recent global electoral trends indicate a shift towards right-wing populism, raising concerns among scholars about democratic backsliding. Are the aforementioned analysed non-democratic features spreading across democracies?
The French writer Salomé Piqué calls for action against this phenomenon:

"When I write that it is necessary to become informed about the danger that the extreme right actually represents for democracy, this affirmation is not a stance, it's the result of research, of a collection of uncurrent factors, of a study of the ideology of the extreme right and finally, yes, of a defence of my values, which, by the way, are also officially the same as those of the French Republic". [11]

[11] Translation from Saqué, S. (2024). *Résister*. Payot. Chapter 'La délicate frontière entre militantisme et engagement'

Therefore, supported by a critical analysis of current data, she denounces the fashionable tendency of European States, in her case France, to consciously or unconsciously support the extreme right, leading to a loss of democratic values.
This section will analyse the concept of "fading democracies" through the lens of cultural policy development.

Fading democracies

The first discussion addresses the theoretical foundations of democracy and its state-of-the-art in contemporary governance, necessary for the understanding of the historical context. Later, chapter 2 provides a more detailed and data-driven discussion on the identification of democracy.

Democracy, deriving from the Greek *demos* – people – and *kratos* – rule, power, refers to a system ruled by the people. However, the diversity of democratic systems globally complicates the establishment of a unique and specific definition of democracy.
As reported in the Portal of the Council of Europe, it is thus more convenient and efficient to identify democracy by defining what it is not: "Democracy, then, is not autocracy or dictatorship, where one person rules; and it is not oligarchy, where a small segment of society rules. Properly understood, democracy should not even be 'rule of the majority', if that means that minorities' interests are ignored completely. A democracy, at least in theory, is the government on behalf of all the people, according to their 'will'."[12]

The Council of Europe further identifies, and thus supports the researchers' claim, a major challenge facing the contemporary democratic systems: the increasing tendencies of certain governments to adopt the rhetoric and strategies of the extreme right. Such political parties have frequently targeted minority groups under the guise of populist and nationalistic ideals. In recent years, this rhetoric has been strategically translated into a democratic language in order to obtain broader public support.

[12] Annan, K. Democracy. Council of Europe, Manual for Human Rights Education for Young People.

For instance, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2018 opened the voting ballots to Turkish expats, whose contribution secured Erdoğan 's victory over his main political opponent (Wiedler, 2023). Whilst such policies appear to foster democratic participation, critics argue that these measures were in fact politically manoeuvred to expand Erdoğan's support base rather than to advance democratic inclusivity.

This shows the limitation of what the Polish-American professor Adam Przeworski named the 'minimalist definition of democracy', which defines a regime as democratic "if and only if people are free to choose, including to remove, governments."[13]
The philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969) explored these limits through his distinction between *negative* liberty – freedom from interference – and *positive liberty* – freedom as self-mastery. In 1992, the French sociologist Alain Touraine built on Berlin's principle of *positive liberty*, suggesting that democratic societies are free to the extent that individuals participate in self-governance. Yet, as Berlin pointed out, the concept of *positive liberty* is vulnerable to authoritarian misuse.

A paradox arises: if freedom is defined as collective self-rule, then even oppressed minorities might be deemed "free" simply because they are nominally part of a democratic process governed by majority rule. Berlin warns that this rationale can justify authoritarian control, especially when framed in terms of rational governance by an elite acting in the name of the collective good. Therefore, the minimalist definition of democracy is not sufficient, as without safeguards for minority rights and genuine pluralism, even electoral democracies risk slipping into illiberalism.

Given the overview on contemporary democracy, it will now be easier to understand the origins of the democratic backsliding or, more accurately, autocratisation.

Autocratisation

The term backsliding refers to the involuntary tendency of an entity to turn back to a previous historical state. In this case, scholars are questioning not only whether European

[13] Przeworski, A. (2024). Who Decides What Is Democratic?.Journal of Democracy

democracies are consciously turning towards their previous autocracies, but whether new autocracies are arising without necessarily originating from or being equal to a previously experienced totalitarian regime. Therefore, semantically, the term autocratisation appears to be the correct one.

Professor Skaaning (2016) provides a definition of autocratisation "as substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy".[14] Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) identified three different periods of autocratisation – namely: 1926 - 1942, 1961 - 1977, 1994 – ongoing, relying on and analysing data from the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem). According to these two scholars, autocratisation occurs when the positive change in the number of autocratisation episodes is higher than the positive change of the number of democratic episodes in a given period. Moreover, they identified a specific characteristic of the process: overall, autocratisation episodes move at a relatively slower pace than previous or democratic ones. Thus, it has become more difficult to identify such processes.

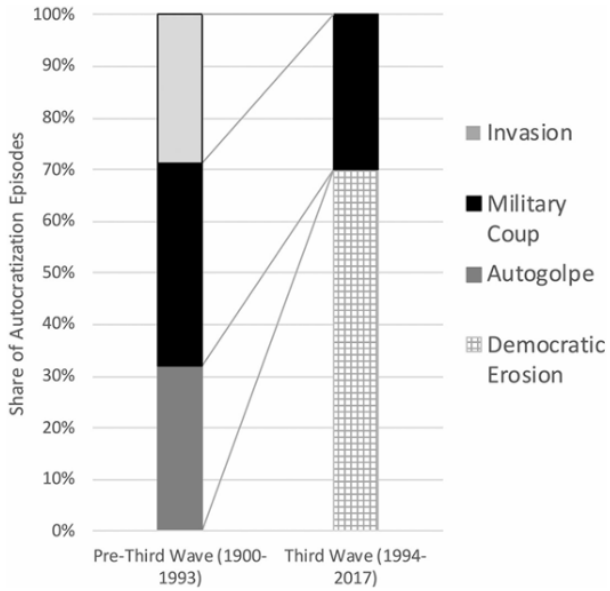


FIGURE 2

Source: Lührmann, Anna and I. Lindberg, Staffan: A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?

[14] Skaaning, S.E. (2020). Waves of autocratization and democratization: a critical note on conceptualization and measurement. Democratization, 27(8), 1533-1542.

They have further identified some key-aspects of the third aucratisation wave: the strategy of the new wave relies less on illegal power grabs, as military coups and autogolpes, and has a more legal façade, turning the regime into an illiberal democracy (Figure 2).

According to Lührmann and Lindberg's analysis, 68% of contemporary autocratisation episodes have their origin in incumbents who legally established themselves through free and fair elections. This suggests that incumbents erode democracies in a subtler and more clandestine manner in order to hide their true nationalist aims.

In 2017, Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg published a comparison between autocracies and democracies (Table 4).

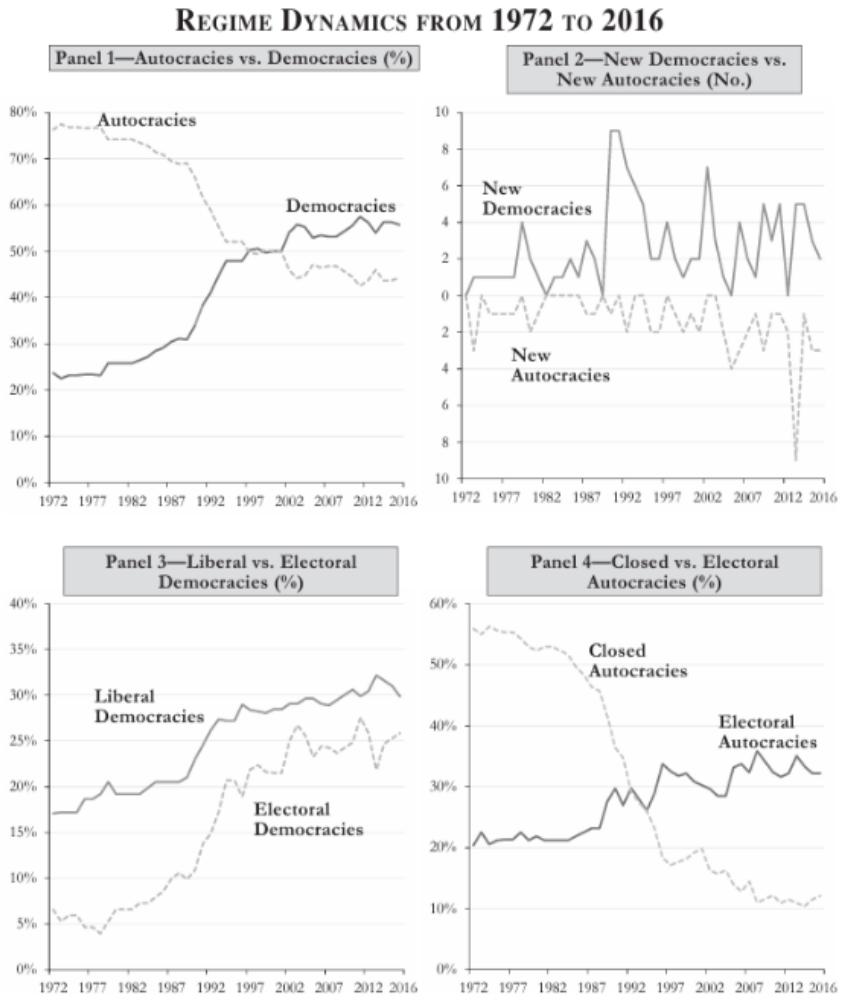


TABLE 4

Source: 'How Much Democratic Backsliding?' Journal of Democracy

The trend appears to be volatile: since the year 2000, democracies and autocracies are fluctuating at a less dramatic pace, on the other hand, new autocracies have arisen after 2012, with a steeper downward trend among new democracies than the former after 2012 (Jounral of Democracy, 2017).
Overall, the panels show a positive presence of democracies over autocracies; however, they also suggest a gradual downward trend of democratic practices in the last three years, where changes in autocratic regimes have involved greater authoritarian mechanisms.

Table 5 depicts the main change indicators identified by these research scholars. Based on V-Dem's analysis, it shows the main three improvements (democratic advances) and the three main declines (democratic backsliding) per regime.

Autocracies		**Electoral Democracies**		**Liberal Democracies**	
Democratic Backsliding	*N Countries*		*N Countries*		*N Countries*
Civil society repression	14	Government intimidation during elections	14	Government censorship of media	9
Government control of civil society entry and exit	13	Government censorship of media; Freedom of discussion	12	Harrasment of journalists; Academic & cultural freedom	7
Political killings by government	12	Media reports critically about government	10	Government compliance with highest court rulings; Media reports critically about government	6
Democratic Advances					
Elections free & fair	22	Voter registry quality	8	Vote buying	5
Government intimidation during elections	21	Government intimidation during elections	6	Elections free & fair; Freedom from torture; Media reports critically about government	3
Election irregularities	20	Legislature holds executive accountable	6	Legislature holds executive accountable; Election irregularities; Political party ban; Media range of perspectives	2

TABLE 5
Source: Appendix to 'How much democratic backsliding?'

Finally, Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg (2017), as well as T.Little and Meng (2024) agree on the increasing challenges that the extreme right is imposing on democracy; nonetheless, there is no objective data that could support a thesis of global democratic

crisis. The narrative relies more on subjective analyses by experts; thus, the evaluation being biased leads to weak evidence of the claim.

Once acknowledged how autocratisation is working in the overall politics, a focus on cultural policies will assess its role in the cultural field.

Zamorano and Bonet (2020) analysed some differences in cultural policy practices in liberal and illiberal democracies, specifically focusing on the promotion of cultural participation. There is no proper definition of cultural practices in illiberal democracies, nonetheless, the two research scholars provide some key points to better identify illiberal strategies in the field.

First, they underline three main normative elements of cultural policies in liberal democracies, i.e. "an open definition of culture", comprising freedom of speech and respect to minorities' rights; the development of "competitive systems of public support", which grant support to citizens, including artists, based on legal criteria; and "governance models […] based on professional and efficacy criteria". [15]

These elements are particularly important given some hybrid models that have developed over the years, making it harder to distinguish between the different practices.

Indeed, illiberal cultural policies may share formal aspects with traditional liberal democracies, especially when it comes to "cultural democratization".[16]

Before defining the main difference between cultural democratisation and cultural democracy, Zamorano and Bonet identify some important determinants of illiberal cultural policies.

First and foremost, the core point of their strategy is the promotion of a nationalistic culture. They provide a strict framing of national culture, promoting and legitimising a specific definition of "people", excluding specific communities – especially minority groups such as Muslims, Roma, and LGBTQ+ communities, and supporting only those kinds of tradition, thus selected arts and artists, that align with the government's ideology.

[15] Zamorano, M. M., & Bonet, L. (2020). Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?. chapter: Citizen Participation in Liberal and Illiberal European Cultural Policies. Éditions de l'Attribut. Occitanie en scène

[16] Zamorano and Bonet, 2020; based on the research of Urfalino (1996), and Dubois (1999)

For this very reason, the administration of cultural policies is most likely to be centralised. Table 6 summarises their analysis.

	LIBERAL DEMOCRACY	ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY
Cultural framework	Support of national culture(s)	Support of a homogeneous national culture; nativism (historical revisionism, ethnocentrism)
	Relative support of multiculturalism while marginalizing certain cultural minorities	Rejection of multiculturalism and cultural relativism; open stigmatization of some minority cultures (e.g. Muslims, Jews, Roma, LGBT+)
	Support of a diversity of cultural expressions (with a bias in favor of high culture or cultural excellence)	Support of popular culture (folk and mass) opposed to elite culture
	Support of free creativity - from academic to avant-garde arts - based on institutionally framed professional merit	Support for arts and cultural heritage expressions linked to the ideology in power via corporatism and clientelism
Governance Model	Autonomy granted to the officials and peer-reviewers according to professional criteria	Staff appointment according to fidelity criteria; clientele relations to supportive intellectuals, artists, and providers
	Support of independent cultural enterprises and professionals (cooperation and conflict)	Non-aligned cultural actors disdained by political power and subsidies
Cultural strategies	Non-ideological direct imposition	Indirect persecution of dissident intellectuals and artists favoring self-censorship
	Free private media and ideologically open public media	Ideological control of public media, alliance with some large private media providers and intensive use of social media and fake news
	Autonomy of cultural mediators dependent on public money (curators, artistic directors, librarians ...)	Pressure on and delegated censorship of cultural mediators dependent on public money
	Support of cultural heritage in line with professional criteria	Exaltation of certain authors/stories and monumentalization based on historical revisionism
	Support of arts education and citizen empowerment through culture	Some support of arts education but not of citizen empowerment through culture
	Support for community activities and events (organized by the government or the communities themselves)	Organization of large multitudinous events targeted at their political clients

TABLE 6

Source: *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?* Chapter: *Citizen Participation in Liberal and Illiberal European Cultural Policies*

Further, they state that an efficient implementation of democratic cultural policy requires an active promotion of public participation and citizen empowerment: "the issue of cultural participation in cultural policies has also become an essential variable for understanding the nature and democratic reach of a certain regime." [17]

On the other hand, this very historical moment is characterised by far-right influences that rely on discursive strategies to affect cultural participation. Some main characteristics of those strategies include exclusion of some specific communities,

[17] See note 15

conservative definitions, centralisation of governance strategies, and a systematic censorship (Bonet and Zamorano, 2020).

Indeed, cultural policies are extremely politicised by governmental forces, especially concerning national pride, identity and populist interests.
As previously noted, illiberal applications of cultural policy can originate from the same conceptual framework as that of cultural democratisation. While both cultural democratisation and cultural democracy aim to broaden access to culture, they differ significantly in intention and impact.

Drawing from the research of Zamorano and Bonet (2020), illiberal democratic regimes often adopt audience development strategies that resemble those used in cultural democratisation. However, these regimes pursue different objectives. Cultural democratisation typically emphasizes cultivating audience loyalty, which can enhance the income and prestige of cultural institutions.
This approach reflects a market-oriented perspective, prioritising the maximisation of revenue relative to cost.

In contrast, cultural democracy aims to empower individuals through bottom-up processes, decentralising cultural decision-making and enhancing accessibility. It seeks not only to expand audiences but also to foster active civic engagement in cultural policymaking.
Within this framework, illiberal democratic governments adopt a top-down approach to cultural policy, using state resources to build audience loyalty among ideologically aligned populations. While these strategies may resemble those of cultural democratisation, they are deployed with the intent to consolidate political support and suppress dissent.

As Zamorano and Bonet (2020) observe, audience participation is a key point to distinguish legitimisation of someone's culture from segregation. The former leads to the latter in most of the cases, stigmatising cultural expressions from minorities.
Moreover, cultural participation is a *status-quo*. Taking part in specific productions and performances foster a sense of belonging and loyalty forming an élite. Therefore, as the

theory about cultural democratisation suggests, it is necessary to ensure a wide participation and representation of collective emotions and values.

This raises a critical question: to what extent are these competing models of cultural participation being designated to the political-cultural agendas of governments identified as illiberal democracies?
Many such governments approve, on the surface, the continuity of top-down strategies traditionally associated with cultural democratisation. Yet, as the experiences of recent Hungarian and Polish governments demonstrate, while the tools may appear similar, the underlying intentions diverge sharply. In these cases, cultural participation becomes a tool for excluding citizens on an ideological base, used to marginalise oppositional identities while reinforcing support for aligned artists and intellectuals.

Table 7 summarises the main aspects of each paradigm in comparison with illiberal democratic practices.

It is further important to state that illiberal democracies arise from either extreme right or extreme left populist mindsets. Indeed, populist policies reject some base principles of democracies, such as the rule of law[18] and division of power (Zamorano and Bonet, 2018), relying on clientelism, strong dominant discourse aimed at fostering and enforcing a specific national identity, therefore manipulating the public masses, and weakening the institutions. Censorship, as well as artists alignment with a specific identity and tradition are part of the populist strategy for policymaking.

[18] Analysed further in the paper

	Goals	Explicit Aims of Liberal Democracy Cult. Policies	Implicit Aims of Illiberal Democracy Cult. Policies
CULTURAL DEMOCRATIZATION	LOYALTY	- Satisfaction of the dominant social milieu - Lower risk: programming and marketing focus on regular audience taste and expectations - Higher revenues (cultural project sustainability) - Income raised before starting (subscription)	- Ensuring growing audiences among political clienteles - Strengthening the feeling of clan membership among groups of loyal followers and clienteles - Fostering the interests and prestige of artists and intellectuals associated with the regime
	TO RENEW	- Attraction of larger audiences of the whole social spectrum (but in practice mostly from established cultural milieus) - Rejuvenation and captivation of active audiences - Social and political legitimization - Casual audience attraction through scheduling prestigious events - Better knowledge of audience trends	- Increasing the number of new social and political followers through attractive free mass events or other activities that foster collective emotions and a shared sense of national pride
CULTURAL DEMOCRACY	TO DEVELOP	- Active involvement of larger layers of population, including marginalized people - Attraction of more demanding or engaged audiences - Inducing alternative cultural practices - Greater development and personal learning - Joint strategies with other cultural institutions - Incorporation of external or hidden talent (which could generate tensions with the establishment)	- Contained prevention of, and in some cases clear aversion to, the development of active audiences
	TO EMPOWER	- Encouraging committed volunteering - Encouraging critical thinking - Sharing power with a committed citizenry - Greater community legitimacy and impact - Visibility and empowerment of marginalized community expressions	- Obstruction of any empowerment action or critical thinking strategy outside their dominant ideological framework

TABLE 7

Source: Zamorano, Mariano Martin, and Luis Bonet. *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?,* chapter: *Citizen Participation in Liberal and Illiberal European Cultural Policies* .

Nonetheless, left-wing and right-wing populist strategies are based on different scopes. Table 8 provides a clear depiction of the two paradigms.

Variables	Right-wing	Left-wing
Dominant rhetoric paradigm	• Cultural democratization • Creative economy	• Cultural democracy
Focus	• Cultural nationalism: constructing a new "us" (assimilationism/segregationism) • Creative industries branding • Free market	• Social-oriented nationalism and patriotism: constructing a new "us" (integrated comunitarism) • Cultural rights to traditional marginalized communities
Main stakeholders	• Private Media alliance • Large cultural corporations • Individual-consumer-oriented clientels	• Social organizations • Cultural professionals • Groups-oriented clientels
Common instruments	• Big events • Intrumentalization of gov't mass media and cultural venues • Internet and social media	

TABLE 8

Source: Zamorano, M.M.; Bonet, L. (2018). "A conceptual framework on right and left-wing populist cultural policies: similitudes and differences from the Argentina case"

Right-wing populist cultural policies are typically framed within the paradigms of cultural democratisation and the creative economy. They prioritise cultural nationalism aimed at constructing a new, homogeneous "us" through mechanisms of assimilation or segregation.

The focus is on branding creative industries and reinforcing free-market logic. Their key stakeholders include private media alliances, large cultural corporations, and consumer-oriented audiences, reflecting an individualistic and commercial orientation. These governments tend to instrumentalise mass media, public cultural venues, and large-scale cultural events, using them to legitimise national identity and reinforce political loyalty, particularly via digital and social media.

In contrast, left-wing populist cultural policies are grounded in the paradigm of cultural democracy, emphasising participatory governance, cultural rights, and community empowerment. They promote a form of nationalism based on social inclusion and integration, seeking to construct a more pluralistic and diverse notion of the "people." Their target groups often include marginalised communities and cultural minorities. Key

stakeholders involve social organisations, cultural professionals, and community-based groups, reflecting a collective and grassroots orientation.
While they may use similar tools, such as large events and media platforms, they do so with the aim of enabling bottom-up participation and promoting cultural diversity rather than reinforcing a dominant ideology. However, differently for left-wing policies, the populist ones foster a new patriotic nationalism while implementing an apparent decentralised public management system.

Zamorano and Bonet (2018) identified some case studies in Argentina, nonetheless populist and backsliding democratic – autocratisation – processes can be found in great variety of country.
According to Mikola, Zagórski, Schafer, Cirhan, Suchanek, and Kevicky (2025), the main regions where illiberal practices have a tendency to develop freely are to be found in Central and Eastern Europe.

CHAPTER 2 – CASE STUDIES ANALYSIS AND INTERNATIONAL DIRECTIVES

Following the previous analysis on the concept of cultural policy and the democratic use of the practices, this chapter now examines data from international datasets to identify whether the cultural policies implemented in European countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, can be considered democratic.

The main databases taken into account are Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Freedom House. As it is important to understand the scope and the indicators of their analysis, this chapter first introduces the Varieties of Democracy's framework, leading to the analysis of two case studies in the field of cultural policies: Hungary and Poland.
As neither of the former mentioned datasets explicitly includes an indicator measuring the democratic use of cultural policy, the analysis will be complemented by scholars' opinions and research findings. The data stored in the Compendium of Cultural Policies is fundamental for framing the state-of-the-art of the countries examined.

2.1 Criteria to Identify Autocracies in Democratic Settings

For the following understanding of the case studies, it is fundamental to recognise the most important criteria that define democracy. International standards and research represent the primary source to determine and individuate democratic principles.

Among the international datasets that analyse the state of democracy worldwide, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) offers a distinctive analytical model. Drawing on the collaboration of a large network of scholars across the globe, V-Dem integrates diverse areas of expertise to provide a comprehensive assessment of democratic practices on a global scale. Owing to its methodological approach, and in contrast to other international datasets – such as Our World in Data, which compiles information across multiple research fields and includes a relatively limited and concise focus on democracy through its Democracy Index, V-Dem delivers a more detailed analysis. It examines a wide range of variables affecting democracy and connects them through explicitly articulated causal relationships.

Among these variables, and for the purposes of this research, the deterioration of the freedom of expression index represents the most significant factor. Indeed, the European Union identifies the safeguarding of freedom of artistic expression as "a cornerstone of democracy and fundamental rights."[19]
Freedom of expression is essential for fostering and protecting cultural diversity and constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the articulation of political dissent.

As discussed in Chapter 1, cultural policies are deeply embedded within a country's political context, and the promotion and protection of the right to freely express opinions through artistic practices strengthen their capacity to foster social change and development. Moreover, as demonstrated in the subsequent analysis, autocratic governments tend to limit artists' influence on citizens by restricting their freedom of expression. In the later examination of case studies, the recognition of artistic expression as a powerful instrument opposing ruling parties will become evident. Ultimately, cultural policies are required to promote and safeguard freedom of expression in order to guarantee the respect of liberal practices.

For these reasons, Freedom House constitutes a fundamental analytical tool for this research, as it approaches global democracy through the lens of freedom and human rights. Its assessment is based on de facto freedoms – namely, the freedoms actually enjoyed by individuals – rather than evaluating democracy solely on the basis of governmental performance. Its methodology is firmly rooted in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is grounded in the core assumption that liberal democratic societies are best equipped to protect and promote the freedoms of all human beings. However, given its lack of a specific focus on the cultural field, it is considered in this thesis exclusively in relation to the analysis of selected case studies.

[19] European Commission. (2025). Draft Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture – Culture for Europe". Culture Compass for Europe

V-DEM data

V-DEM 2025 Report (*Democracy Trumped?*) shows that, compared to 2014, the rule of law is in decline in 14 additional countries, reaching a total of 18 as of 2025.

The rule of law is a core democratic principle of European governance. First elaborated in the XVIII century by the French philosopher Montesquieu, it was conceived as a safeguard against totalitarian practices. It ensures equality before the law for all citizens and aims to prevent a despotic or arbitrary use of state power.
According to the European Commission, the rule of law is uniformly defined across all Member States of the European Union, and it is grounded in six defining principles: legality, legal certainty, prohibition of the arbitrary exercise of executive power, effective judicial protection by independent and impartial courts, separation of powers, and equality before the law.
However, these principles are not consistently respected and some EU states – despite being identified as democratic – have shown signs of democratic backsliding.

As Figure 3 shows, the V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 identifies the 20 most significantly declining indicators between 2014 and 2024, grouped under six keys components of democracy: clean elections, deliberative component, freedom of association, freedom of expression, liberal component, and participatory component – newly added to the yearly analysis.

According to the report, freedom of expression is the most endangered component over the ten-year period, with almost nine additional countries showing a declining performance within a single year. The most affected indicators are: the media, undermined by censorship and political biases, the freedom of expression in academic and cultural environments, and the harassment perpetrated on journalists. Indeed, media freedom is among the first targets of emerging autocratic strategies (Democracy Report 2024).

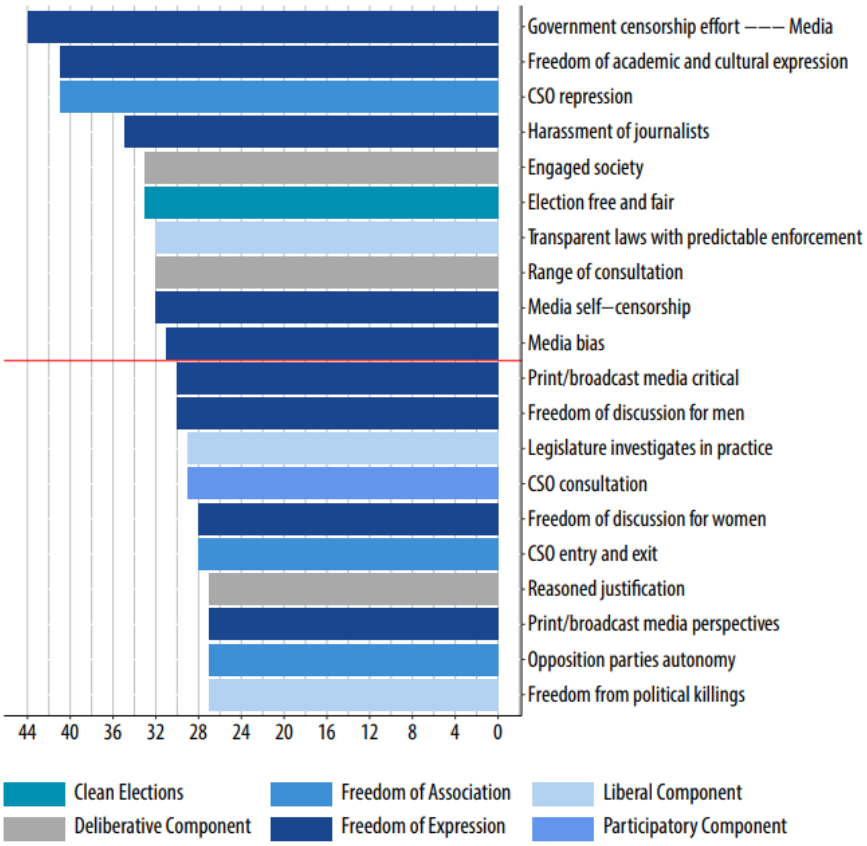


FIGURE 3

Source: *Democracy Report 2025*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute

Figure 3 illustrates the number of affected countries (horizontal axis) and the individual components broken down into 20 specific indicators (vertical axis).

Figure 4 depicts the main 20 indicators – right column – of declining democracies in settings where autocratisation is already underway.

As a result, alongside restrictions on media freedom, autocratic governments increasingly target academic and cultural expression, as well as men's freedom of discussion.
The introduction of the participatory component as a new element of analysis suggests a growing importance of citizen participation for the health of democracy and, conversely, its influence on autocratic powers.

Before advancing with the inspection of Hungary and Poland, an important question should be addressed: what criteria define the democracy-autocracy dichotomy?

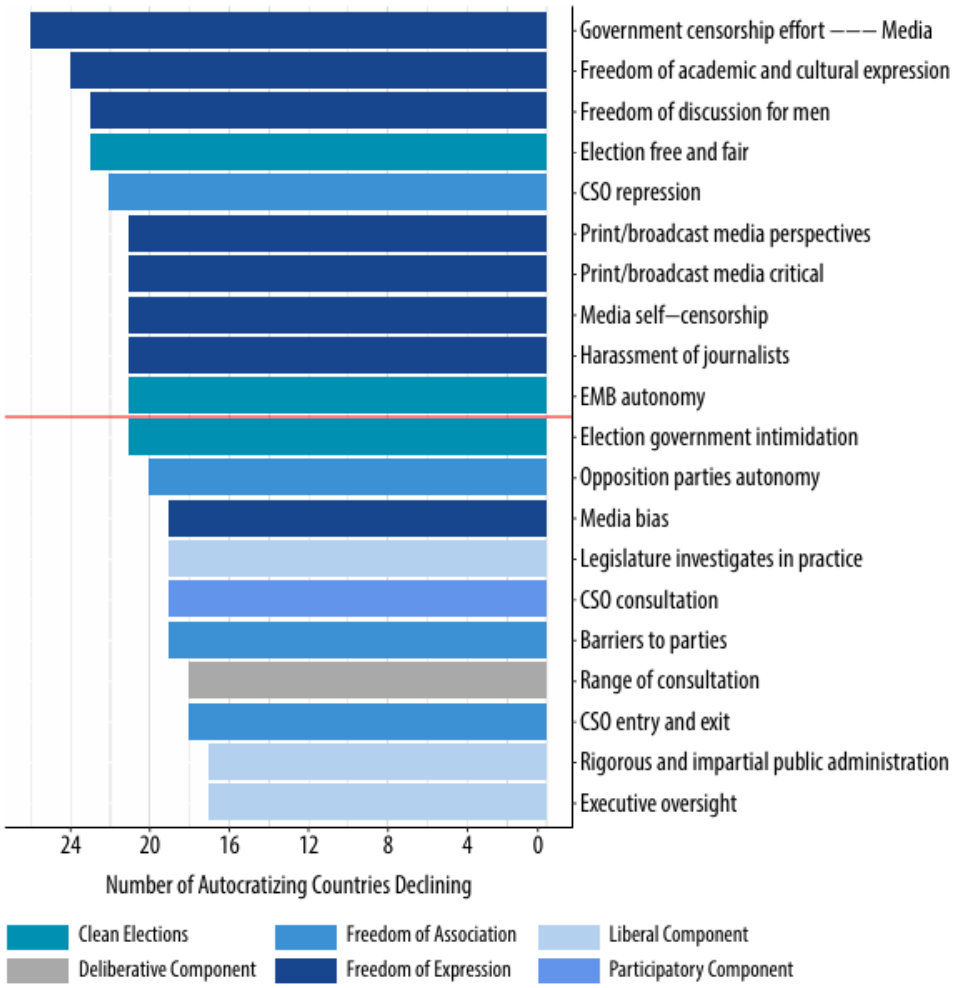


FIGURE 4

Source: *Democracy Report 2025*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute

As revealed by Figure 3 and Figure 4, the extent to which governments improve and guarantee the freedom of expression is a decisive factor for the implementation of democratic cultural policies. Moreover, the dataset identifies the following elements to further differentiate the two regimes in the cultural field: the autonomy of cultural institutions, the accessibility to cultural initiatives, and education guaranteed to every citizen.

According to Freedom House, political rights and civil liberties indexes are fundamental to identify the category of political regime of the country, and these indexes can be highly influenced by cultural policies.

Table 9 presents the categorization of countries into Free, Partly Free, Not Free, based on the scores gathered by Freedom House. The scores are assessed based on 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators, each indicator represents a question and a country can be awarded up to 4 points for each indicator, 4 being the highest level of freedom, 0 the lowest level of freedom. Overall, the denomination of "Free" does not necessarily imply that the country enjoys complete freedom, but, compared to "Partly Free" and "Not Free", it depicts higher and positive levels. For instance, according to the scores registered on the dataset, most European countries are awarded as "Free" (Austria 93/100, Croatia 82/100, Denmark 97/100), whereas countries where conflicts or totalitarianisms thrive are registered as "Not Free" (Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine -1/100, North Korea 3/100, China 9/100).

This reference table will be especially useful for the following analysis on the assessment of level of freedom of the two countries.

Status		Political Rights score						
		0-5*	6-11	12-17	18-23	24-29	30-35	36-40
Civil Liberties score	53-60	PF	PF	PF	F	F	F	F
	44-52	PF	PF	PF	PF	F	F	F
	35-43	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	F	F
	26-34	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	F
	17-25	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
	8-16	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF	PF
	0-7	NF	NF	NF	NF	PF	PF	PF

KEY: F = Free, PF = Partly Free, and NF = Not Free

TABLE 9

Source: Freedom in the World Research Methodology. Freedom House

Lührmann, Tannenberg and Linberg (2018) propose a classification of global regimes (*Regimes of the World*, 2018) based on V-Dem data. Their analysis draws from Dahl's (1971) criteria for democracy, which emphasises that freedom of expression and the availability of alternative sources of information constitute essential prerequisites for a functioning democratic system. Their findings indicate that, based on the typology of elections, four regime categories can be distinguished: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy (see Figure 5).

Drawing on V-Dem indicators (*see formula in italics in Figure 5*), the researchers establish a data-driven threshold that differentiates autocracies from democracies.

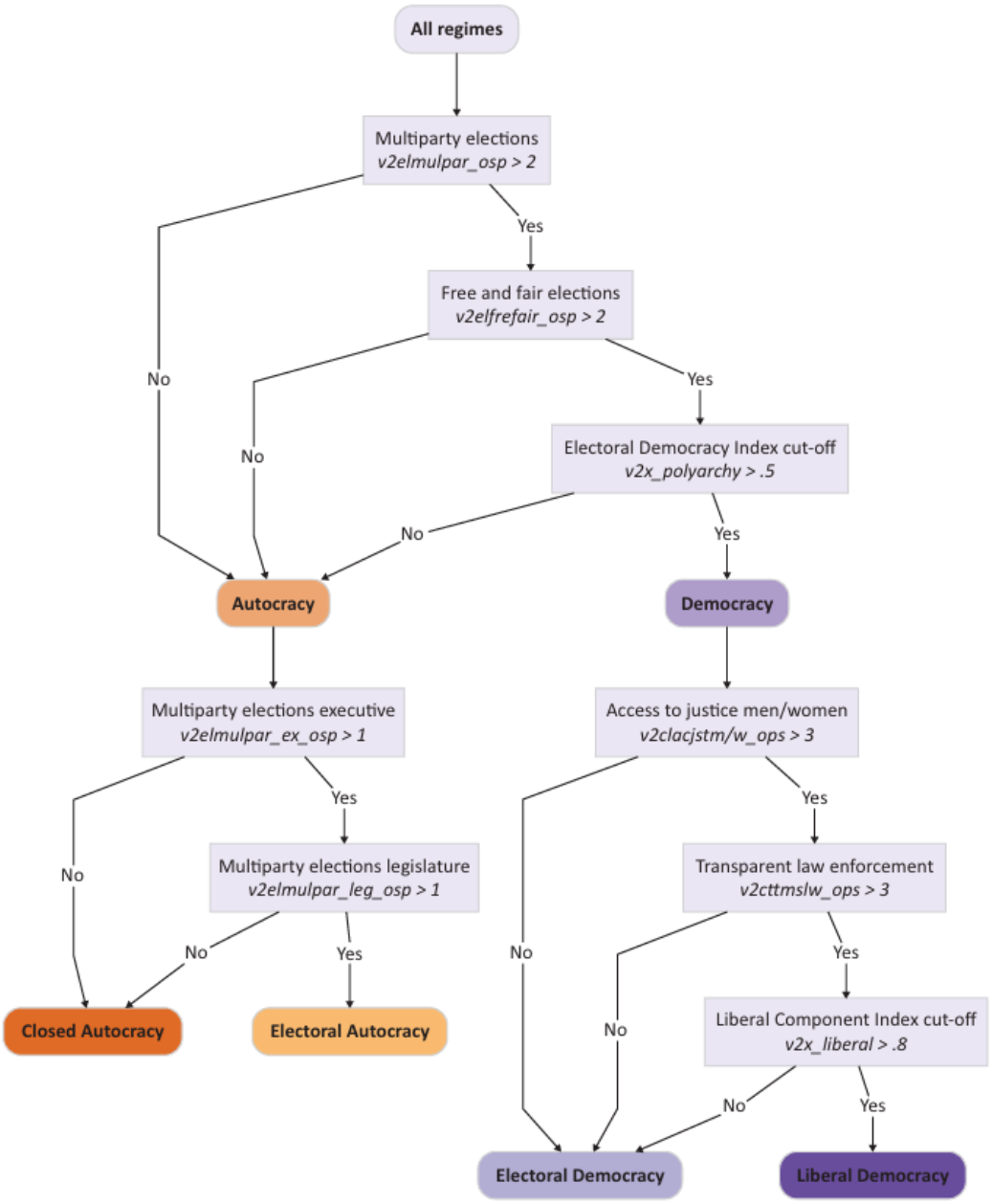


FIGURE 5

Source: *Regimes of the world (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes*

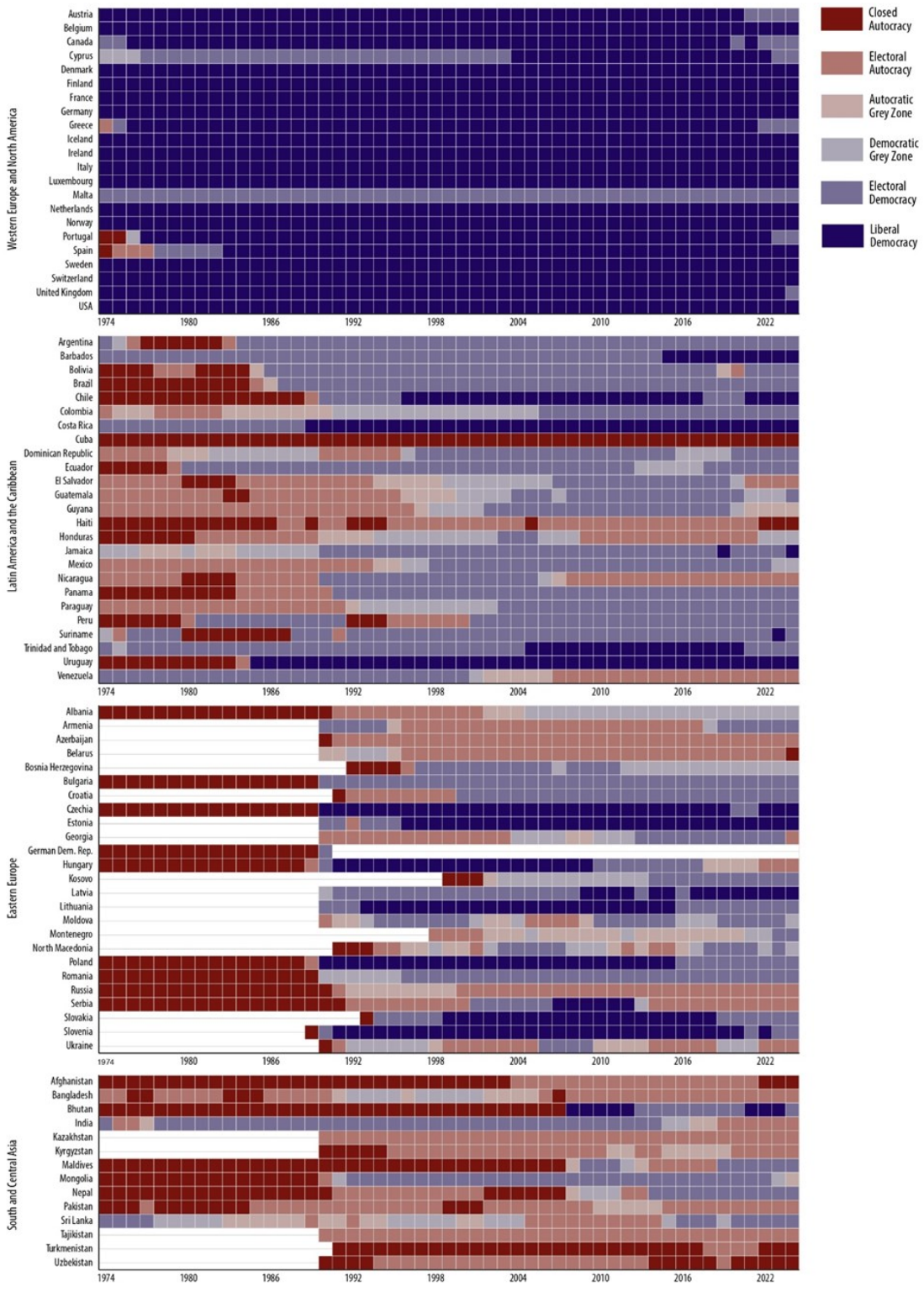
The indicators to be found under the definitions are the variables recorded on V-Dem dataset, while the numbers provided are the scores that define whether a country is democratic or not based on elections.

A democracy is defined and distinguished from autocracy when it fosters multiparty elections that are fair and free, conducted without irregularities and mistakes, while also meeting Dahl's (1971) institutional prerequisites. Furthermore, a democracy attains the status of a liberal democracy when it additionally guarantees the protection of liberal principles and ensures full adherence to the rule of law.

Building on this categorisation, V-Dem 2025 Report presents the historical change of regimes of the world from 1974-2024 divided by geographical areas (Table 10).

Within this framework, the freedom of cultural and artistic expression becomes a significant indicator of liberal democracy, as it reflects both the protection of individual rights and the state's commitment to pluralism. Conversely, when cultural production is restricted, instrumentalised, or politically censored, it signals a shift towards totalitarian control and unfair practices.

By analysing these aspects with qualitative analysis of funding strategies, institutional independence, and representation of minority cultures, this thesis will now analyse how cultural policies have been implemented in illiberal democracies.


Western Europe and North America
Austria
Belgium
Canada
Cyprus
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Luxembourg
Malta
Netherlands
Norway
Portugal
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom
USA
1974
1980
1986
1992
1998
2004
2010
2016
2022
Latin America and the Caribbean
Argentina
Barbados
Bolivia
Brazil
Chile
Colombia
Costa Rica
Cuba
Dominican Republic
Ecuador
El Salvador
Guatemala
Guyana
Haiti
Honduras
Jamaica
Mexico
Nicaragua
Panama
Paraguay
Peru
Suriname
Trinidad and Tobago
Uruguay
Venezuela
Eastern Europe
Albania
Armenia
Azerbaijan
Belarus
Bosnia Herzegovina
Bulgaria
Croatia
Czechia
Estonia
Georgia
German Dem. Rep.
Hungary
Kosovo
Latvia
Lithuania
Moldova
Montenegro
North Macedonia
Poland
Romania
Russia
Serbia
Slovakia
Slovenia
Ukraine
South and Central Asia
Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Bhutan
India
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Maldives
Mongolia
Nepal
Pakistan
Sri Lanka
Tajikistan
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan
Closed Autocracy
Electoral Autocracy
Autocratic Grey Zone
Democratic Grey Zone
Electoral Democracy
Liberal Democracy

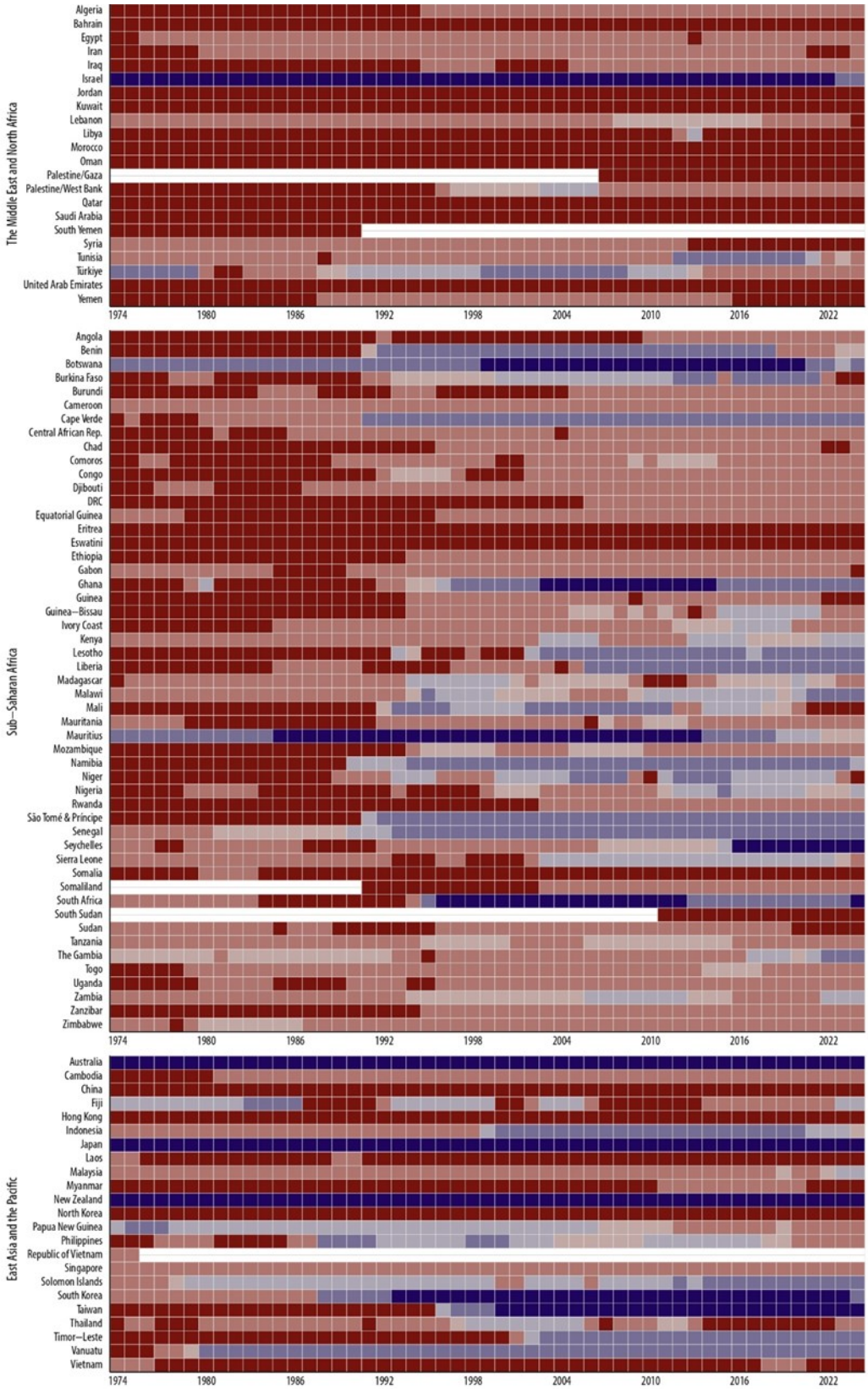


TABLE 10. Source: Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., and Lindberg, S.I. (2025). Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

2.2 Case Studies

Two countries have been chosen for the analysis of cultural policies in illiberal democracies. The Hungarian and Polish governments have been sentenced as illiberal by research scholars, nonetheless they present two different perspectives.

The V-Dem 2020 Report (Table 11) shows that both countries belonged to the top 10 autocratisers between 2009 and 2019.

	CHANGE	LDI 2009	LDI 2019	REGIME TYPE 2009	REGIME TYPE 2019
Hungary	−0.36	0.76	0.40	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Turkey	−0.36	0.46	0.10	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Poland	−0.33	0.83	0.50	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Serbia	−0.27	0.53	0.25	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Brazil	−0.25	0.76	0.51	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
India	−0.19	0.55	0.36	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Mali	−0.17	0.48	0.31	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Thailand	−0.16	0.32	0.15	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Nicaragua	−0.16	0.22	0.06	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy
Zambia	−0.15	0.42	0.27	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy

TABLE 11

Source: Lührmann,A., Maerz, S.F., Grahn, S., Alizada, N., Gastaldi, L., Hellmeier, S., Hindle, G., and Lindberg, S.I. 2020. Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).

Nonetheless, the Polish elections in 2023 marked a turning point for the democratic level of the country. Thus, this section first wants to visualise the current state-of-the-art of cultural policy framework of the two countries, while later a comparison between the practices implemented in these two illiberal contexts, thus referring to the previous Polish ruling party, will be addressed.

Previous works of research scholars were fundamental to build this analysis through the data on the Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends, namely: Inkei Péter and Kristóf Luca (2025) for Hungary, and Ilczuk Dorota, Karpińska Anna and Kozieł Maciej (2023) for Poland.

2.2.1 Hungary

Hungary's political and cultural landscape continues to bear the imprint of its communist past, which still shapes the framework of its national policies (Kristóf, 2017). Nonetheless, the Fidesz government, ruled by Viktor Orbán, has established specific conservative and far-right practices in the field of culture since its election in 2010.

According to V-Dem analysis, Orban's election marked a turning point for the democracy of the country. Since 2010, the government has proven to rely on autocratic practices, leading to worsening conditions for the country's democratic institutions and, therefore, to a stronger scrutiny and criticisms from the European Union. For instance, the Fidesz government proceeded with replacing judges only opposing the regime with loyal trustees of the party (Gall, 2018). Moreover, the opposing parties have little if no power on social media, hindering their political campaigns as well.

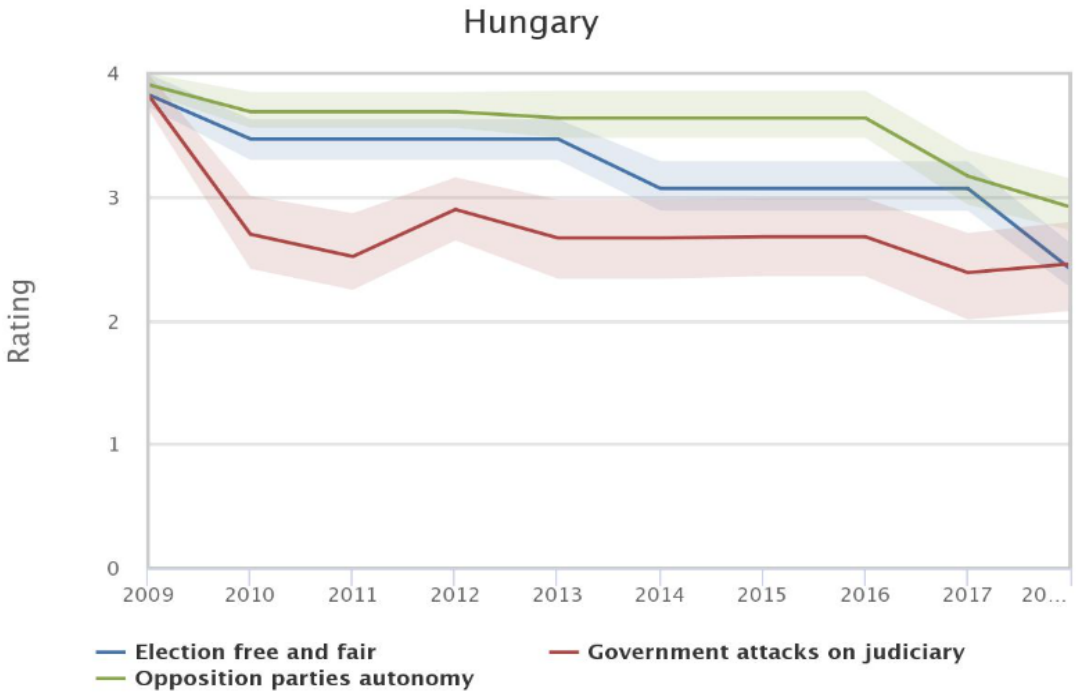


FIGURE 6

Source: Democratic Declines in Hungary. By: V-Dem Staff. Jun 07, 2019

Figure 6 shows clearly how from 2010 Hungary has suffered a growing but fragmented tendency of violation of the judiciary power by the government, as well as a constant decline of the authority of the opposition parties. Altogether, they affected the degree of

free and fair elections in the 8 years studied in the research. This specific datum is fundamental as, according to Szelényi, the main trait that still defines Hungary as a democracy is that the government's mandate is based on elections (Kristóf, 2017).

Milestones of cultural policy practices in Hungary

In 2019, the government has sought to consolidate cultural governance through the adoption of a unified cultural strategy, most notably via the establishment of the National Council of Culture (*Nemzeti Kulturális Tanácsról*). According to this Act (2019. évi CXXIV. Törvény), seventeen institutions are designated as strategically important and therefore benefit from designated funding within the national budget. Yet, concerns persist regarding the transparency of public expenditure, as official accounts often lack clear details on how these resources are allocated.

The distribution of funding and recognition has increasingly been linked to loyalty to the ruling party. Independent companies, especially those staging politically critical productions, often face obstacles in obtaining resources, while projects of questionable artistic merit are supported disproportionately because of their political alignment (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025). Controversial practices have also included state sponsorship of concerts and films celebrating performers from the communist era, whose work now serves as an expression of allegiance. Furthermore, according to the report published on the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends, commercially popular but politically compliant talent shows have absorbed significant portions of public funding, raising further questions about the ideological bias shaping cultural subsidies. Indeed, politicisation of culture is a tangible strategy of the Fidesz government.

The 2021 Child Protection Act (Act LXXIX) has been used to justify restrictions on cultural expression, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. For example, in 2023, during the World Press Photo exhibition at the National Museum, a complaint was submitted against a photograph portraying men in women's clothing. As the museum's director, himself a government supporter, refused to enforce censorship according to the government guidelines, he was subsequently removed from his position (FitzGerlad 2023). Therefore, legislation has played a crucial role in constraining artistic freedom.

Since 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Innovation has been granted the responsibility of overseeing policies relating to culture, family, education, children, and cultural diplomacy. Public education, however, remains under the authority of the Ministry of Interior (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025).
Within this framework, the Minister of Culture delegates powers to commissioners who supervise areas such as investments in cultural heritage, the development of the national film industry, and international cultural initiatives, including the Hungarian-Turkish Year of Science and Innovation.

The abolition of the self-employment tax scheme - KATA regime - in the same year significantly worsened the conditions of cultural sector workers (Labour and Employment law Hungary). Artists and cultural professionals increasingly face financial insecurity, aggravated by a lack of state support in cultural administration and persistent shortages of employment opportunities in sectors such as cinema and theatre.
According to Inkei and Kristóf, the government's System of National Cooperation (NER) has recently placed more emphasis on the role of individuals in the cultural sphere. However, the credibility of this approach is questionable, as it operates within a governance framework marked by clientelism.

In 2023, the government created the Sovereignty Defence Office (Act LXXXVIII), a body tasked with monitoring and restricting the work of independent media. Reports also confirm the use of surveillance technologies such as Pegasus spyware against journalists and critics, reflecting the government's hostility to Western-oriented media and narratives.
The 2024 Rule of Law Report of the European Commission underlined that concerns regarding media pluralism remain unresolved. According to the report, Hungary has not adopted reforms to ensure independent regulation of state advertising, nor has it secured the editorial or financial autonomy of public service media. All these dynamics illustrate the extent to which media freedom is being eroded, despite the formal guarantees provided by the constitution. In the same year, the justice minister was granted sweeping powers to access judicial and prosecutorial decisions, effectively enabling political interference in the judiciary.

In January 2025, following a deep analysis of autocratic practices worldwide, the research scholar Samuele Arioli defined Hungary as "the 'worst' autocratizer of the world today, in terms of magnitude of change".[20] Figure 7 supports this claim by showcasing the decline of the Hungarian democracy index and the anti-pluralism strategy simultaneously. The V-Party Anti-Pluralism Index evaluates political parties by calculating a weighted average across four dimensions: their level of commitment to democratic procedures, the extent to which they demonise political opponents, their willingness to encourage or legitimise political violence, and their respect, or lack thereof, for the fundamental rights of minorities.

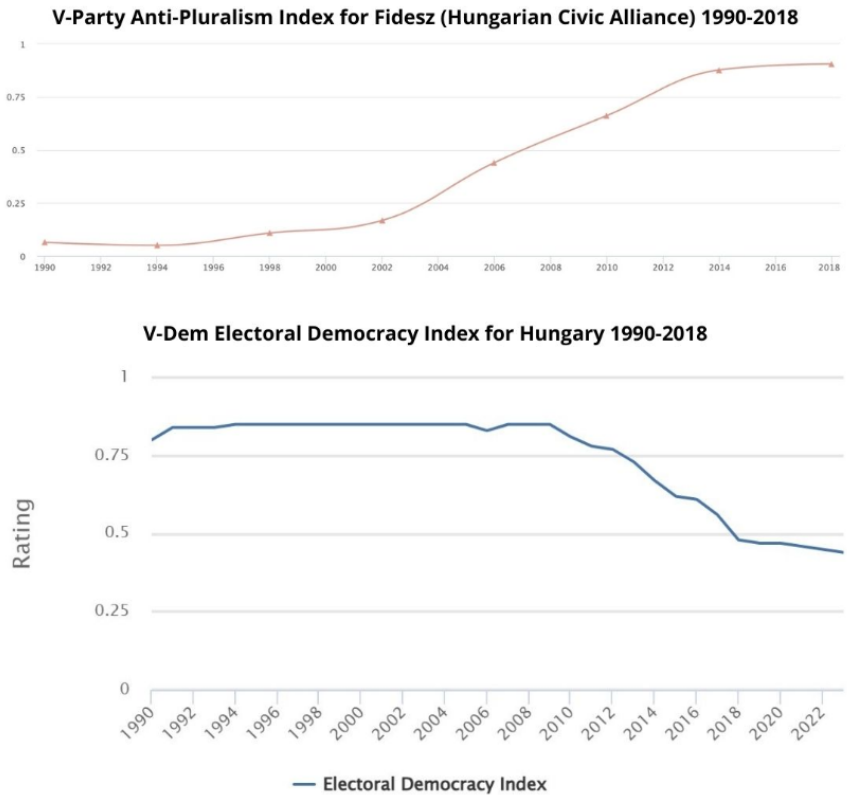


FIGURE 7

Source: Rising Anti-Pluralism in Hungary's Fidesz Party. By: Samuele Ariol. Jan 15, 2025

As the graph shows, before its elections in 2010, the Fidesz Party gradually implemented an anti-pluralism strategy that consolidated after 2014, with its peak in 2018. According to the scholar, the main forerunners of this strategy were a scaling down of restrictions on institutions while strengthening the ones on civil society, defamation of political opponents, and systematic repression on refugee and migrants' rights. At the same time,

[20] Arioli, S. (2025). Rising Anti-Pluralism in Hungary's Fidesz Party

the democracy level of the country has deteriorated quite steadily since 2008, to the point of losing the appellation of 'full democracy' and becoming a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy" (Rankin, 2022).

Hungarian cultural institution and national authorities

A central role is played by the Petőfi Cultural Agency, managed through a public interest trust. This body is responsible for the implementation of state cultural strategy and the coordination and finance of cultural institutions. Its stated mission is to transform citizens from passive consumers of cultural products into active cultural participants.
To achieve this, the Agency uses several cultural brands, most prominently the online portal kultura.hu, which provides access to Hungarian cultural news, literature, music, cinema, and other forms of artistic expression (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025).

Among artistic domains, the performing arts occupy a particularly significant position as spaces for independent groups and bottom-up initiatives. Precisely for this reason, they have become subject to close political scrutiny. The Hungarian theatre scene, in particular, has become deeply polarised along political lines. The shift was especially evident after the opposition gained control of the Budapest municipality in 2019 (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025), leading to a redistribution of theatres between local and national authorities. Long-standing institutions once jointly managed by state and city authorities were divided, with some theatres placed under direct government control and others retained by the municipality.

Public cultural institutions have increasingly been subjected to centralising reforms. Major museums, including the National Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts, have been consolidated into a single umbrella organisation, the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre (Bráder, 2024). More recently, the Ministry of Culture suggested extending this centralisation to local cultural institutions, proposing that theatres, museums, and similar entities be managed under national bodies for both administration and financing. This initiative, however, faced resistance from the cultural community, and for now, the reform has not been implemented (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025).

The autonomy of Hungarian cultural institutions has been increasingly undermined by direct political interference. In recent years, several leading cultural institutions and public universities have been placed under the control of boards of trustees appointed by the government. These boards, composed largely of political figures, have raised concerns over the transparency of investment decisions and the allocation of resources. In response, the European Union initiated infringement proceedings against Hungary, expressing mistrust regarding the use of EU funds under this governance model (Scheppele, R. Kelemen, and Morijn, 2021).
Among the institutions most affected are the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, the Hungarian Dance University, and the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE).

Financing, funds and support

As shown on the 2025 Compendium of Cultural Policies report, Hungary maintains relatively high levels of expenditure on culture, particularly directed towards the construction and renovation of prestigious national institutions. Recent examples include the House of Music Hungary and the Museum of Ethnography, and the restoration of the Royal Palace, which now houses the National Gallery. In addition, the government launched the National Castle Programme to restore historic heritage buildings across the country, further highlighting its focus on symbolic cultural infrastructure.

Private contributions to cultural life remain modest. While household spending on cultural goods and services represents the most significant form of private support, donations from individuals and philanthropic patronage play only a marginal role. Mechanisms such as the "1% scheme," which allows taxpayers to direct one percent of their income tax to a nonprofit organisation of their choice, exist but have limited impact. Similarly, crowdfunding campaigns provide some opportunities for community support, though they rarely generate meaningful sums.

Corporate sponsorship is dominated by state-owned enterprises, notably the national lottery operator Szerencsejáték Rt, the electricity provider MVM, and the Hungarian Development Bank. These sponsorships are often criticised for their lack of transparency

and their apparent political bias, as funds tend to favour institutions and projects aligned with government priorities.

The film industry has been particularly impacted by these dynamics. Filmmakers at the National Film Institute frequently report that projects are rejected on political grounds, with funding favouring new or inexperienced directors whose work aligns with government ideology, rather than established professionals. Despite these constraints, audience preferences have not been fully shaped by state subsidies, as the most commercially and critically successful Hungarian films in recent years have often emerged from projects that received no state support.

Interestingly, unlike the National Cultural Fund, which traditionally relies on independent professional boards, the Petőfi Cultural Agency distributes public funding directly, bypassing the safeguards of trustee evaluation.

Legislation and media

Building upon the previous discussion, Freedom House data offers valuable insights into Hungary's position within the 'freedom of expression and belief' index. Hungary is classified as 'Partly Free', with an overall score of 65 out of 100. This figure is split between 24/40 in political rights and 41/60 in civil liberties. Within this framework, freedom of expression registers a score of 10/16, a relatively strong result, though recent developments reveal a concerning downward trend. Indeed, it presents a score of 46/100 as Transitional or Hybrid Regime, as feared by the European Parliament (Rankin, 2022)

While the Hungarian constitution guarantees freedom of the press, this right is increasingly undermined in practice (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025). Pro-government media dominate the public sphere, limiting political pluralism and reinforcing partisan narratives. Media pluralism has consequently become a major source of domestic and international controversy.

Although the government claims adherence to constitutional and European standards, critics point to structural imbalances: the Media Council, the top regulatory body, is composed entirely of members nominated by Fidesz and appointed for nine-year terms, independent media outlets have been systematically dismantled or absorbed into pro-

government networks, and public service broadcasters allocate only minimal space to opposition voices. Moreover, state advertising is disproportionately large and functions less as neutral information than as a continuous form of political campaigning for the ruling party.

On the cultural side, Hungary lacks a comprehensive legal framework governing culture and the arts. The frequently cited Act CXL/1997, commonly referred to as the "Law on Culture", in reality regulates only three sub-sectors: libraries, museums, and local socio-cultural initiatives. Another significant statute is Act LXIV/2001, which focuses specifically on the protection of cultural heritage.
Since 2010, when Fidesz consolidated its constitutional authority, the only major cultural policy legislation introduced under the National System of Cooperation (NER) has been the Act on the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA), an institution that has since become central to state-directed cultural governance.
Since 2010, artistic funding procedures were politicised, privileging projects that coincided with xenophobic campaigns, including anti-Muslim rhetoric, and extended to the educational sector, where gender studies were banned, and universities subjected to increased state supervision.

In response, the European Commission suspended agreements with 21 Hungarian universities participating in Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, citing concerns over academic freedom and government interference (Brent, 2023).

Although the constitution nominally guarantees freedom of expression, the Sovereignty Defence Law has raised significant concerns among human rights groups. This law has been used to silence dissenting voices and tighten restrictions on civil society. NGOs have faced systematic pressure, including excessive bureaucratic requirements, reputational attacks labelling them as "Soros agents" or "foreign agents," and, in some cases, forced closure through unlawful police actions. The European Commission responded by initiating legal proceedings against Hungary, citing infringements of EU law linked to the Sovereignty Defence Law (Partners Hungary Foundation, 2025).

Beyond media and civil society, democratic standards in Hungary have eroded in other sectors as well. Minorities remain underrepresented in political and electoral processes, while judicial independence is increasingly compromised. Refugees and asylum seekers also face systemic violations of their rights, reflecting a broader pattern of disregard for international obligations.

The role of the artist and societal impact of the arts

In terms of wider social impact, culture plays an important role in tourism and urban development, contributing both to economic growth and to the country's international visibility. Civil society also supplements state action, as NGOs seek to alleviate social inequalities, particularly by providing support to children in disadvantaged households. Community and cultural centres likewise play an essential role in fostering participation and social engagement. For instance, the community house Auróra in Budapest aims at creating an open space for dialogue and cooperation for non-profit organisations operating in social and cultural fields. Its core principle is to foster innovative practices for the promotion and development of active democratic practices in Hungary.
The community support is fundamental as the organisation relies on volunteers for day-to-day activities and operations.

Participatory strategy

Participation in cultural life in Hungary is closely intertwined with the state's efforts to reinforce a particular vision of national identity (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025). Cultural programmes that allegedly aim to broaden access and reduce inequalities are, in reality, explicitly framed as vehicles to strengthen collective identity narratives promoted by the government.

One of the flagship initiatives in this area is the Lázár Ervin Programme, launched in 2019 and directed at schoolchildren. Its declared purpose is to transmit what is presented as Hungary's millennial cultural heritage to younger generations. Each year, students in grades 1 through 8 are offered free access to theatre, circus, dance, classical, and folk music performances. Participation is structured through a registration system in which

performers must apply to have their productions approved. Between 2019 and 2024, the programme has reportedly reached over 2.2 million children, making it one of the most extensive cultural outreach initiatives in the country (Inkei and Kristóf, 2025).
Beyond the classroom, a growing number of cultural events have been supported through state subsidies, including the World Days of Music, the Day of Open Heritage, the International Day on Monuments and Sites, the Night of Museums, and the Month of Libraries. These events are getting increasingly subsidised by public funds, gaining significant visibility and audience engagement.

In addition to large-scale programmes, targeted measures exist to encourage participation among specific groups. For example, teachers receive substantial discounts for entry to museums and other public cultural institutions through a national card scheme. Family tickets are also commonly available, though debates have arisen regarding the restrictive definition of "family" used in these policies, which excludes same-sex couples and, in some cases, single-parent households. Such exclusions highlight the ways in which participatory cultural strategies are aligned with a conservative vision of national identity, reinforcing government priorities rather than promoting inclusivity.

Further controversies

Recently, a highly symbolic example of cultural transformation is the Buda Castle reconstruction project started in 2019, which has been criticised for displacing existing cultural institutions, as the National Gallery resides in the Royal Palace, in order to repurpose the historic site for government functions (Németh, 2025). Similarly, heritage protection has been weakened: the independent heritage office was dissolved years ago, and while experts now operate within ministerial structures, their authority is limited. Political decision-makers routinely override professional recommendations, leading to demolitions and reconstructions that prioritise investment over conservation (Átlátszó, 2019).

2.2.2 Poland

Scholars, as Zamorano and Bonet, have frequently compared the practices of Hungary's Fidesz government with those of Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party, particularly when assessing their democratic qualifications. However, in 2023, PiS was replaced by the opposition – the Civic Coalition (KO) – which has since initiated a gradual transformation of the country's democratic framework.

Milestones of cultural policy practices in Poland

As in Hungary, Poland's political trajectory is rooted in its twentieth-century communist past. From 1989 onwards, the country underwent significant societal changes, yet after the 2015 elections, the conservative PiS party became the dominant force. Its governance had a profound impact on Poland's democratic practices until its electoral defeat in 2023 (Picheta, 2023).

A key moment in the dispute between the European Union and the PiS occurred in October 2021, when the Constitutional Tribunal (TK) ruled that specific provisions of EU law conflicted with Poland's constitution, thereby claiming the supremacy of national legislation (Henley, 2021). This ruling triggered a strong reaction from Brussels, and by December the European Commission had initiated infringement proceedings, arguing that Poland was in breach of core EU legal obligations (European Commission, 2023).

At the same time, Polish citizens have generally retained the freedom to engage in private conversations without fear of surveillance or harassment. However, restrictive defamation laws continue to cast a shadow over freedom of expression. These include criminal penalties for allegedly insulting religious convictions or the head of state.
A widely publicised example involved activists who displayed an image of the Virgin Mary encircled by a rainbow halo (Clooney Foundation for Justice, 2021). Initially prosecuted for "offending religious feelings", they were ultimately acquitted, with the Supreme Court upholding this ruling in March 2024, thereby affirming limits to the scope of such laws.
During its time in office, PiS also pursued reforms designed to extend political control over the judiciary. Among the most controversial measures were the appointment of pro-

government judges to the Constitutional Tribunal and the restructuring of the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), which shifted the power of appointment from judges themselves to a parliamentary majority (Davies, 2018). After the Civic Coalition (KO) won the 2023 elections, the incoming government outlined a programme to reverse these changes and restore judicial independence. In July 2024, Parliament passed a law re-establishing the autonomy of the KRS, but President Andrzej Duda referred the measure back to the TK for review, effectively blocking its entry into force by the end of the year (Skóra, 2024).

LGBT+ rights remain another highly contested domain. While the number of pride parades has increased in recent years, often in the face of official obstruction, local authorities under PiS promoted policies hostile to sexual minorities. From 2019 onward, numerous municipalities and provinces adopted "LGBT-free zone" declarations or so-called "family charters", invoking the need to "protect children from moral corruption" (Boff, 2021). By late 2020, over 100 local governments had adopted such resolutions, which rights organisations condemned as discriminatory. Although courts repeatedly struck them down, several remained in force until December 2024.

The impact of these measures, while largely symbolic and legally non-binding, was far from negligible. Human Rights Watch reported that the "LGBT-free" declarations fostered an atmosphere of stigma and exclusion, indirectly sanctioning discrimination against LGBT people. By May 2025, however, the final resolution, in the town of Łańcut, was repealed, formally ending more than five years of institutionalised hostility toward LGBT communities at the local level (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

In 2024, the new government introduced an action plan aimed at restoring the rule of law (European Commission, 2024), effectively concluding a prolonged dispute between the European Commission and the PiS administration.

Unlike Hungary, data from Freedom House categorise Poland as "Free," with an overall score of 82/100, of which 48/60 is attributed to civil liberties.
According to the V-Dem 2025 Report, Poland belongs to the democratising countries.

After gaining the title of one of the top 10 autocratisers (Radó and Mikola 2025) because of the PiS ruling, the 2023 election marked a U-turn. Media and freedom of expression are the main democratic figures that showed improvements in practice, nonetheless, due to a lack of commitment to restore the judiciary independence and civil liberties, the country shows lower level of democracy than 2015, where its governance structure was based on a liberal democracy (Csaky, 2024).

Moreover, despite the U-turn implemented by the KO, the statistics (figure 8) analysed by the Polish researcher Adriana Sas exhibit a general dissatisfaction with the ruling party in its governance practices. This shared feeling led to the election of the PiS' candidate Karol Nawrocki on the 1st of June 2025, which could revert the ongoing democratising phenomenon.

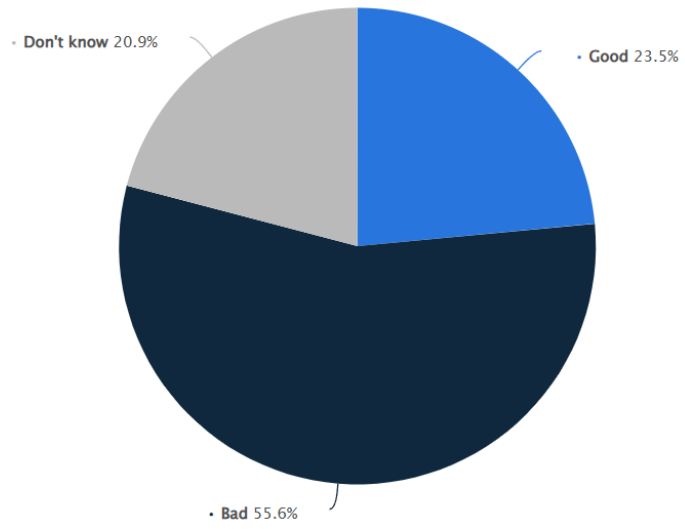


FIGURE 8
Source: Statista

Cultural institutions and national authorities

Building on the analysis of Ilczuk, Karpińska, and Kozieł, cultural institutions in Poland are founded either by the state or by local administrative bodies at the levels of voivodeships, districts, and municipalities. At the national scale, sixty-four institutions are

either managed directly or co-managed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. These include theatres, operas, orchestras, philharmonic halls, museums, and multidisciplinary cultural centres, with a presence in all sixteen voivodeships.
Nevertheless, local governments play the leading role in establishing and sustaining cultural institutions, whereas the state itself administers only a limited number, with a particular concentration on museums.

This institutional map reveals a marked territorial imbalance. Around one-third of Poland's cultural institutions are concentrated in just three voivodeships: Mazowieckie, Małopolskie, and Śląskie. Urban areas host the majority of theatres, music organisations, cinemas, galleries, and exhibition spaces, while rural communities rely mainly on community halls, cultural centres, and public libraries.
Polish cultural institutions can operate under public, private, or non-profit legal forms, though the public sector is by far the most prevalent. Institutions may be created by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, by other ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of National Defence, or by local government authorities.
In practice, the financial responsibility for maintaining these institutions most often falls to local administrations.

In accordance with national legislation, cultural institutions are tasked with creating, safeguarding, and disseminating cultural resources, while also supporting creativity, education, and the protection of cultural heritage (UNESCO, Polish Act 1991).
The Minister of Culture and National Heritage remains the central policymaker in this domain, although other ministers may also establish cultural institutions within their areas of competence – for instance, the Polish Army Museum, which is subordinated to the Ministry of National Defence. The Ministry also oversees specialised institutions dedicated to specific cultural fields, such as the Institute of Music and Dance, the Book Institute, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (which promotes Polish culture abroad), the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, the National Heritage Board of Poland, and the Fryderyk Chopin Institute.

Beyond state structures, advocacy bodies also contribute to the governance of culture. Mechanisms such as the Social Dialogue Commissions or Culture Commissions are formed

jointly by non-governmental organisations and local authorities within the framework of the Cooperation Programme. Their function is both advisory and consultative: they propose initiatives to local governments, comment on legislative measures affecting NGOs, set collaborative priorities, and nominate experts to councils responsible for decisions on local cultural funding.

Financing, funds and support

For most cultural institutions in Poland, public subsidies constitute the primary, or at least one of the principals, sources of funding for their statutory activities and ongoing operations (Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends - Poland, Report 2023). The current financing model is strongly centred on public expenditure, while private contributions are treated as supplementary. This structure has generated systemic weaknesses, as it fosters dependency on short-term subsidies and competitive grants. As a result, many cultural organisations lack financial stability and face significant obstacles in planning for long-term development.

At the same time, the overall framework of public funding, covering both institutional support and cultural events, remains crucial, particularly when combined with incentives designed to stimulate private investment.

In addition to state subsidies, cultural activity in Poland can be supported by private actors through two main channels: sponsorship and patronage. Sponsorship is typically transactional, involving financial support in exchange for marketing benefits. Patronage, in contrast, is understood as a more altruistic form of support, without the expectation of direct returns. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have also gained prominence, with major companies increasingly active in the cultural sector.

Newer forms of financing have likewise emerged. Crowdfunding platforms, now used by both individuals and organisations, provide an alternative avenue for raising resources. While success through crowdfunding is uncertain and influenced by numerous factors, it has become an attractive option for many artists because it allows greater independence, creative freedom, and autonomy in publishing their work.

A major development is the adoption of a new law on the rights of professional artists – Act on Social Security for Professional Artists (October 2024) – which represents a significant step forward in the area of social protection. Under this framework, individuals engaged in artistic work may apply for entitlements that enable them to pay social contributions under preferential terms, while also granting access to social assistance.

Legislation and media

The legal foundation for cultural institutions in Poland is provided by the Act on Organising and Conducting Cultural Activity of 25 October 1991. This was later revised by the Amendment Act on Conducting and Organising Cultural Activity, built on two core principles: first, that cultural patronage is a non-transferable responsibility of the state; and second, that cultural institutions must adapt to changing global circumstances by modernising and increasing efficiency. The amendment also introduced new mechanisms, such as allowing management of cultural institutions to be delegated through public procurement procedures, creating a new category of "performing institutions," and defining the "artistic season" as the temporal framework for artistic organisations. It further specified transparent rules for the appointment of directors, limiting indefinite mandates, and establishing competitive procedures for recruitment.

Legislative oversight in cultural matters lies with the Cultural Commissions of the Polish Parliament. Their duties include nominating candidates for cultural policy posts, drafting and reviewing legislation, scrutinising ministerial reports, monitoring cultural activities, and responding to budgetary proposals.

Although Poland lacks quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quasi-NGOs or QUANGOs) - that usually manage activities aimed at fostering social cohesion, independently from government's control, but still receiving funds from it - civil society does participate in cultural policy development. A key example is the Council of Non-Governmental Culture Organisations, created in 2007 by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Serving as a consultative and advisory body, the Council provides opinions on legislation relevant to NGOs in the cultural sector and facilitates cooperation between the Ministry and civil society.

Constitutional provisions also shape the cultural and media landscape. Article 6 of the Polish Constitution obliges the state to guarantee citizens equal access to cultural goods, including support for Polish communities abroad in preserving their cultural heritage. Article 73 secures freedom of artistic expression, academic research, education, and access to cultural resources, while also safeguarding freedom of conscience and speech.

Despite these protections, recent years have seen repeated challenges. Controversies include the 2017 staging of "The Curse" at Teatr Powszechny, criticised for its treatment of religious symbols (Davies, 2017), and the 2020 Eurovision broadcast incident (Henderickx, 2022), in which Poland's public broadcaster replaced footage of a transgender presenter with advertisements, raising concerns about censorship despite official denials.

The Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Languages, adopted in January 2005, represents the first legal definition of minority groups in Poland. It distinguishes between "national minorities," tied to existing nation-states such as Germans, Ukrainians, or Jews, and "ethnic minorities," stateless groups like the Roma. While the legislation was seen as a milestone, it has sparked debate about its adequacy in recognising newer minority communities, such as the Vietnamese. Currently, the German minority remains the only group with parliamentary representation.

At the local level, cultural policies vary widely, but discussions of social inclusion have been clouded by discriminatory practices. In recent years, several municipalities adopted resolutions targeting so-called "LGBT ideology." Although largely symbolic and lacking legislative force, these declarations have been heavily criticised as unconstitutional, discriminatory, and damaging to Poland's international reputation.

The role of artists and social impacts of the arts

The 2023 Report on Poland suggests that the position of artists, authors, and cultural creators in Poland is marked by considerable instability, both socially and professionally. Recognising these challenges, the National Conference for Culture (OKK) in 2017 initiated a broad debate on improving the conditions of artistic labour. Out of this process, a

working group of experts was formed with the task of drafting the Act on the Rights of the Professional Artist.

The proposed legislation is designed to strengthen the legal and social status of professional artists through several key measures. First, it seeks to establish a formal definition of the professional artist and to specify the rights associated with this category, thereby enabling policy tools to be adapted to the group's particular needs. It also outlines procedures for recognising and updating an individual's professional artist status, based on factors such as formal education in the arts, achievements certified by representative cultural organisations, or income derived from artistic activity.

A further objective of the draft law is to integrate professional artists more securely into the social and health insurance system. Under its provisions, artists would be required to contribute at a level corresponding to the minimum wage.

The draft legislation introduces new mechanisms to improve the living and working conditions of artists. One such measure is the artist's card, which would serve as the basis for a system of discounts, special offers, and benefit packages directed at this group. Another is the creation of the Polish Chamber of Artists, a state-recognised legal entity. Its council would bring together representatives of artistic organisations, alongside delegates from the Ministries of Culture and Labour, as well as the Social Insurance Institution.

Despite these developments, an important issue still characterises the cultural and artistic field, impacting the society. Interculturalism remains a neglected area in Polish cultural and educational policy. The country is often perceived as culturally homogenous, and national curricula have given limited attention to the value of intercultural dialogue and diversity.

Participatory strategy

In Poland, participation in cultural life is strongly tied to legal and institutional frameworks that seek to ensure access and education (Report 2023). The 1996 Law on Museums requires all public museums to guarantee free admission at least one day per week, while also providing reduced ticket options, with specific rates determined by

museum directors. In addition to access provisions, museums have developed educational programmes targeting children and young people, reinforcing their role as central actors in cultural learning.

Public theatres, under their statutory obligations, are also tasked with promoting cultural education. Yet this responsibility is unevenly applied in practice, as theatres often prioritise performance programming over educational outreach.
By contrast, cultural centres play a much more active and visible role in enabling participation. They function as spaces for amateur artistic activity, supporting local initiatives and facilitating community-based cultural events.

These centres also engage in structured cooperation with schools, integrating artistic practice and cultural learning into formal education programmes. In this way, they help to reduce geographical and social barriers to cultural participation, particularly in areas with limited access to museums, theatres, or other major cultural institutions.
Table 12 summarises the main elements of the Hungarian and Polish cultural policy frameworks as of today.

	HUNGARY	POLAND
MAIN INSTITUTIONS FOR CULTURAL POLICIES	Ministry of Culture and Innovation Petőfi Cultural Agency	Ministry of Culture and National Heritage Local governments
MAIN FINANCIAL SOURCE	Government	Local administrations Public subsidies Sponsorship and patronage
STRATEGY	Close political scrutiny Polarisation of media Centralisation Politicisation of culture Loyalty to the government – Clientelism	Redemption from former government More support from the government More transparency Social protection acts
ISSUES	Lack of transparency Financial insecurities Limits to artistic freedom Tensions with the EU Lack of a legal framework	Lack of financial stability Instability for artists and cultural professional in the job market LGBTQ+ communities' rights
DIRECTION	Autocratic	Democratic

TABLE 12

Source: personal elaboration on previous analysis

2.3 A Comparison of Cultural Policy Practices: PiS and Fidesz

Radó and Mikola (2025) provide a detailed comparative analysis of the cultural policies pursued by the PiS government in Poland and the Fidesz government in Hungary. Building on earlier research in the field, particularly the contributions of Bonet and Zamorano (2021), they identify the core features that characterise the cultural policy agendas of these illiberal regimes.

According to their findings, the two governments share several traits that define their cultural agendas as illiberal. These include right-wing conservatism and nationalism, populist ideologies, and the instrumentalization of culture for political purposes – particularly through loyalty-based rather than merit-based allocation of funding. Both governments have also established strong alliances with the Christian church, with Hungary moving further towards privatisation of institutions. Additional strategies include the use of schools to promote a national ideology, centralisation of cultural governance, and the replacement of independent professionals with politically loyal trustees or elite allies, thereby institutionalising clientelism. Other defining elements of illiberal practices include censorship, political interference in cultural institutions, and revisionist approaches to national history.

Despite these similarities, the two governments differ significantly in the ways these measures have been implemented. In Hungary, Fidesz has pursued a more aggressive strategy, facilitated by its strong parliamentary majority, which allowed it to exert extensive control over local administrations. Institutional safeguards were replaced, opposition voices silenced, and teachers perceived as disloyal subjected to punitive legislation. Corruption within cultural institutions was enabled, and a remarkable example of misalignment with EU standards ended with the expulsion of the Central European University from Hungary. The repression of artistic freedom has been particularly strong in the theatre sector, addressed by the government as “culture war.” At the same time, there were attempts to enhance certain areas of cultural production, such as support for popular music through the provision of rehearsal spaces and studios, though these initiatives have struggled to engage younger audiences.

By contrast, PiS in Poland operated within a more constrained framework, lacking the parliamentary dominance enjoyed by Fidesz. As a result, civil society was more resilient, and education governance remained relatively decentralised. To navigate these limitations, PiS relied heavily on ideological pressure and indirect control of local administrations. This included leveraging public funding for cultural institutions – evidenced by the reduced resources and diminished artist engagement at the National Museum in Warsaw – deploying populist rhetoric that stigmatised minorities, and advancing a mythologised vision of national history to shape contemporary identity. In addition, PiS frequently made use of legislative procedures implemented roughly and quickly to bypass consultation with stakeholders and local authorities, thereby limiting scrutiny and accelerating the implementation of its policies.

In sum, while both governments employ illiberal cultural strategies, the scope and intensity of their control have been shaped by their respective governance structures. Hungary's parliamentary dominance enabled deeper centralisation and more aggressive interventions, whereas Poland's weaker institutional position necessitated more indirect, yet still illiberal, mechanisms of cultural governance.

CHAPTER 3 – LIVED EXPERIENCES

Personal and private testimonies concerning the current conditions faced by artists offer an in-depth understanding of the issues discussed. By examining in detail the influence of specific cultural policies on the artistic field, this chapter makes it possible to capture aspects that broader research on autocratic practices often overlooks: namely, the concrete experience of living and working as an artist in autocratising democracies.

Accordingly, this chapter shifts the analytical perspective from the general to the specific, enabling a deeper understanding of both the role of the artist and the challenges they face within such political contexts. This approach is particularly significant as it fosters awareness, understanding, and empathy towards cultural professionals. Completing the V-Dem analysis, which provides a macro-level assessment, the interviews presented here illustrate the tangible effects of the deterioration of freedom of expression on artists' lives and practices.

For this reason, three art professionals were interviewed: one based in Hungary and two in Poland. The interviews were structured on the preceding analysis of freedom of expression in these countries. Consequently, the core themes addressed include state propaganda practices, freedom of artistic expression and self-censorship, forms of resistance to autocratic regimes, personal perceptions of the current state of the artistic field, and interviewees' reflections on prospects.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the identities of the interviewees are not disclosed in order to ensure their privacy and personal safety. Nevertheless, it is important to outline their professional engagement within their respective national cultural fields. The Hungarian interviewee pursued arts education in Hungary, specialising in performing arts studies and conducting research on propaganda, working in their own home country as well as abroad, while the two Polish interviewees left the country in 2023 after having worked exclusively within academic environments. This information is relevant for understanding the degree of potential interaction with

governmental structures, which is considerably higher for the Hungarian cultural professional and comparatively limited for the Polish interviewees.

Moreover, in order to support the analysis of artists' and cultural professionals' points of view of cultural policy in Hungary and Poland, two research studies are also discussed in the chapter: the Artistic Freedom Monitor – Poland and Hungary profiles – published by the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI). AFI is an organisation that supports artists at risk by facilitating and enabling pro bono immigration and legal assistance for persecuted artists in more than sixties countries worldwide. Its reports on Hungary and Poland provide a detailed assessment of the conditions of the artists under the Fidesz government and the former PiS government, respectively.

Finally, the concluding part of this chapter is dedicated to formulated recommendations addressed to both Central European governments and to European Union institutions, aimed at improving cultural policy practices and safeguarding artistic freedom.

3.1. State-of-the-artist

3.1.1. Hungary

Discourses on freedom of expression

Our interlocutor described the cultural strategy adopted by Fidesz as particularly "clever".

"It's crazy as you are free to do everything you want but they're suffocating you."

According to the interviewee, restrictions are introduced in a subtle and carefully calibrated manner, avoiding overt measures that could attract the attention of European Union institutions. This results in a form of governance that is less visible yet highly manipulative. While, in theory, individuals retain a wide range of freedoms, in practice these freedoms are severely constrained.

“They [the EU] are helpless” our interlocutor explains, “they don’t have any tools to regulate Orban. They think that democracy is working but Hungary is not a democracy. It is rooted in its post-soviet past and it’s from Asia as well, so it has a completely different perspective on things.”

For instance, even though Hungary is an EU Member State, the government repeatedly tests the challenges of permissible action. The banning of the Pride is emblematic of this attitude. At the same time, the authorities insist that artistic freedom remains intact, claiming that individuals are free to engage in any form of expression, including queer theatre. However, in reality, public funding is withheld and additional restrictions are imposed, such as the censorship of queer content aimed at audiences under the age of eighteen.
“We can call it declining of freedom”: although freedom formally exists, artists showcasing queer content are denied access to venues and are subjected to random controls by the police.

Government inspectors are reportedly dispatched to cultural institutions to monitor activities and inform artists and artistic directors of potential violations. This practice is intended to spread fear and uncertainty. As the interviewee noted, the strategy closely resembles that of authoritarian regimes, particularly the Russian model: artistic activity is formally permitted, yet constantly inspected.
An illustrative example was provided: “my show was supposed to start at 10am, and five minutes before the performance the director came to me to tell me that two inspectors came to check whether I was doing queer propaganda for children, and obviously I was not, and we just started laughing because it was like during the communism but this is how it works.”

“Everything changes very quickly, like in the nazi era”: until recently, violations related to queer art for minors resulted in monetary fines; however, new proposals suggest the possibility of arrest, as demonstrated by the case of the activist Géza Buzás-Hábel involved in organising the Pécs Pride. At present, activists across Hungary are mobilising in response to this development.

At the same time, according to the interviewee, freedom of expression is becoming increasingly restricted on a daily basis as the government is "losing its power". In response to economic decline and growing dissatisfaction, the authorities have adopted harsher measures in order to reassure their electorate of their resolve. While propaganda can be effective to a certain extent, the interviewee referred to Umberto Eco's reflections in *Cinque scritti morali*, noting that autocratic systems follow cyclical patterns and eventually collapse due to corruption and social hardship. Rising living costs and declining living standards render such systems unsustainable, a dynamic that the interviewee believes is currently unfolding in Hungary. This, in turn, explains the intensification of restrictive policies. The government is specifically concerned about the role of the arts and artists in its political life.

According to AFI's report, right-wing journalist Árpád Szakács publicly accused several Budapest-based cultural institutions of misusing state funds to promote liberal and left-leaning artistic values that are incompatible with the ideology of the ruling party. He described this practice as the "misusing of public funds to promote liberal indoctrination".

Indeed, artists, the interviewee argued, are inherently positioned in opposition to the government, as artistic practice fosters critical thinking and public engagement. For this reason, the arts are perceived as a threat by autocratic systems. As a result, artists are consistently portrayed as adversaries and treated as potentially dangerous actors.

Discourses on censorship, artistic integrity and the underground scene

As discussed in the previous chapter, AFI's findings confirm a systematic restructuring of governance within Hungarian arts and cultural institutions, with leadership positions occupied by individuals loyal to the current government. This shift has resulted in politically biased funding mechanisms and widespread instability among artists, many of whom have become discouraged from applying for public grants. The report describes this process as a form of "cultural desertification" (page 39), accompanied by the extensive implementation of censorship within academic and artistic environments.

This context has intensified the dilemma between artistic integrity and self-censorship, particularly in the absence of a robust private funding system. As a result, artistic production remains overwhelmingly dependent on state support.

"In Hungary, everything is governmental. You cannot escape the government, given also the communist past."

As witnessed by the interviewee, censorship has become institutionalised, using the adjective "queer" for propaganda. Indeed, advertising queer-related content is restricted, yet no legal definition of "queer" exists. This ambiguity allows authorities to arbitrarily apply the label to a wide range of materials. Books featuring queer themes must be sealed, and, due to the lack of clear criteria, even works such as Harry Potter have been subjected to this treatment.
"I have to censor myself…Thanks to my techniques I can filter myself and I re-direct my content in a way that is accepted. I have to do it otherwise they can kick me out."

AFI further reports that among young artists the dilemma to choose between artistic integrity or economic survival is becoming very common. Interviewees noted the difficulty of advising emerging artists, who often feel compelled either to seek opportunities abroad or to self-finance their work if they wish to remain independent.

The advice offered by our interlocutor was unequivocal: "go abroad". While acknowledging the intense politicisation of the cultural environment, they also suggested that those who choose to remain in Hungary should focus on building communities within academic and informal spaces. As censorship and restrictions increase, artistic expression has increasingly shifted toward underground contexts. According to the interviewee, heightened frustration within artistic communities has contributed to the strengthening of the underground scene.

Discourse on resistance and the underground scene

As our interviewee explains, the Hungarian cultural system traditionally consists of three layers: the official art scene, the independent sector, and the underground scene. At

present, the independent sector – historically the most critical of the government and inclusive of queer artists – has largely disappeared due to funding cuts.
The underground scene now occupies a hybrid position, combining amateur and professional practices, while the official sector remains closely aligned with government interests. As the independent scene declines, underground artistic activity has intensified. However, this form of expression does not provide sustainable employment and primarily serves as escapism for frustration and dissent rather than a sustainable livelihood.

Historically, underground art in Hungary has flourished during periods of repression, including during Soviet domination. A comparable dynamic can be observed today. Techno parties have proliferated in recent years as forms of escapism from an increasingly controlled everyday reality. The interviewee noted a rise in drug use and described these events as temporary refuges from political pressure. “They [the artists] dance themselves to death”. While many of these venues are closing due to financial constraints, new initiatives continue to emerge spontaneously, driven by a desire for visibility and release.

AFI’s report also documents this new attitude: artists seek unconventional spaces to exhibit and perform. One notable example is Hungarofuturism whose manifesto “aims to oppose the notions of an ethnic, biopolitical, and racial essentialism of Hungarianness as promoted by the far-right government of Viktor Orbán” (page 44).
The principles of Hungarofuturism include: free expression, openness, promise of autonomy, no censorship, open-source, international scope.

Although various protest movements have emerged over the years, the interviewee characterised Hungarian society as generally reluctant to engage in public demonstrations: “we are not a country of demonstrations, unfortunately”. Nevertheless, significant mobilisations have occurred, such as the SZFE movement, during which students occupied the SZFE university and surrounding areas to fight for its autonomy and academic freedom. The movement was ultimately stopped by the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, whether a student graduated before or after this even has political implications, as it signals potential involvement in opposition activities.

Discourses on key milestones and the future

One of the most significant recent developments, according to our interlocutor, has been the departure of approximately 20% of Hungarian artists following changes to the freelance tax system two and a half years ago.
"They killed the independent and freelancer fields": under the current framework, sustaining oneself financially as an artist has become nearly impossible. As a result, many artists either emigrate or take on low-paid service jobs, relegating artistic practice to a secondary activity.

"Literally, I had to leave the country because I couldn't pay the taxes."

The tax system has also facilitated increased surveillance of artists. In some cases, theatres reportedly rely on offshore companies to pay performers, as direct employment has become unfeasible. Artists must therefore operate through intermediary companies, creating a legally permissible yet precarious arrangement that further marginalises independent practitioners. According to the interviewee, this system discourages artists from remaining in Hungary, as they are perceived as carriers of oppositional values.

A solution might be on the way.
Péter Magyar has publicly stated that, if elected, he would restore the former tax system. His party, Tisza, has gained political momentum and is viewed by some as a potential source of hope for Hungarian artists. Although Magyar originates from Fidesz and remains right-wing, he is perceived as more liberal and enjoys support from the European Union.

Among artists, there is cautious optimism toward the emerging opposition, tempered by widespread disillusionment and psychological distress. The interviewee noted a rise in alcoholism over recent years.

The interviewee expressed the belief that the current autocratic system is unsustainable and will eventually collapse, as historical precedents suggest. However, uncertainty remains regarding the nature of any future leadership. Hungary's limited democratic

tradition poses a significant challenge, as democratic practices require both institutional and educational foundations.

"The problem is that historically, Hungary doesn't know much about democracy and when we conquered the university it turned out that we had to learn more about democracy. Whatever leader will come, I'm afraid he could be like Orbán, because we need a dictator, a father-figure, we always need someone to rule over us. People's mindset is not able to accept another system."

If the opposition were to win the upcoming April elections, cultural programmes could be reinstated and the artistic sector revitalised. However, the interviewee also warned that a victory by Péter Magyar might provoke resistance from Orbán, potentially resulting in widespread revolutions.

"We're right now in the big downside in Hungary, but it's going to collapse, and when it does, I'm going to be back in Hungary because I love it."

3.1.2. Poland

Discourses on freedom of expression

Following the change in government in 2023, the interviewees reported that they perceived a reduction in governmental pressure on artists. During their time as students, they described a significant degree of freedom in artistic exploration. This relative openness was partly attributed to the fact that they were not financially dependent on their artistic practice as their primary source of income.
At the same time, they emphasised that the level of pressure exerted by authorities varied considerably depending on geographical context. In the capital city, artistic production was perceived as more tightly regulated and scrutinised than in smaller urban centres. As one interviewee noted, students generally enjoyed substantial freedom to experiment, although this was also influenced by individual professors. While some educators were

described as more traditional, the academic environment was not experienced as strongly hierarchical or authoritarian.

In their own city, the interviewees characterised the academy as relatively open and supportive. However, they reported hearing accounts of severe constraints and overt propaganda practices in other regions of Poland. The cultural climate was described as highly localised, with each city possessing its own character. Kraków, for example, was identified as particularly shaped by its historical legacy, resulting in a more traditional and conservative orientation that was reflected in the artistic academy, according to second-hand statements.

On the other hand, the AFI report (2022), which refers to the period under the previous government, presents a more critical picture. Based on interviews with ten arts professionals, the report identifies a shared concern regarding potential financial and legal consequences for artists perceived as unsupportive of the ruling party. One negative consequence of this climate was the increasing difficulty of continuing to live and work in Poland.

The fear of financial insecurity was closely linked to the near absence of a private art market, which rendered many cultural workers heavily reliant on public funding. As a result, access to international funding sources became crucial. Visual artist Marta Frej described this condition as a "constant state of emergency" (page 80). At the same time, international grants were not easily accessible, particularly for theatre practitioners, whose sector remained highly dependent on the Ministry of Culture. Moreover, external funding did not necessarily guarantee full artistic freedom.

Both the AFI report and the interviewees identified the appointment of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage as a key turning point for freedom of expression. The reconstitution of boards of directors across major cultural institutions, including theatres, museums, galleries, and public media, through the appointment of PiS-aligned trustees fostered widespread self-censorship among artists whose work or values diverged from those promoted by the government and the Polish Catholic Church.

A prominent example occurred in 2021 at Zachęta, one of Warsaw's most significant contemporary art galleries, traditionally associated with left-leaning cultural positions. The appointment of a new director triggered protests. Jan Schanowski, a right-wing painter with a preference for realism, curated his first exhibition around this aesthetic, prominently featuring his own works. Other participating artists reportedly had not been informed that their works would be included, and several requested their removal upon discovering the association. Schanowski remained in the position for two years and was replaced following the change in government.

More broadly, state-owned galleries and museums were described as highly dependent on political compliance in order to secure funding, regardless of their location. Decisions regarding programming and financing often required approval from political authorities or state-owned enterprises.

According to AFI's report, PiS also relied on individual actors to monitor and regulate artistic expression in line with party ideology. In this context, private individuals were empowered to initiate legal action against artists by invoking laws aimed at protecting the Catholic Church. One example cited in the report refers to the 2021 case in which the social activist Agnieszka Wojciechowska van Heukelom collaborated with the prosecutor's office by reporting an artwork showing vaginas on the background of religious and national symbols

Additional practices implemented under PiS involved the use of defamation charges, as illustrated by the case of artist and activist Bartosz Staszewski. He placed signs reading "LGBT Free-Zone" at the entrances of municipalities aligned with PiS that had declared themselves free from "LGBT ideology". This action attracted attention at the European level, prompting the European Union to threaten the suspension of funding to regions adopting such declarations. Consequently, several provinces revised their policies.

Another major source of pressure identified by AFI concerned the actions of non-state actors targeting artists. The report lists several groups involved in such activities, including:

- The Rosary Crusade for the Homeland, an ultra-conservative Catholics that protested against a theatrical production involving performers from the pornography industry;
- The Life and Gamily Foundation, led by anti-feminist and homophobic activist Kaja Godek, which attempted to block funding for a gallery supporting LGBTQ+ art;
- The Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture, which collaborates with the prosecutor's office to identify artists and works deemed incompatible with PiS values;
- The All-Polish Youth organisations, promoting antisemitism in universities, they also persecuted the artist Dominika Kulczyńska for depicting the Virgin Mary as a vagina in rainbow stripes

Discourses on rights and propaganda

The interviewees described the broader political climate as deeply frustrating, citing pervasive propaganda campaigns on issues such as abortion. These campaigns, often presented through billboard advertising, were formally private initiatives but were widely believed to be financed primarily by the Catholic Church. Such measures provoked extensive public protests.

Migration was another prominent political issue, particularly in relation to migrants arriving from Belarus and broader tensions along Poland's eastern border. Although the interviewees did not recall explicit propaganda campaigns on this topic, they emphasised the heightened political tension surrounding border control, including the construction of a fence aimed at preventing migrant crossings.

Regarding the so-called LGBTQ+ free zones, the interviewees stressed that these declarations were not formally binding legal instruments. Several municipalities proclaimed themselves free of "LGBT ideology", though these resolutions had little direct practical effect. According to the interviewees, these initiatives were largely symbolic and closely tied to electoral campaigning. LGBTQ+ identities were framed as an ideology rather than a lived condition, a strategy that aligned with the government's appeal to Poland's predominantly Christian population. The influence of the Church and Poland's historical legacy continues to shape public discourse.

The interviewees also recalled a case involving a student who represented the Virgin Mary as a vagina, inspired by its feminine symbolism. The government subsequently sought legal action against her.
Similarly, an artist involved in a rainbow-themed artwork was arrested, triggering widespread demonstrations known as the rainbow protests. In Poland, public protest is generally possible and not excessively dangerous, despite occasional police intervention. The interviewees characterised Polish protest culture as active, though less confrontational than in France and somewhat less visible than in Germany.

Discourses on moving abroad

"[As a queer couple] It would be nice to start building our life somewhere where we can have rights. […] At some point I just refused to pay taxes in places where I don't have rights."

When asked whether they would suggest moving abroad to an emerging artist in Poland as a response the political pressure, the interviewees emphasised the importance for artists of mobility, exchange, and exposure to diverse artistic communities. Such experiences were described as enriching and essential for professional growth. At the same time, they acknowledged that it remains possible to pursue an artistic career in Poland, albeit under challenging conditions. They cited examples of individuals who have succeeded through grants and freelance work, noting that these difficulties are not necessarily unique when compared to other European contexts. On the other hand, due to its history and close-mindedness on LGBTQ+ rights, Poland does not provide a welcoming environment for them.

Living in Poland would, however, be easier in certain respects, particularly due to existing social and support networks that are absent abroad. The interviewees noted that their current situation outside Poland is also marked by uncertainty. In Germany or in the UK, for instance, artistic engagement with politically sensitive topics such as Palestine may result in serious repercussions, including the risk of expulsion.

Discourses on key milestones and the future

A major milestone identified by writer Kuba Szreder (2023) is the systematic takeover of cultural institutions – such as leading museums and contemporary art centres – by politically loyal trustees appointed by the government. Prominent examples include the former mentioned National Gallery of Art Zachęta and the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, as well as the Museum of Art in Łódź. In several cases, appointees lacked professional expertise in the cultural sector or were widely considered unsuitable for their positions.

These interventions prompted strong reactions from the Polish contemporary art community, which viewed them as unacceptable impositions and described them as "a far-right assault on the fundamental principles of democratic state and the rule of law" (Szreder 2023). The government justified this authoritarian turn as part of a broader strategy to exert top-down control over key cultural institutions.

The interviewees observed that resistance to autocratic tendencies remains present in Poland. While individuals may hold pro-Russian or pro-Putin views, any explicit governmental alignment with such positions would likely provoke widespread public outrage. Poland may be indirectly influenced by Russian interests, but there is no overt governmental support for Russia. According to rumours referenced by the interviewees, certain propaganda campaigns, such as those related to abortion, may have received financial backing from the Kremlin.

3.1.3. Summarised Overview: Poland and Hungary

In the Polish case, the impact of cultural policy on artistic freedom appears to be highly contingent upon contextual and geographical factors. A significant turning point was the appointment of Gliński as Minister of Culture and National Heritage, which marked a shift in the governance of cultural institutions. Non-state actors further worsen the pressure exercised on artists, particularly through mechanisms of harassment and legal pressure, often reinforced by Poland's deeply rooted Catholic tradition.

However, more broadly, the challenges faced by artists in Poland reflect systemic issues related to politics and civil rights rather than being confined exclusively to the cultural sector. According to the interviewees, the environment does not appear to be as restrictive or as overtly threatening for artists as in the Hungarian context. On the other hand, it is also important to note that this analysis primarily concerns cultural professionals whose dependence on the Polish government has been so far limited, as they developed professionally only once they moved out of the country.
Although PiS has recently returned to power, there is currently limited empirical evidence regarding the cultural policy orientation of Donald Tusk's government and its potential influence on artistic freedom, while the situation in Hungary remains particularly fragile, with the possibility of significant political change anticipated around April 2026. For the Hungarian case it is important to highlight the inefficacy of EU's measures in responding to Fidesz' strategies and manipulation of domestic dynamics.

3.2 Recommendations

Given the characteristics of the political and cultural contexts examined, both the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and Culture Action Europe (CAE) have articulated a set of recommendations aimed at improving future cultural policy practices across Europe.

These documents have been considered due to the organisations' expertise in analysing potential future scenarios, based on prior interviews with cultural professionals whose experiences largely align with those discussed in the previous section. Remarkably, the Polish case presents some divergences from the experience reported by the interviewees, thereby enabling a broader and finer conceptualisation of the Polish context. Moreover, these recommendations explicitly address the role of the European Union in responding to and mitigating these challenges.

Finally, the analysis concludes with a set of recommendations specifically directed at artists and cultural professionals.

AFI's recommendations for the Hungarian and Polish governments

AFI calls for the cultivation of a dynamic cultural ecosystem that enables access to, and production by, diverse, independent, and critically engaged artists. Governments should develop frameworks that actively promote, respect, and safeguard the rights of artists and cultural organisations. Ensuring coherence between international and regional legal commitments and domestic policy practices is considered essential.

AFI further recommends the introduction of legislative reforms designed to guarantee independent governance within the cultural sector, particularly in cultural institutions and universities. This includes the creation of autonomous hiring bodies for cultural institutions and artistic activities, and the allocation of dedicated funding streams for artistic, academic, and cultural institutions. Additional priorities include strengthening media pluralism and ensuring fair and equitable access to public subsidies for independent cultural actors and institutions.

Recommendations for European Institutions, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations

At the supranational level, European and international institutions are encouraged to intensify monitoring efforts and apply political pressure on Hungary and Poland to ensure compliance with international legal frameworks, notably the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

These institutions should continue issuing public statements and demonstrating political solidarity with Hungarian and Polish artists and cultural producers. This includes sustaining attention within European and other parliamentary arenas through monitoring missions, reports, and resolutions, as well as facilitating platforms for exchange and cooperation among cultural organisations across borders.

Further recommendations include strengthening oversight mechanisms related to the use of EU funds, expanding access to funding opportunities, such as scholarships, fellowships, and exchange programmes, for independent cultural, academic, and artistic organisations, and providing financial support to legal and advocacy groups engaged in monitoring artistic freedom.

Regular monitoring and, where necessary, the activation of legal procedures in response to violations of artistic and cultural rights are also deemed crucial, particularly in relation

to restrictions on foreign funding. The European Council is encouraged to develop an effective system for addressing violations affecting cultural and artistic organisations, with a strong focus on safeguarding the rule of law. Finally, the implementation of these recommendations by national governments should be systematically assessed.

Culture Action Europe (CAE) – Towards the Cultural Compass

In September 2025, Culture Action Europe presented a set of policy recommendations in support of the European Commission's draft for a new European cultural strategy. The discussion paper identifies several shared priorities and emerging trends across the analysed policy briefs.

First, culture is recognised as a foundational component of democracy. Access to, and participation in, cultural life should therefore be strengthened, particularly through reforms of education systems that acknowledge arts and cultural education as a universal right. Cultural freedom should be guaranteed not only for artists but for society as a whole. Culture is framed as essential to democracy because it fosters openness and imagination, thereby enabling societies to navigate the inherent unpredictability of democratic systems.

Second, CAE advocates for the establishment of an Artistic Freedom Observatory and a Cultural Democracy Index to improve analytical tools linking cultural practice and democratic governance. A key proposal involves integrating artistic freedom into rule-of-law assessments. In this regard, the development of an Artistic Freedom Act represents an initial step, while EU funding instruments, such as the proposed AgoraEU programme, should provide emergency support to protect artistic freedom.
The paper also calls for more binding EU measures to enhance policy alignment among Member States, alongside the introduction of a Charter on Working Conditions for cultural professionals, ensuring "Fair Pay, Fair Share, Fair System" (p.13).

Further emphasis is placed on expanding research at the intersection of arts, culture, and innovation. CAE highlights the need to recognise "the arts as a knowledge domain within the European Research Area" (p.15). To this end, structured dialogues on creative

innovation should be promoted through forums involving commissioners and directorates-general responsible for cultural policy. Stronger synergies between AgoraEU and Horizon Europe are encouraged, with the aim of reinforcing culture's role as a driver of innovation and international cooperation.

Finally, CAE stresses the importance of developing a comprehensive EU strategy on international cultural relations. This strategy should address institutional fragmentation within EU structures, enhance inclusivity and accessibility, facilitate visa processes, rebalance power relations in international partnerships, and frame climate change as a cultural crisis. Participation in cultural life should also be assessed through Cultural Footprints, enabling evaluation of societal impact, inclusivity, local engagement, and sustainability. Since cultural participation can stimulate cultural mobility, CAE argues for the establishment of dedicated EU funding specifically targeted at supporting participation in cultural life.

Recommendations for cultural professionals

Building on the interviews conducted with cultural professionals, as well as on reports published by Human Right Foundation and Mimeta, the following section is an attempt to outline some recommendations for artists encountering autocratic dynamics in their home countries.

One of the key findings emerging from the interviews concerns the crucial role played by artist-in-residence programmes in safeguarding artists at risks. In both cases, interviewees emphasise that having been awarded a place at an artistic residency represented a cardinal turning point and vital opportunity to continue expressing their artistic practices and viewpoints freely, away from the structural and political constraints imposed by their home countries.
Alongside these programmes, plenty of foundations and organisations are dedicated to supporting artists at risk by facilitating access to residencies, platforms, and exhibition spaces that respect artistic freedom and fundamental rights.

In this regard, the programme “Art is Protest” of the Human Right Foundation has identified a few organisations that actively support vulnerable artists. Moreover, the foundation additionally works on raising awareness of the global state of artistic freedom through initiatives such as the Oslo Freedom Forum.

Among the organisations supporting artists at risk, they identify:

- Agency of Artist in Exile (French and European networks);
- Artists at Risk, whose network includes 20 AiR-Residencies across 17 countries, among those Finland, Germany, Spain, Tunisia, Ivory Coast;
- Artists at Risk Connection, which provides a safety guide for artists;
- The Artist Protection Fund, which coordinates a network of host institutions in safe countries;
- Artistic FREEdom Initiative, led by immigration and human rights attorneys;
- Martin Roth-Initiative (Germany).

Another central theme emerging from the interviews is resistance.
While interviewees identified Poland as a context characterised by widespread protest, Hungary was described as lacking comparable collective reactions. Nevertheless, all cultural professionals stressed the fundamental importance of awareness and active response. This sentiment is widely shared within the international cultural community. For instance, the European Theatre Convention’s manifesto – Resistance Now Together – commits its members to fostering programmes and opportunities across borders in order to resist to censorship and political interference, while enhancing dialogue and creative exchange through theatre. The network comprises more than 70 European theatres united by shared values of equal rights, democracy, and freedom of expression.

The Thematic Report on Artistic Freedom (Mimeta, 2025) further documents multiple cases of cultural and artistic resistance, illustrating the actual power and capacity of the arts to challenge the political authority. Indeed, artists are described as “architects of resistance” (page 1), and the reported examples of artistic resistance offer relevant insights for artists facing repression.

In Kenya, following the death of a 31-year-old teacher who had publicly criticised the police and died while in custody, widespread Gen Z-led protests emerged. During these protests, "Nairobi became an open-air gallery, with walls transformed into canvases documenting police violence […] Songs like 'Anguka Nayo' became anthems repeated at rallies, shared across social platforms, and performed spontaneously in the streets." Despite ongoing state violence, artistic resistance remains strong in Kenya, where, as the report notes, "when one mural is removed, ten more appear; when one artist is detained, others amplify their work."

In Serbia, protests against government policies persisted throughout 2024 and 2025. Although the country experiences formal censorship, artistic resistance remains highly visible, prompting reactions and implicit threats from governmental authorities. These protests have been organised by both artistic and socio-political actors, including labour unions and civic organisations, enabling the artistic community to benefit from the legal and financial protection of established institutions.

The Georgian case illustrates particularly clearly the perceived threat that artists pose to political authority. State repression has targeted multiple art forms – including journalism, opera, theatre, poetry, comedy, visual arts, and publishing – recognising their role in sustaining democratic resistance. Repressive measures range from intimidation and torture to formal legal prosecution, significantly increasing personal risk for artists. Nevertheless, figures such as Amaglobeli – Georgian journalist sentenced to 2 years of prison for responding to a police officer during a pro-European protest – continued to resist even while imprisoned, eventually receiving the Sakharov Prize as a sign of international recognition and support. Despite this, international attention remains limited, as dozens of artists continue to be detained by the Georgian government. This case exemplifies democratic backsliding practices that suppress cultural infrastructure by silencing artists and preventing the articulation of alternatives to governmental authority. As the report observes, "when poets cannot write, actors cannot perform, musicians cannot play, and journalists cannot report – societies lose the capacity to imagine democratic futures."

In Morocco, protests led by Generation Z in September 2025 demanded reforms in the education and healthcare systems, challenging governmental priorities. The movement, known as 'Gen Z 212', mobilised thousands of young people across multiple cities. A central symbolic figure of the protests was the rapper Hamza Raid, whose music articulated the frustrations and aspirations of Generation Z and was recognised by protesters as their political language.

Drawing on these examples, the report identifies a set of recurring resistance strategies, including:

- the use of ephemeral and anonymous art forms, such as murals, which are more difficult to suppress than identifiable individuals;
- the revival of historical works, through which cultural memory and past resistance counter contemporary repression;
- the integration of digital and analogue practices, highlighting the multiplicity of artistic languages employed in resistance;
- international solidarity, which amplifies silenced voices;
- the transformation of repression into artistic material through documentation.

Finally, the report formulates a series of recommendations for artists, emphasising the importance of building transnational solidarity networks – particularly prior to the outbreak of crises – systematic documentation practices, economic independence from state funding subject to political manipulation, and digital security measures, including the use of artificial intelligence to safeguard identities and communications from surveillance.

These cases want to illustrate the strength of artistic resistance. In spite of and due to autocratic governments, artists and communities try to fight the current broken ideologies, asking for freedom, respect and tolerance. They want to inspire old and new generations of artists to defend their rights in front of repressing circumstances and ask for unity of actions.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that cultural policies play a central role in the contemporary processes of democratic backsliding observed in several European countries. Through the combined use of quantitative data from V-Dem and Freedom House and qualitative evidence drawn from case studies and interviews, the research shows how governments strategically instrumentalise culture to promote illiberal values, marginalise dissent, and reshape public narratives.

The analysis of Hungary and Poland reveals that illiberal cultural policies are not uniform but context-dependent, shaped by national histories, institutional frameworks, and political strategies. Nevertheless, common patterns emerge, including the politicisation of cultural funding, the erosion of artistic autonomy, the use of propaganda, and the gradual normalisation of self-censorship among cultural professionals. By featuring artists' lived experiences, this research contributes to the literature by bridging macro-level democratic analysis with micro-level cultural practice, an approach that remains underexplored in existing scholarship.

Ultimately, this thesis confirms that cultural policies are not neutral instruments but powerful mechanisms through which governments narrate democracy, identity, and belonging. In autocratising democracies, these narratives increasingly diverge from democratic ideals, rendering governments unreliable narrators of cultural life. At the same time, the research highlights the resilience of artists and cultural professionals, whose practices continue to function as spaces of resistance, imagination, and democratic possibility. Thus, it wants to be a call to action, a call to hope, a reminder to stand your ground for your values and rights.

By articulating policy recommendations and emphasising the role of international institutions and solidarity networks, the thesis underscores the urgent need to safeguard freedom of artistic expression as a cornerstone of democracy. In a context where political trajectories remain uncertain, recognising and supporting the cultural field becomes essential not only for the protection of artists, but for the preservation of democratic futures themselves.

"…the only truly reliable narrator is life itself. But life itself is also a completely unreliable narrator because it is constantly misdirecting and misleading us and taking us on this journey where it is literally impossible to predict where it's gonna go next."

Abby – fictional character (2018)

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