

**Joint Master in European
Cultural Governance**

*Art, Identity, and Governance: The
Role of Cultural Investment in a
Polarized European Union*

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I feel proud and grateful to contribute, even in a small way, to the European project by shining a light on a field that often receives too little attention - culture. Writing about such a timely and relevant topic has been both a challenge and a privilege.

Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that I have composed the present thesis autonomously and without use of any other than the cited sources or means. I have indicated parts that were taken out of published or unpublished work correctly and in a verifiable manner through a quotation. I further assure that I have not presented this thesis to any other institute or university for evaluation and that it has not been published before.

Abstract

This thesis explores the role of cultural investment in shaping democratic resilience, identity, and unity within the European Union. While the EU officially upholds cultural pluralism, freedom of expression, and artistic independence, some member states have increasingly used culture to promote nationalist narratives and weaken European cohesion. Through a comparative case study of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (Magyar Művészeti Akadémia, MMA) and the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes, KSB), this thesis reveals contrasting models of cultural governance. The Hungarian Academy of Arts has been instrumentalized by the Orbán government to promote national-conservative ideology, while the German Federal Cultural Foundation supports pluralism and artistic autonomy, despite recent funding cuts.

The analysis combines institutional and legal review, budget comparison (2010–2025), and per capita cultural funding calculations. It is further enriched by an interview with a Slovak artist facing restrictions under a populist government, and a discourse analysis of cultural policy debates in Germany. The findings suggest a paradox: pro-European democracies often neglect cultural policy, while nationalist regimes recognize and exploit its strategic potential. The thesis concludes by arguing that culture must be reimagined as a core pillar of EU governance, essential to upholding democracy, resisting polarization, and fostering a shared European future.

List of Acronyms

AfD: Alternative für Deutschland

BKM: Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (Bundeshaushalt Kultur und Medien)

EU: European Union

ESC: European Solidarity Centre

HUF: Hungarian Forint

TEU: Treaty on European Union

ZKM: Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by rising nationalism, political polarization, and democratic backsliding, the role of culture has gained renewed political urgency within the European Union. Culture is often framed as a soft policy domain, distinct from the more overtly strategic fields of economics, security, or migration. Yet, this thesis argues that cultural policy is not only central to the EU's political identity but also one of its most underutilized tools in defending its foundational values. The cultural sphere is where collective identities are shaped, narratives are contested, and democratic ideals either flourish or erode. In this sense, culture functions as both a mirror and a motor of political change.

The EU's official commitment to values such as pluralism, democracy, and respect for human rights, as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), presumes a cultural infrastructure capable of supporting these principles. However, while right wing regimes such as Hungary have strategically invested in culture to shape exclusionary national identities, pluralistic democracies like Germany and France have paradoxically underinvested in the cultural field. This paradox is at the heart of the present study. It asks: How can contemporary culture and art strengthen European unity, independence, and pluralism amidst rising nationalist narratives?

The danger is not only symbolic. Neglecting culture contributes to social disconnection, political apathy, and the erosion of shared European purpose. Conversely, strategic cultural investment, when grounded in pluralism and openness can foster resilience, civic engagement, and a deeper sense of European belonging. This thesis proposes that culture must be repositioned at the center of the EU's governance strategy, not treated as a peripheral luxury.

This research is situated within the interdisciplinary field of European cultural governance, combining insights from cultural policy studies, political theory, and identity research. Theoretically, it draws on scholars such as Gerard Delanty, who frames European identity as historically constructed and politically contested, and

George Yúdice, who conceptualizes culture as a resource increasingly valued for its social and political utility. Additional perspectives from Claire Bishop, Homi Bhabha, and Ruth Wodak help illuminate how artistic practices and discursive framings influence public understanding of identity and values.

The central paradox, the cultural investment gap between pro and anti EU states is explored through a comparative analysis of Hungary and Germany. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán's leadership, has integrated culture into its nation-building strategy, exemplified by the transformation of the Hungarian Academy of Arts into a state-aligned institution. Germany, by contrast, while rhetorically committed to pluralism and artistic freedom, has implemented severe cultural budget cuts that weaken the independent sector. This juxtaposition reveals two distinct paths: one of strategic cultural instrumentalization, the other of passive neglect.

To capture this complexity, the thesis employs a qualitative, multi-method approach:

1. **Comparative Case Study:** Institutional and policy analysis of The Hungarian Academy of Arts and Germany's Kulturstiftung des Bundes , examining governance structures, legal foundations, and cultural narratives.
2. **Budgetary Analysis:** A comparison of public cultural investment (2010–2025), converted to euros and calculated per capita to assess prioritization trends.
3. **Expert Interview:** A semi-structured interview with a Slovak artist offers personal testimony on the lived consequences of cultural instrumentalization and the symbolic role of the EU.
4. **Discourse Analysis:** A focused study on recent controversies in Germany, including the AfD's attacks on the Bauhaus and cultural budget cuts in Berlin, reveals how culture is politicized even in pro-EU contexts.

The findings are not purely diagnostic. In addition to highlighting risks, the thesis identifies constructive alternatives. EU-supported initiatives like Perform Europe and the

European Pavilion demonstrate how culture can foster civic dialogue, artistic innovation, and a shared European identity. These programs represent models for a more active, participatory, and pluralistic cultural governance.

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis unfolds as follows:

- **Chapter 2: Literature Review** – Maps the theoretical foundations of European identity, cultural governance, and the political functions of contemporary art. It reviews key scholars including Delanty, Triandafyllidou, Bishop, Yúdice, and others, establishing the conceptual lenses through which the empirical analysis is conducted.
- **Chapter 3: Methodology** – Outlines the qualitative multi-method research design, justifies the case study selection, explains the budgetary approach, details the expert interview protocol, and introduces the discourse analysis framework.
- **Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis of Cultural Governance** – Examines the structural and ideological roles of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation, revealing contrasting models of state–culture relations.
- **Chapter 5: Interview-Based Perspective** – Presents insights from a young Slovak artist navigating political constraints in her country, offering a grounded perspective on cultural resistance and European identity.
- **Chapter 6: Discourse Analysis in Germany** – Analyzes political rhetoric and media coverage of the Bauhaus controversy and Berlin’s cultural budget cuts to illustrate how culture is contested even in democratic contexts.

- **Chapter 7: Culture as a Platform for Dialogue and Engagement** – Highlights EU-level programs and cultural institutions that promote civic participation, democratic values, and intercultural understanding.
- **Chapter 8: Conclusion** – Synthesizes the findings, answers the research question, and outlines policy recommendations for strengthening democratic cultural governance in Europe.

This thesis argues that culture doesn't just show political change, it helps create it. To keep the European Union strong, diverse, and unified, it needs to support cultural policies that encourage openness, participation, and shared ideas.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The question of European identity has gained urgency amid rising nationalism, fragmentation, and challenges to EU cohesion. While often perceived as an economic or political union, the European project also relies on shared cultural narratives. Culture, especially in the form of contemporary art, can offer emotional and symbolic grounding for unity, pluralism, and freedom. This review maps the theoretical and empirical literature on European identity, cultural governance, and the role of contemporary art. It lays the foundation for analyzing how culture can counter exclusionary narratives and support the core values of the EU.

2.2 European Identity: Historical and Conceptual Roots

Gerard Delanty (1995), in *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*, presents Europe as a historically constructed and contested idea shaped through processes of inclusion and exclusion. His argument that Europe should be judged by how it treats minorities and fosters collective responsibility forms a critical normative anchor for this thesis. Anna Triandafyllidou, in her chapter in *Migration in the European Union* (2009), examines the complex relationship between supranational identity and national interests, particularly under the pressures of migration and integration. Monica Sassatelli's *Becoming Europeans* (2009) investigates how EU cultural initiatives such as the European Capital of Culture programme promote a performative, experience-based identity rooted in diversity and participation. These scholars demonstrate that European identity is not static but constantly negotiated through symbolic, social, and political processes.

2.3 Culture, Contemporary Art, and Political Narratives

Claire Bishop (2012), in *Artificial Hells*, and Grant Kester (2004), in *Conversation Pieces*, analyze participatory and community-based art as forms of civic engagement and resistance. Their work supports this thesis's claim that contemporary art plays an active political role in shaping inclusive public discourse. George Yúdice (2003), in *The Expediency of Culture*, expands this view by framing culture as a resource whose legitimacy increasingly depends on its social and political utility. Yudhishtir Raj Isar (2015) also critiques the EU's inconsistent support for critical or dissenting art, highlighting the tension between symbolic endorsement of pluralism and the structural limitations of policy implementation. These contributions illustrate how artistic practices can either reinforce or challenge the dominant political narratives of European identity.f

2.4 Culture, Populism, and the Crisis of European Values

Recent scholarship on populism provides essential context for understanding how culture has become a political battleground. Cas Mudde (2007), in *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, and Benjamin Moffitt (2016), in *The Global Rise of Populism*, argue that populism operates as a political style that polarizes society by positioning "the people" against perceived elites and outsiders. This narrative frequently targets the EU's cultural and democratic values. Ruth Wodak and Salomi Boukala (2015), in their article *European Identities and the Revival of Nationalism in the EU*, show how language and discourse are used by nationalist actors to reshape public perceptions of belonging and legitimacy. Homi Bhabha (1994), in *The Location of Culture*, offers a theoretical lens for understanding identity as hybrid and negotiated, rather than fixed. His emphasis on cultural ambivalence and the "third space" helps contextualize the EU's attempts to foster unity without erasing difference.

2.5 Summary

The literature reviewed here underscores the centrality of culture in the formation and contestation of European identity. While EU institutions promote a vision of “unity in diversity,” political forces with authoritarian or exclusionary tendencies increasingly instrumentalize culture to assert narrow definitions of national identity. At the same time, contemporary art and critical cultural practices have the potential to defend democratic values and create space for pluralism. This review provides the conceptual and theoretical basis for the empirical analysis that follows, including case studies of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation, as well as a discourse analysis of the recent Bauhaus controversy in Germany.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Strategy

This thesis adopts a qualitative, multi-method research design to examine how cultural policy and public institutions influence the defense of European values such as pluralism, freedom, and unity in the face of growing nationalist narratives.

The central research question of this thesis is:

How can contemporary culture and art strengthen European unity, independence, and pluralism amidst rising nationalist narratives?

This question emerges from a growing paradox within the European Union: while nationalist governments actively invest in cultural policies to promote exclusionary identity narratives, many western European governments have reduced cultural funding, even while promoting pluralism and integration in principle. As the literature shows, culture is a site of power, not neutrality. It shapes identity, political perception, and social cohesion. Yet in many pluralistic EU-states, it remains an underused tool for defending core democratic values.

This thesis frames culture not merely as heritage or soft power, but as a strategic medium for dialogue, identity formation, and resistance. It builds on the assumption that cultural spaces (especially in the form of contemporary art) can create platforms for pluralism, inclusion, and democratic engagement in an increasingly divided Europe.

To support this investigation, three sub-questions will be explored:

1. How do nationalist governments like Hungary use cultural institutions to promote exclusive identity narratives and consolidate political power?
2. In what ways does cultural underinvestment in pro-European democracies, particularly Germany, weaken democratic resilience and pluralism?
3. How can EU-funded cultural initiatives and civic cultural spaces foster democratic participation, pluralism, and a shared European identity?

The methodological approach draws on comparative case study analysis, budget data evaluation, a qualitative expert interview, and a focused discourse analysis. This combination enables a triangulated perspective on the symbolic, institutional, financial, and political dimensions of cultural governance in Europe.

3.2 Institutional and Budgetary Analysis: The Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation

The empirical core of this thesis consists of a comparative analysis of two national-level cultural institutions: The Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation in Germany. These institutions were selected because they represent fundamentally different approaches to cultural governance in the European Union. One is aligned with EU-sceptic nationalism. The other is grounded in pluralist democratic values.

Each case is analyzed in two parts. First, an institutional profile is developed by examining the founding documents, legal frameworks, mission statements, governance structures, and ideological positioning of the respective institutions. This section also includes examples of promoted or rejected projects and the broader cultural or political

consequences of these decisions, drawing on both official sources and critical perspectives from artists, politicians, and scholars.

Second, a budget analysis is conducted to assess the level of state investment in each institution from 2010 to 2025. The analysis includes total annual budgets, adjustments for inflation, and per capita cultural spending. Graphs are used to visualize funding trends and demonstrate how financial support reflects political priorities over time. Particular attention is given to moments of increased or decreased investment. This helps illustrate the political instrumentalization of culture through state funding.

By separating the legal and structural analysis from the financial dimension, this dual method highlights how symbolic and material governance operate in parallel. It also allows for a sharper comparison between Hungary and Germany. The analysis shows not only how each country defines and manages culture, but also how seriously they invest in it as a strategic domain.

3.3 Expert Interview

To deepen the empirical perspective and introduce a subjective dimension, the research incorporates a semi-structured interview with a Slovak artist and activist who has publicly commented on cultural developments in Central Europe. The interview provides insights into how artists experience institutional priorities, the shrinking space for critical expression, and the symbolic role of European cultural programs. The interviewee reflects on the contrast between restrictive environments and supportive ones, particularly in relation to pluralist funding bodies such as the German Federal Cultural Foundation. The interview is cited anonymously to protect the speaker's identity. Selected quotes are used to complement the institutional and budgetary data, illustrating how abstract governance models impact individuals on the ground.

3.4 Discourse and Media Analysis

A focused discourse analysis is included to illustrate how cultural institutions and values are contested in the public sphere. This aspect of the methodology examines the 2024 to

2025 public controversy surrounding the Bauhaus, in which the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) attacked the Bauhaus legacy as a symbol of “failed modernity” and “inhuman architecture.” The episode serves as a symbolic microcosm of broader ideological struggles over culture in Germany and Europe.

Public statements from AfD representatives, including official Landtag motions and speeches by Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, are analyzed alongside responses from key cultural figures such as Barbara Steiner, Director of Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, and Claudia Roth, then Minister of State for Culture. Translated quotes are used to demonstrate how nationalist actors attempt to frame cultural heritage in exclusionary terms, while pluralistic institutions position it as part of a democratic and inclusive identity. This discourse sample supports the wider case study of the German Federal Cultural Foundation. It illustrates how pluralist institutions operate under political pressure and why their defense is relevant to the EU’s core values.

3.5 Methodological Rationale

Together, the selected methods, comparative case study, budget analysis, expert interview, and discourse analysis, offer a layered and context-sensitive view of cultural governance in the European Union. Each method is chosen to highlight a different dimension. The case study focuses on structure. The budget analysis explores financial commitment. The interview provides lived experience. The discourse analysis examines symbolic conflict. This juxtaposition enhances the validity of the findings and allows the thesis to move beyond descriptive analysis toward a normative argument. Reclaiming and reinvesting in pluralist cultural institutions is essential for safeguarding democratic values in an increasingly polarized Europe.

3.6 Limitations and Challenges

Several limitations apply to this research. First, the empirical focus on two countries and institutions means that broader generalizations across the EU are limited. However, these cases were deliberately selected as illustrative examples of wider trends. Second, access to interviewees was constrained by time, availability, and the sensitivity of the topic. This resulted in a single expert interview. Third, as with all qualitative research, interpretation involves a degree of subjectivity. This is mitigated through combination across institutional data, public discourse, and individual perspectives. Finally, while cultural values are inherently difficult to quantify, the integration of budgetary evidence provides a measurable entry point into political priorities.

4. Comparative Analysis of Cultural Governance Models in Hungary and Germany

As the European Union faces rising ideological polarization and political fragmentation, cultural institutions have become strategic arenas where national narratives, values, and political agendas are negotiated and contested. In this context, the role of publicly funded cultural bodies becomes particularly significant, not only as vehicles for artistic support but also as tools of symbolic governance. This chapter undertakes a comparative case study of two key institutions: the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation. These cases illustrate contrasting models, an authoritarian, centralized structure used to promote exclusionary national identity in Hungary, and a decentralized, pluralistic framework fostering critical engagement and artistic autonomy in Germany.

Section 4.1 examines the transformation of the Hungarian Academy of Arts into a state-aligned institution with strong political ties and a budget of approximately 10 billion HUF (\approx €25 million) per year, making it the best-funded cultural body in Hungary. Section 4.2 analyzes the German Federal Cultural Foundation, which operates with an annual federal budget of around €38–40 million, committed to supporting diverse, innovative, and socially engaged cultural production. Section 4.3 offers a direct institutional comparison, while Section 4.4 provides a budgetary analysis to quantify disparities in public investment and strategic orientation. Taken together, these analyses demonstrate how cultural governance models can either bolster or erode the democratic and pluralistic ideals the EU seeks to protect.

4.1 The Hungarian Academy of Arts: Cultural Control and National Identity

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping collective identity. In Hungary, the government under Viktor Orbán has increasingly used cultural policy to advance a nationalist vision, prioritizing tradition, religion, and historical heritage over pluralism and diversity. The Hungarian Academy of Arts, granted public-law status in 2011, stands at the heart of this strategy. This subchapter outlines the legal mandates, institutional role, and ideological orientation of the Academy, and shows how it has come to dominate Hungary's cultural landscape through targeted support and exclusion.

Legal Mandates and Role

The Hungarian Academy of Arts was institutionalized as a public body through Act CIX of 2011. According to its founding law, it is tasked with preserving national culture and heritage, supporting artistic creation, and honoring Hungary's outstanding artists. The law explicitly frames these duties in national terms, stating that the Academy shall "protect and promote cultural values, preserve artistic and historical traditions, strengthen the social conditions for high-quality artistic creation, protect the freedom of creative work, and personally honor outstanding representatives of Hungarian art" (Hungarian Parliament 2011, preamble, author's translation). Its formal powers include awarding grants, managing cultural institutions, and cooperating with national public media (§4).

This legal structure gives it a state-like authority over Hungary's artistic field. Unlike independent cultural foundations, it is embedded in Hungary's constitutional order and exercises wide-reaching influence over national cultural policy.

Institutional Impact: Funded and Excluded Voices

The formal authority of the The Hungarian Academy of Arts has translated into significant cultural influence since its elevation to a public body in 2011. Its Artistic Fellowship Program provides monthly stipends to approximately 100 artists each year, primarily supporting projects that reflect traditionalist themes, such as national identity, religious symbolism, and folk heritage (Építészfórum 2024). In architectural competitions, it similarly favors historicist and heritage-based designs, contributing to a cultural landscape that privileges conservative aesthetics (Építészfórum 2024).

A pivotal moment in its consolidation of institutional control occurred in 2013, when it assumed management of the Múcsarnok (Kunsthalle), Hungary’s leading contemporary art venue. This takeover prompted several curators and directors to resign in protest of the perceived ideological encroachment. Since then, the venue’s programming has noticeably shifted away from progressive and experimental exhibitions, reflecting the broader institutional preference for conformist narratives (Artistic Freedom Initiative 2022, 26–27).

Civil society reports highlight how the Hungarian Academy of Arts’s dominance contributes to a climate of exclusion for artists engaged in critical or pluralistic practices. The Artistic Freedom Initiative documents that “Hungarian artists that oppose the government find it increasingly difficult—and some speculate even futile—to earn state support without yielding to governmental demands and thus compromising their artistic or personal integrity” (Artistic Freedom Initiative 2022, 27). The report also notes that the academy plays a decisive role in state grant committees, effectively shaping national cultural policy to reflect its ideological orientation. This concentration of influence leads to the systematic marginalization of dissenting voices and fosters a culture of self-censorship, curtailing the diversity and autonomy of Hungary’s public cultural sphere (Artistic Freedom Initiative 2022, 27).

Conclusion

Through its legal authority, funding power, and ideological leadership, the Hungarian Academy of Arts has become a central instrument in Hungary's national identity construction. It supports artists and institutions that reinforce state-sanctioned narratives while excluding those who challenge them. In doing so, it has restructured Hungary's cultural field toward a more homogeneous and controlled space—one increasingly out of step with the EU's commitment to pluralism, artistic freedom, and democratic values.

4.2 The Kulturstiftung des Bundes: Democratic Cultural Governance

Introduction

The German Federal Cultural Foundation represents a markedly different model of cultural governance compared to Hungary's academy of arts. Established on 21 March 2002 at the initiative of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, it was designed to promote artistic innovation and international cooperation, while maintaining independence from direct political control despite being publicly funded (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2022; Creative City Berlin 2023). Financed by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the German Federal Cultural Foundation received approximately €37.8 million in 2024 to support cultural projects that reflect democratic values such as pluralism, diversity, and freedom of expression (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2024). This section analyzes the legal foundations, institutional impact, and cultural narratives advanced by the German

Federal Cultural Foundation, emphasizing how the foundation reflects and reinforces the European Union's values within Germany's federal governance framework.

Legal Mandates and Structural Autonomy

The German Federal Cultural Foundation was established on March 21, 2002, as a legally independent foundation under German civil law (*rechtsfähige Stiftung des bürgerlichen Rechts*) by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2022). Under its charter (§ 2), the German Federal Cultural Foundations mission is to promote art and culture within the federal government's competence, with special emphasis on innovative projects with an international orientation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2022).

In contrast to the Hungarian model, the German Federal Cultural Foundation does not fund cultural institutions directly, but operates entirely on project-based grants awarded through transparent, competitive processes. Funding decisions follow a tiered structure: the Executive Board approves projects requesting between €50,000 and €250,000, based on recommendations from independent expert juries. Grants over €250,000 are decided by the Board of Trustees after jury review (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2017).

The foundation's governance is structured to ensure balanced, non-partisan decision-making. It is overseen by a Board of Trustees (Stiftungsrat), an Executive Board (Vorstand), and an Advisory Committee (Beirat). The juries are composed of experts across artistic disciplines, conducting their evaluations in closed sessions (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2017).

Institutional Impact and Artistic Consequences

the German Federal Cultural Foundation plays a pivotal role in Germany's cultural policy landscape by funding projects that address pressing societal challenges and uphold democratic values. Since its founding in 2002, the German Federal Cultural Foundation has supported over 4,000 cultural initiatives across Germany and Europe

(Kulturstiftung des Bundes n.d.). Among them is *ankommen – auskommen*, a collaboration with Caritas and the Hellweg-Museum Unna that explored themes of migration and urban diversity through participatory art. Another notable initiative, *Examples to Follow!*, is a traveling exhibition showcasing works at the intersection of artistic experimentation and environmental sustainability (Kulturstiftung des Bundes n.d.).

Despite this pluralistic vision, structural limitations exist. The German Federal Cultural Foundation's annual budget is approximately €37.8 million, entirely funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2024; Tagesspiegel 2023). Its funding model requires a minimum project budget of €50,000, and applicants must secure at least 20% co-financing, a condition that can pose challenges for smaller or grassroots organizations (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2024). Nevertheless, the selection process relies on independent, expert juries, and funding decisions are guided by criteria of innovation, relevance, and public engagement, rather than ideological alignment.

Cultural Narratives and EU Value Alignment

The German Federal Cultural Foundation embraces democratic identity-building through pluralistic cultural narratives. Rather than promoting a singular national identity, it funds projects that foster dialogue, interdisciplinarity, and engagement with urgent societal issues, reflecting the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (European Union 2012).

One flagship initiative, the 360° – Fund for New City Cultures, launched in 2018, has supported 39 cultural institutions, including museums, libraries, orchestras, and theaters, with over €13.9 million in funding. The program helps these institutions become more inclusive and better reflect the diversity of their urban populations by engaging with immigrant communities and integrating intercultural perspectives (Natur und Mensch 2023).

Similarly, the pik – Programme for Inclusive Artistic Practice, launched in 2022, provides €3.9 million over four years to seven partnerships between cultural institutions and disability advocacy organizations. It aims to improve accessibility, promote inclusive leadership, and support the participation of artists with disabilities in the public cultural sphere (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2024).

Internally, the German Federal Cultural Foundation relies on independent expert juries and a transparent decision-making structure to evaluate project proposals. This governance model helps ensure that funding is based on artistic merit, social relevance, and innovation - rather than political ideology. In contrast to ideologically aligned institutions like the Hungarian Academy of Arts, the German Federal Cultural Foundation exemplifies a participatory and open model of cultural governance.

Conclusion

The Kulturstiftung des Bundes exemplifies democratic cultural governance rooted in transparency, pluralism, and artistic merit. Through its structurally independent design and inclusive funding strategies, it offers an institutional model that aligns closely with the EU's core values. While resource constraints and access thresholds remain challenges, the German Federal Cultural Foundation's impact demonstrates that arm's-length cultural governance can support both artistic excellence and democratic resilience.

4.3 Comparative Analysis: The Hungarian Academy of Arts vs. The German Federal Cultural Foundation

This section offers a structured comparison between the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation. While both institutions play prominent roles in their respective countries' cultural governance, they embody sharply contrasting models. This analysis focuses on five dimensions: governance structure and political alignment; funding strategy and cultural investment; artistic freedom and inclusion;

cultural narratives and identity-building; and alignment with European Union (EU) values.

Governance Structure and Political Alignment

The Hungarian Academy of Arts operates as a public institution embedded in Hungary's constitutional framework, having gained public-law status through Act CIX of 2011 and later constitutional recognition in the 2012 Fundamental Law. This status grants it substantial authority and influence over national cultural policy. Its leadership is composed of self-selecting members, many of whom align with the government's nationalist ideology. The Academy has secured representation on major cultural boards and funding juries, effectively integrating it into the state's apparatus of cultural governance.

By contrast, the German Federal Cultural Foundation is a civil-law foundation established in 2002 by the German federal government. It is governed by an independent Board of Trustees and advised by expert juries. This arms-length governance model ensures pluralism, transparency, and protection from direct political interference. The foundation's strategic guidelines are shaped through consensus among stakeholders from federal, state, municipal, and civil society sectors, reflecting Germany's federal and democratic structure.

Funding Strategy and Cultural Investment

The Hungarian Academy of Arts receives substantial and steadily increasing state funding. From €8 million in 2012, its budget rose to over €24 million by 2019, enabling it to fund ideologically aligned artists and projects. Its financial structure includes life-long stipends for members, management of major cultural venues, and a dominant role in grant allocation. This concentration of resources has been used to promote a cohesive nationalist cultural narrative and marginalize dissenting voices.

In contrast, the German Federal Cultural Foundation operates with an annual budget of around €37.8 million (as of 2024), allocated through competitive, jury-reviewed processes. Its funding supports time-limited, project-based initiatives that encourage

artistic innovation, social inclusion, and international collaboration. The foundation's funding model avoids creating permanent dependencies and instead seeks to stimulate a diverse cultural ecosystem through open calls and strategic programs.

Artistic Freedom and Inclusion

Artistic freedom under the Hungarian Academy of Arts is constrained by ideological gatekeeping. The institution supports artists and projects that reflect traditional, national, and religious values, while marginalizing those perceived as critical, liberal, or experimental. Public statements by its leadership have openly dismissed pluralism, and artists who do not conform to the dominant narrative often struggle to secure funding or visibility.

Conversely, the German Federal Cultural Foundation actively promotes artistic freedom and inclusion. Funding decisions are based on merit, innovation, and relevance rather than ideology. The foundation runs targeted programs to enhance access for underrepresented groups, such as the "360° Fund for New City Cultures" and the "pik" program for inclusive artistic practice. This inclusive approach ensures that cultural participation is widely accessible, and that diverse voices are represented in the public sphere.

Cultural Narratives and Identity-Building

The Hungarian Academy of Arts plays a central role in constructing a homogenized national identity rooted in heritage, religion, and traditionalism. Its exhibitions, fellowships, and competitions reinforce a narrow vision of Hungarian culture aligned with government ideology. This approach supports a broader political project of cultural hegemony and national redefinition.

The German Federal Cultural Foundation, in contrast, fosters narratives of democratic engagement, global responsibility, and cultural plurality. It funds projects that explore migration, climate change, and digital transformation, positioning culture as a medium

for critical reflection rather than nation-building. The foundation's emphasis on dialogue, experimentation, and hybridity underscores its commitment to a pluralistic cultural identity that evolves through participation and exchange.

Alignment with European Union Values

The Hungarian Academy of Arts structure and practices stand in tension with the EU's foundational values, particularly freedom of expression, equality, and pluralism. Reports by organizations such as the Artistic Freedom Initiative and the European Alliance of Academies have highlighted concerns over institutional capture and censorship in Hungary's cultural sector. The Hungarian Academy of Arts dominance and ideological exclusivity undermine the EU's efforts to promote cultural diversity and democratic engagement.

The German Federal Cultural Foundation aligns closely with EU values. Its governance and funding practices reflect transparency, inclusivity, and respect for human rights. The foundation supports cross-border projects, intercultural dialogue, and socially engaged art, all of which resonate with the EU's vision of "unity in diversity." It demonstrates how national cultural institutions can contribute to democratic resilience and European cohesion.

Concluding Reflection

The Hungarian Academy of Arts and the Kulturstiftung des Bundes represent two opposing paradigms of cultural governance. The Hungarian Academy of Arts exemplifies centralized, ideologically driven control, using culture to reinforce a narrow nationalist identity. The German Federal Cultural Foundation, by contrast, illustrates a decentralized, democratic model that upholds artistic freedom, pluralism, and social inclusion. These divergent approaches highlight broader political tensions within the EU and underscore the role of cultural institutions in shaping democratic futures. The contrast between the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the German Federal Cultural Foundation serves as a compelling illustration of the stakes involved in cultural policy:

whether it is wielded as a tool of control or nurtured as a space for dialogue and diversity.

4.4 Budget Analysis and Funding Trends

This section analyzes the long-term funding patterns of the Hungarian Academy of Arts in Hungary and the German Federal Cultural Foundation in Germany between 2010 and 2025. By comparing their annual public funding on a per capita basis and converting all figures to euros, the analysis offers a clear, quantified reflection of each state's prioritization of cultural investment within their broader governance models.

Methodology and Data Sources

The funding data presented in this chapter is derived directly from official national sources. For Hungary, figures were drawn from the central budget laws published annually in the *Magyar Közlöny*, specifically from the annexes outlining appropriations to The Hungarian Academy of Arts (e.g., 2011. évi CLXXXVIII. törvény, 1. melléklet; 2024. évi XC. törvény, 1. melléklet). These sources record the precise yearly allocations to the Academy from 2012 onwards, since the institution only gained public-law status at the end of 2011 (Annual Budget Allocations to the Hungarian Academy of Arts 2010–2025).

For Germany, annual budget figures for the German Federal Cultural Foundation were retrieved from the Federal Government's *Bundshaushalt* (Budget Plans), specifically from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media's Einzelplan (budget chapter) where institutional support for the German Federal Cultural Foundation is listed (Jahresbudgets der Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2010–2025). These numbers are based on official entries and have been cross-verified using the German Federal Cultural Foundation publicly accessible annual reports.

To enable a meaningful comparison, the original Hungarian Forint (HUF) figures were converted to euros using the average exchange rate per year. Both countries' annual

allocations were then divided by their national population for the corresponding year, based on Eurostat figures, to determine per capita cultural funding.

Key Findings: Comparative Per Capita Investment

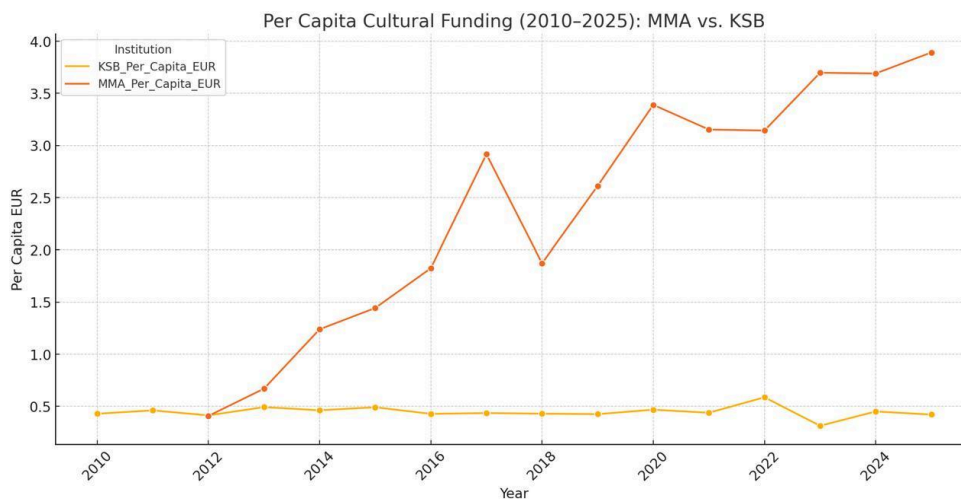


Figure 1: Annual Per Capita Cultural Funding in Euros (The Hungarian Academy of Arts vs. The German Federal Cultural Foundation, 2010–2025)

As visualized in the graph provided in this section, Hungary consistently allocates significantly more per capita funding to The Hungarian Academy of Arts than Germany does to the German Federal Cultural Foundation. This disparity is not only consistent over the observed period but grows more pronounced in recent years. By 2024, the Academy receives more than four times the per capita funding of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, despite Germany’s broader economic capacity and population size.

This financial imbalance reflects deeper structural and strategic divergences. The Hungarian Academy of Arts benefits from privileged political status and generous state support as part of a deliberate cultural strategy aligned with the government’s national identity agenda. In contrast, the German Federal Cultural Foundation’s relatively

modest and often fluctuating funding indicates a more constrained and reactive approach to cultural investment. Notably, German cultural policy remains fragmented across federal, state, and municipal levels, and institutions like the German Federal Cultural Foundation do not hold the same symbolic or political centrality as the the Hungarian Academy of Arts does in Hungary.

Implications and Interpretation

The budget analysis underscores the central paradox in European cultural governance: countries that strongly identify with the European project, such as Germany, may underinvest in national cultural institutions that could serve as key instruments for fostering democratic pluralism and civic engagement. Conversely, more EU-sceptic states like Hungary may strategically use generous cultural funding to centralize narratives and consolidate political influence.

This discrepancy not only highlights the contrasting policy priorities of each state but also raises broader concerns for European cohesion. When pro-European democracies like Germany fail to prioritize culture institutionally and financially, they risk ceding cultural influence to nationalist narratives that are better resourced and more coherently promoted.

The analysis also aligns with the comparative institutional reflections presented in Chapter 4.3. The Hungarian Academy of Arts privileged status is not only visible in its foundational law and mission but is materially reinforced through sustained, elevated funding. Meanwhile, the German Federal Cultural Foundation, despite its alignment with EU values and commitment to cultural diversity, operates under financial constraints that limit its long-term impact.

Conclusion

The comparative budget data from 2010 to 2025 clearly illustrates that The Hungarian Academy of Arts receives disproportionately high cultural funding per capita compared to the German Federal Cultural Foundation. This finding supports the broader thesis argument that cultural investment strategies are deeply tied to governance models and

political agendas. Where nationalist narratives are institutionally reinforced through culture, as in Hungary, generous state support is central. In contrast, where pluralism and EU values dominate rhetorical agendas but lack institutional follow-through, as in Germany, cultural underinvestment presents a critical vulnerability.

5. Interview - Cultural Resistance and European Belonging — A Slovak Artist’s Perspective

Introduction

This chapter presents the lived experience of a young Slovak artist who has become an active participant in both the cultural and political landscape of her country. Through a semi-structured interview, conducted as part of this research, she reflects on her dual role as an artist and citizen, navigating growing censorship, media manipulation, and nationalist cultural rhetoric. Her narrative provides critical insight into how contemporary art serves as a site of personal and political expression, and how the European project continues to represent a source of hope, solidarity, and democratic possibility. Her perspective not only illustrates the risks faced by artists in oppressive environments, but also reaffirms the role of culture as a democratic force grounded in freedom, identity, and collective resistance.

The protests referenced throughout the interview primarily concern recent demonstrations in Bratislava organized in response to perceived threats to media freedom, judicial independence, and rising authoritarian tendencies in Slovak politics. These protests, often led by civic movements and supported by cultural figures, reflect growing public dissatisfaction with government efforts to control public discourse and restrict dissent. The interviewee participated in these demonstrations both as a concerned citizen and as part of her artistic engagement, documenting events through visual media and collaborating with independent publications committed to democratic values.

Interview

“I'd like to begin with a brief question about your personal background and your involvement in the protests. Could you tell me a bit about your artistic background and how you became involved in the protests in Bratislava?”

So, my personal background is that I'm a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, studying in the intermedia department. At first, I started going to the protests simply as a citizen — as someone living in Slovakia who cares about what's happening here.

At some of the protests, I participated as a volunteer. Later, I got involved with this magazine — initially by coincidence, because they needed a photographer. A friend recommended me. I already knew the magazine before, as I was a fan and a regular reader. I liked what they wrote about; their content aligned with my political views. When they said they were looking for someone to make videos for their social media, I was really eager to help.

That's how I ended up documenting the protests. Over time, it began to feel more and more necessary, especially as changes started happening in Slovak media. The government is increasingly trying to control the media. We have one state-owned television channel and two private ones, but it seems like the government is trying to control even the private ones by various means. The protests were being covered — but not to the extent I felt they should be. So it sometimes felt really important for me to go there and make those videos, because otherwise nobody was doing it.

Thank you. And now a quick question about

art and political engagement. Do you believe that contemporary art has a responsibility to engage with political and social issues?

I think that's a difficult question. I don't believe that art necessarily has a responsibility to address political issues. People can create art about many different things. For some, it comes more naturally to engage with political topics, and for others, it doesn't.

I don't think it's a responsibility — but in my own practice, I often find that these themes appear in the final result, even if it wasn't planned. Because, in a way, everything that's personal is also political. So even if you don't intentionally aim to address political issues, they often end up being part of the work.

But I don't know — I don't really like to talk about what the responsibility of art is, because it's a complicated topic.

It was a bit of a provocative question. And I agree with you. Do you have an example of your own artistic practice, how do you personally deal with that? Or is there an example where you realised one of your works turned out to be political ?

Yeah, I mean, it's not directly related to Slovak politics or anything like that, but for example, right now I was working on a project about power and power structures. For me, it's a feminist project — I was making a throne and some swords, and it was my way of fighting the patriarchy.

In a way, it was about owning my own strength, but also kind of making fun of these strong men in the world who feel the need to show their power by accumulating wealth, weapons, and proving their superiority. So I tried to do something similar with myself — but as a kind of joke. I think that's my way of combining the political with the personal, and mixing everything together.

Okay, now I'd like to ask a question that's more about Europe. I hope it's not too political, but — do you feel, here in Slovakia, that you're part of a larger European cultural identity? Or do you see that as something separate? What's your personal relationship to Europe and the EU — especially in light of recent issues like media censorship and similar developments?

Are you asking about me personally, or people in general? Personally, I definitely feel like I'm part of a European identity. Maybe I even feel more European than Slovak, in a way. It's really concerning for me to see our prime minister admiring Russia — going to Russia, shaking hands with Vladimir Putin, and so on

But I think that's actually what still gives me some hope — that we're part of the European Union. I hope that if things get really bad, there will still be some kind of external pressure or intervention from the EU. That gives me hope.

It also gives me a sense of security knowing that, if things get too bad, I could move to another European country quite easily. That's maybe why I did my Erasmus — first in Prague and then in Vienna — because I'm trying to find a way to create a future elsewhere, just in case.

For now, I still prefer to stay in Slovakia, because I feel like we still have democracy — even if it's a flawed one. At least we still have democratic elections... or I hope the next ones will still be democratic. I feel like there's still something worth fighting for.

But if I ever feel like we've truly lost that — then yes, I would consider moving to another European country. And I'm grateful that I even have that option.

What do you think about cross-border collaboration in Europe? Do you see it as an opportunity — a chance for European countries to stick together and support each other through shared projects? Have you seen any examples of such collaborations? Or projects that you think help push back against negative developments?

I think it's really important. I'm not sure I can think of a great example right now, but I do believe it's essential that we stand together on these issues. What gives me hope is seeing people in other countries going through something similar — like Poland or Hungary. I think Poland is doing much better now, so that also gives me hope. It shows that good elections can really change things.

I also really appreciate support from other countries. Friends of mine from abroad often tell me I should move, and that kind of support — and collaboration — feels meaningful. It's helpful to know that people care and that there's some kind of solidarity out there.

At the same time, though, I feel like many countries in Europe are dealing with similar problems — maybe in different ways, but still. And honestly, I'm not even sure what country would feel like a “safe” option right now. Sometimes it just feels like it's kind of bad everywhere.

From your perspective, how is culture being used or instrumentalized by nationalist governments?

I think culture is being used quite a lot by nationalist governments. Our Minister of Culture, for example, is always talking about supporting “traditional culture” and “Slovak values.” But I feel like that's just twisted to support their messed-up views and their efforts to — I don't know — control people, or at least distract from what they're really doing.

Honestly, I don't even think it's just about power. I feel like they mostly care about stealing as much money as they can, and all this cultural talk is just a cover for that.

They constantly talk about traditional music, traditional art, and supporting anything “traditional,” but at the same time, with all the changes they’ve made, they’ve undermined the system so badly that even traditional culture is suffering. So I think it’s just a lie. And also — what even counts as “traditional”?

Now I’d like to ask about the EU and artistic freedom. Do you feel supported — or limited — by EU-level cultural programs like Creative Europe, if you’ve ever applied or considered applying? Do you think these kinds of programs offer real support, or can they also come with certain limitations? And what do you think the EU could do better to support artists who are working in politically sensitive contexts?

I mean, I definitely feel supported. I’ve never applied myself — or at least I don’t remember applying — so I can’t really speak about that in detail. But I do feel like I’ve received a lot of great opportunities through the EU.

Both of my Erasmus internships were supported by the European Union, so I really feel like they’re already doing quite a lot. And I have friends who have done internships or — what’s it called — residencies that were also supported by the EU.

I mean, I guess there’s always room to do more, but I’m honestly really grateful for what we have now. So yeah, I think the European Union is doing quite a good job.

What advice would you give to young or emerging artists who want to engage politically through their art? And more broadly — what would you say to people who are considering becoming artists but are faced with a government that makes it really difficult, especially when funding or support for independent art is being cut or blocked?

I’m not sure if I’m the right person to be giving advice to anyone, but maybe I’d say: do something you really believe in — that way, you won’t regret it, even if things go badly.

I feel like what keeps people in Slovakia going — those of us still working in culture, in universities, or in media that’s being censored — is that we truly love what we do. We believe in it. That’s what gives us the strength to keep fighting, because it’s something that really matters to us.

So I think that's the only advice I can give: if you really believe in it, then you should do it. But if you're doing it just to become famous or to make a lot of money, then it's probably not a good idea.

Conclusion

This interview demonstrates how the personal experience of one emerging artist can shed light on broader European questions of identity, resistance, and cultural governance. Her reflections echo many of the themes explored in this thesis: the increasing politicization of culture, the dangers of nationalist instrumentalization, and the continued importance of EU support for democratic cultural actors. Most notably, her sense of European belonging, rooted in both hope and pragmatism, illustrates how the European project can still serve as a vital source of resilience in the face of internal democratic erosion.

Chapter 6. Cultural Governance in Germany — Between Neglect and Resistance

6.1. Discourse Analysis: The 2024–2025 Bauhaus Controversy in Germany

The 2024–2025 controversy surrounding the Bauhaus in Germany exemplifies escalating tensions between far-right political actors and cultural institutions. Triggered by a motion from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the Saxony-Anhalt Landtag in October 2024, the debate centered on the Bauhaus, a UNESCO World Heritage site known for its modernist architecture and democratic legacy. The AfD criticized the Bauhaus as a symbol of ideological excess and cultural homogenization, sparking widespread condemnation for rhetoric reminiscent of fascist aesthetics (Escritt 2024). Though rooted in regional politics, the episode drew national attention, engaging institutions like the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

The AfD portrayed the Bauhaus as a threat to traditional German identity. In their Landtag motion, the party called for a “kritische Auseinandersetzung” (critical examination) to prevent “one-sided glorification,” labeling the Bauhaus an “Irrweg der Moderne” (wrong path of modernity) responsible for “menschenfeindliche Architektur” (inhuman architecture) and “Bausünden” (building sins) (Escritt 2024). Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, the AfD’s cultural spokesperson, claimed during debate that the Bauhaus “hat das menschliche Maß verloren” (has lost the human scale) and “hat das menschliche Bedürfnis nach Behaglichkeit nach allen Regeln der Kunst vergewaltigt” (has violated the human need for comfort according to all the rules of art) (Hoyer 2024). Tillschneider denied Nazi parallels but used the term “Globalisten” (globalists) to frame the Bauhaus as a project of cultural displacement (Fuchs 2024).

Defenders of the Bauhaus emphasized its pluralistic and democratic legacy. Claudia Roth, Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media, called the AfD's rhetoric "in höchstem Maße alarmierend und absolut inakzeptabel" (highly alarming and absolutely unacceptable), warning that the party was using "erschreckend ähnlichen Argumenten und Formulierungen wie einst die NSDAP" (shockingly similar arguments and formulations to those once used by the NSDAP) (The Times 2024). Roth also praised the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau for its "hervorragende Arbeit" (excellent work) and warned that "ein solches Vorgehen gegen die Freiheit von Kulturinstitutionen... ist kein Einzelfall, sondern Programm bei der AfD" (such actions against the freedom of cultural institutions are not isolated incidents, but part of the AfD's program) (Fuchs 2024).

Barbara Steiner, director of the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, condemned the motion as "pauschal und politisches Kalkül" (sweeping and political calculation), stating, "Wer das Bauhaus angreift, erhält eine große Sichtbarkeit – an einem ernsthaften Diskurswillen glaube ich nicht" (those who attack the Bauhaus gain visibility—I don't believe in a serious desire for discourse) (The Times 2024). She further described the AfD's vision as "völkisch" (ethno-nationalist), warning of a return to cultural "purification" narratives (El País 2024).

These discourses demonstrate how the AfD weaponizes culture to promote nationalist agendas, presenting modernism as incompatible with German values. Tillschneider's language, invoking terms like "vergewaltigt" and "Globalisten," draws from far-right rhetorical traditions (Fuchs 2024), effectively shifting public debate toward identity-based polarization.

Meanwhile, cultural institutions such as Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau and national agencies responded by reaffirming pluralist democratic values. Ahead of the Bauhaus centenary in 2025, the Stiftung has announced inclusive programming to highlight its modernist heritage and commitment to civic engagement (Fuchs 2024; Haaretz 2025). Roth and the Kulturstiftung des Bundes emphasized that state cultural policy must remain autonomous and uncoerced. Yet the controversy cautions that even reactive defense of

cultural values may risk amplifying the very extremist discourse it seeks to resist. Ultimately, the episode underscores the vital role of culture in safeguarding European pluralism and calls for proactive cultural governance strategies to counter nationalist encroachment

Conclusion

The Bauhaus controversy reveals how cultural heritage can be turned into a political tool, and why this dynamic must be taken seriously not only in Eastern Europe but also in countries like Germany. Although Hungary has illustrated how culture can be brought under ideological control through state-aligned institutions, this case shows that similar tendencies already exist within German political discourse. The statements made by AfD politicians do not represent isolated provocations but are part of a broader attempt to reshape public narratives around national identity and cultural legitimacy.

By attacking the Bauhaus, the AfD not only rejected a cornerstone of modern German artistic achievement but also missed a chance to reframe it as a source of national pride. Rather than acknowledging the Bauhaus as an example of German creativity, international relevance, and visionary thinking, they dismissed it as dehumanizing and ideologically foreign. This choice speaks volumes about the AfD's cultural agenda. Their framing of the Bauhaus as "globalist" and in conflict with the so-called German spirit signals a desire to define culture through exclusion rather than openness.

If the AfD were to gain significant political power, there is little doubt that its approach to culture would reflect these views. Their statements suggest that they would support only those artistic expressions that conform to a narrow and traditional vision of German identity. This would threaten the diversity, critical engagement, and artistic freedom that are essential to an open society. It is not enough to increase funding for cultural institutions. A broader awareness is needed of the political pressures that may attempt to redefine the purpose and value of culture.

This episode shows that the protection of cultural freedom is not guaranteed, even in established democracies. Cultural institutions, funders, and public authorities must remain alert to early signs of ideological control. What is at stake is not only the future of iconic institutions like the Bauhaus but also the ability of culture to reflect a society that is pluralistic, self-critical, and forward-looking. The debate surrounding the Bauhaus is a timely reminder that cultural policy must not be treated as secondary, but as a central part of democratic resilience

6.2 Cultural Neglect in Germany: A Threat to Democratic Values and European Cohesion

Introduction

The European Union (EU) promotes democratic values, pluralism, and cultural diversity as central to its identity. Culture plays a vital role in upholding these ideals by fostering dialogue, critical thinking, and social inclusion. Yet in some pro-European democracies such as Germany, rhetorical support for these values is not matched by sustained cultural investment. While Hungary actively uses culture to shape a nationalist identity, Germany risks undermining pluralism through underfunding and passive cultural policy. This chapter analyzes recent cuts to Germany's cultural budgets, their consequences for the sector, and how this neglect creates space for nationalist narratives to grow.

Cultural Budget Cuts in Germany

Germany's 2025 federal cultural and media budget (BKM) officially rises to €2.2 billion, but this headline figure conceals significant internal cuts. Despite the apparent increase, six federal cultural funds, including those for literature, performing arts, visual arts, and sociocultural work, will collectively lose €14 million, amounting to nearly half of their previous allocations. Most notably, the Alliance of International Production Houses will lose its entire €10 million in federal support, dealing a major blow to experimental and independent art scenes (Reinhardt and Nees 2024).

Berlin faces even sharper reductions. The city's 2025 cultural budget will shrink by €130 million, representing a 12–13 percent cut. This austerity measure, part of a broader €3 billion savings plan, has sparked widespread concern among artists and institutions, with more than 450 cultural organizations warning that it could inflict lasting damage on Berlin's globally renowned arts ecosystem (Morton 2024; Rusch et al. 2024). The Senate's redistribution strategy has intensified tensions within the cultural sector, shifting the burden from large state theaters onto smaller, independent venues and community-based programs, including youth and diversity-oriented initiatives.

While these cuts are tied to Germany's constitutional debt brake and post-pandemic fiscal consolidation, critics argue they risk eroding the democratic function of cultural infrastructure. Berlin's arts community warns that continued disinvestment threatens not only the viability of venues and festivals but also the pluralism and accessibility that underpin cultural life in the city.

The Risks of Cultural Neglect

Independent and socially engaged cultural initiatives in Germany typically depend on project-based funding, and with several major funding mechanisms shrinking, artists are facing increasing precarity. As Gregor Hotz, managing director of Musikfonds, explains: "Most artists and organisations are handing in one application after the other and they don't know if it's going to work or not" (Hotz 2024). In Berlin, the alliance Berlin ist Kultur, representing more than 450 cultural institutions, has warned that the planned €130 million cut to the city's cultural budget "could permanently destroy Berlin's cultural infrastructure," jeopardizing rehearsal spaces, galleries, theaters, and community projects (Rusch et al. 2024; Morton 2024).

As cultural spaces contract or close, the democratic function of these institutions erodes, reducing opportunities for dialogue, inclusion, and identity-building, key components of cultural participation in a pluralistic society. This shrinking space also creates the conditions under which nationalist and exclusionary ideologies can take hold.

Passive vs. Active Cultural Governance

Unlike Hungary, where the state strategically funds nationalist-aligned cultural institutions (as shown in Chapter 4), Germany's approach reflects passive neglect. While not intentionally exclusionary, this negligence weakens democratic resilience by underfunding the very spaces that foster pluralism and critical reflection.

This creates a strategic vulnerability. If pro-European democracies fail to support the cultural infrastructure that promotes unity in diversity, they risk ceding the cultural narrative to those who would use it to divide.

Conclusion

Germany's recent cultural budget cuts present more than a fiscal challenge - they signal a strategic gap in upholding the democratic and pluralistic values that the country publicly supports. While the motivation behind these cuts may stem from broader financial pressures, the impact on independent and socially engaged cultural institutions is political. By reducing support for the spaces that foster dialogue, creativity, and civic participation, these decisions risk weakening the very structures that sustain an open and inclusive society.

Unlike the overt cultural control seen in countries like Hungary, Germany's model reflects a quieter but no less consequential form of neglect. This passivity leaves cultural spaces vulnerable to ideological capture and limits their capacity to resist exclusionary narratives. As artists and institutions face mounting precarity, the absence of stable support undermines cultural freedom not through censorship, but through disinvestment.

The German case underscores a broader point: pro-European democracies must treat cultural policy as a strategic priority. Protecting cultural institutions requires more than rhetoric; it demands long-term funding, political backing, and recognition of culture's role in maintaining democratic resilience. Without this commitment, the cultural sphere becomes an easy target for those seeking to reshape public discourse along nationalist or exclusionary lines.

This chapter highlights why strengthening the cultural field is essential not only for artistic flourishing but also for defending the European project. The next chapter will explore how culture, when actively supported and thoughtfully structured, can serve as a powerful force for inclusion, democratic engagement, and shared identity across Europe.

7. Culture as a Catalyst for European Unity and Democratic Participation

In the preceding chapters, this thesis examined the role of cultural governance in shaping national identity and political discourse. The contrast between Hungary's state-driven nationalist model and Germany's underfunded yet pluralistic approach highlighted the political implications of cultural investment. The discourse analysis further demonstrated how cultural narratives can be instrumentalized, with public statements foreshadowing potential authoritarian shifts in cultural policy. Against this critical backdrop, Chapter 7 adopts a constructive outlook. It explores how culture - particularly contemporary art and cultural spaces - can serve as a powerful vehicle for promoting European values such as inclusion, dialogue, democratic engagement, and social cohesion.

7.1 The Role of Contemporary Art in Advancing EU Values

Contemporary art, by its nature, challenges conventions, invites critical reflection, and fosters open dialogue. Participatory and socially engaged art practices have been identified by scholars like Claire Bishop (2012) as effective in promoting democratic participation and social interaction. Through active engagement, these practices allow citizens to encounter diverse perspectives and address collective challenges in creative and meaningful ways.

Monica Sassatelli (2009) and Lluís Bonet (2018) emphasize the role of EU cultural policy in constructing a shared European space grounded in diversity. Programs such as the European Capital of Culture or Creative Europe are not simply funding mechanisms but symbolic arenas where European values are enacted through artistic collaboration, intercultural

exchange, and public participation. In this sense, contemporary cultural initiatives are essential tools for strengthening cohesion and building a European identity that embraces pluralism rather than uniformity.

7.2 Cultural Initiatives in Practice: Perform Europe and the European Pavilion

Two standout EU initiatives exemplify how culture can function as a unifying force: Perform Europe and the European Pavilion.

Perform Europe, launched in 2021 and funded by Creative Europe, supports innovative cross-border distribution models for performing arts. Its focus on environmental sustainability, inclusion, and access reflects the EU's wider priorities. The 2024–2025 cycle funds 42 partnerships across Europe, featuring projects like *Dancing with Excess*, which uses mixed-ability dance performances to engage diverse communities (Perform Europe 2024). The program fosters democratic participation within the arts by involving artists, operators, and audiences in decision-making, and by supporting underrepresented groups.

The European Pavilion, initiated by the European Cultural Foundation, creates a space for artistic experimentation and critical dialogue about Europe's future. Projects have included collaborative exhibitions and residencies addressing migration, democracy, and cultural memory. In 2024, the Pavilion brought together artists and cultural actors along major European rivers, culminating in a three-day festival in Lisbon. These initiatives do not impose a singular European identity; rather, they support co-creation and reflect the EU's commitment to unity in diversity (European Cultural Foundation 2024).

7.3 Cultural Institutions as Spaces for Civic Engagement

Cultural institutions such as museums, media art centers, and artist residencies have proven effective in fostering democratic values and civic participation. Examples include:

- The European Solidarity Centre (*Europejskie Centrum Solidarności*, ESC) in Gdańsk, Poland, functions as a cultural and educational hub on democracy and human rights. Through exhibitions and public forums like *Europa z widokiem na przyszłość*, the ESC cultivates a politically aware and historically conscious citizenry.
- The Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (*Zentrum für Kunst und Medien*, ZKM) in Germany explores the intersection of media art and digital culture. Through its interdisciplinary programs and interactive exhibitions it promotes dialogue on contemporary societal issues while encouraging critical reflection on technology and democracy.
- The Camargo Foundation, a residency program in France, brings together artists, scholars, and cultural workers from diverse backgrounds. It fosters transnational collaboration and public engagement, contributing to inclusive cultural production and a sense of European belonging.

These institutions serve as democratic platforms by hosting dialogues, encouraging artistic freedom, and creating inclusive spaces for public reflection. They offer alternatives to nationalist cultural narratives by promoting intercultural understanding and participation.

7.4 Challenges and Policy Reflections

Despite their promise, these initiatives face significant structural challenges. Issues such as uneven cultural funding across Member States, elitist perceptions of contemporary art, limited accessibility for marginalized communities, and political pressure on institutions persist. Moreover, the EU's limited legal competence in cultural policy often restricts its ability to act decisively.

To overcome these limitations, the EU and its Member States should consider the following strategies:

- Strengthen funding for projects that emphasize dialogue, diversity, and participation.
- Support smaller institutions and grassroots actors to reduce barriers to access.
- Develop EU-wide platforms and tools for inclusive dialogue (e.g., moderated online forums).
- Integrate cultural investment into democratic resilience and education strategies.

7.5 Conclusion

Culture is not only a mirror of society but a tool to shape it. The examples explored in this chapter demonstrate how EU-supported initiatives and cultural institutions contribute meaningfully to social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and democratic engagement. Far from being peripheral, culture holds the potential to strengthen the European project - not through propaganda or imposed identity, but through open, inclusive, and participatory processes. If given sufficient support, cultural spaces and practices can help citizens feel heard, valued, and connected - essential conditions for a resilient, pluralistic, and united Europe.

8. Conclusion: Culture as the Cornerstone of European Unity and Democracy

In an era of rising nationalism, political fragmentation, and democratic uncertainty, culture has reemerged as a strategic dimension of European governance. Far from being peripheral, cultural policy today is a key arena where values are negotiated, identities constructed, and futures imagined. This thesis has shown that contemporary culture and art are not just reflections of societal change but tools that actively shape public discourse, democratic engagement, and European cohesion. Whether through state-aligned institutions that restrict diversity or inclusive initiatives that promote dialogue, culture wields real political power. To secure the European project, this power must be channeled toward openness, participation, and shared belonging.

8.1 Summary of Findings

Through empirical and theoretical analysis, this research has investigated the role of cultural policy in shaping national and European narratives. Chapter 4 examined Hungary's strategic use of culture under the Orbán government, particularly through the Hungarian Academy of Arts, to promote nationalist identity and suppress dissenting artistic voices. Here, culture is used not to foster dialogue but to consolidate ideological control. In contrast, Chapter 5 explored Germany's passive cultural governance. Although rhetorically committed to European values, Germany's cultural funding cuts undermine pluralism and leave a vacuum that nationalist actors can exploit.

Chapter 6 presented two aspects of German cultural politics: a discourse analysis of the AfD's attacks on the Bauhaus and an examination of budgetary neglect. Together, they revealed how far-right narratives seek to redefine culture in exclusionary terms, while insufficient cultural investment weakens the infrastructure that supports pluralism and critical debate. These insights underscore that threats to cultural freedom are not limited to Eastern Europe, and that democratic erosion can also stem from inaction.

Chapters 7 and 8 offered constructive counterpoints. Chapter 7 analyzed how initiatives like Perform Europe, the European Pavilion, and institutions such as ZKM and the European Solidarity Centre actively promote democratic values and civic participation. These examples demonstrate that culture can create inclusive, emotionally resonant spaces where European identity is not imposed, but co-created. Chapter 8 presented the voice of a young Slovak artist living under a government with oppressive tendencies. Her testimony illustrated both the risks of cultural suppression and the hope that the EU still represents for artists striving for freedom and integrity.

Together, these findings confirm that cultural policy is not neutral. It shapes who feels represented, which stories are told, and what futures seem possible. Culture can entrench authoritarianism or empower pluralism. It can silence dissent or inspire engagement. The outcome depends on political will and policy design.

Answering the Research Question: Culture as a Strategic Force

This thesis asked: *How can contemporary culture and art strengthen European unity, independence, and pluralism amidst rising nationalist narratives?* The answer is that culture strengthens democracy when it is accessible, participatory, and values-driven. Through cross-border collaboration, artistic experimentation, and inclusive civic spaces, cultural initiatives help citizens connect beyond national identities and engage meaningfully with shared challenges.

However, this potential is not automatic. It hinges on how cultural policy is framed and funded. Hungary's Academy Of Arts and Germany's neglected sector reveal two sides of the same coin: one uses culture to control; the other fails to support it strategically. By contrast, initiatives like the European Pavilion foster participatory belonging and democratic imagination. To realize the full promise of culture, its governance must be intentional and values-based.

Policy Implications: What Happens if Europe Does Not Act

If the EU and its Member States continue to underinvest in culture or treat it as symbolic, they risk losing ground to actors who seek to use culture to divide. Culture is

never neutral: it always tells a story about who belongs, what matters, and what futures are imaginable. To ensure it supports democracy and unity, it must be made a strategic priority.

This entails:

- Expanding and Equipping Creative Europe: Programs like Culture Moves Europe and Perform Europe should be scaled up to reach smaller institutions and underrepresented communities. Their success shows that strategic, values-driven cultural funding works, but their scope remains limited.
- Defending Artistic Freedom: The EU should link cultural freedom more explicitly to its rule-of-law mechanisms. When Member States interfere with cultural autonomy, this should be treated as an issue of (undermining) democracy, not just a cultural one.
- Supporting Civic Cultural Spaces: Libraries, museums, and independent centers are the backbone of cultural democracy. Programs like The Europe Challenge show how local engagement can reinforce European values. These spaces deserve sustainable, structural funding.

Each of these priorities aligns with a broader vision: that culture must be embedded in the EU's democratic strategy. A Europe that protects markets but neglects meaning weakens its own foundations.

8.2 Final Reflection: A Democratic Imperative

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, culture is not merely a mirror of society – it is a means of shaping it. In polarized times, it offers one of the last public arenas where dialogue, empathy, and complexity can thrive. Culture builds trust, holds space for disagreement, and allows diverse communities to co-create the future.

This potential must not be wasted. Investing in culture means investing in democratic resilience. It means equipping citizens to imagine and construct a pluralistic, united, and free Europe. If the EU embraces this role, it can turn culture from a contested

battleground into a cornerstone of its democratic renewal. In doing so, it affirms that Europe is more than treaties or borders - it is a shared project of imagination, identity, and solidarity.

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