

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



COURAGE – CULTURAL OPPOSITION

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF DISSENT IN THE FORMER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

Based upon research in twenty countries and in more than 500 archiving institutions (museums, archives, NGOs) this policy brief calls for immediate action to preserve the largely hidden heritage of non-conformist cultures under Communism.

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INTRODUCTION

The heritage and memory of opposition has gained particular urgency in view of **neo-authoritarian tendencies** in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The values of pluralism, democracy, and open societies are not unquestioned anymore. During the period of state socialism, individuals and groups challenged one-party communist dictatorships. Many committed themselves to democratic and liberal values and insisted on human rights, civic freedom, and the autonomy of the individual. Opposition to oppression was often articulated through culture and the arts; cultural opposition challenged the communists' claim to a monopoly on knowledge, values, and norms.

The **heritage of cultural opposition** against state socialism is today an important resource for social reflection and innovation in Europe. However, as COURAGE has shown, this resource needs to be better acknowledged, and its significant symbolic power should be better exploited. Study and ongoing discussion and debate of the heritage of cultural opposition will counter one-sided interpretations of state socialism and the exclusion of important groups and individuals from history. It offers valuable knowledge about the practices of freedom and strategies against authoritarian governments. Cultural opposition under state socialism was incredibly creative. A nuanced grasp of these examples of cultural creativity under adverse conditions can help stimulate innovative acts and initiatives today.

COURAGE has studied the efforts to preserve the memory and material heritage of cultural opposition to communist rule in most countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. It has produced the first transnational digital database on collections on cultural opposition. In total, 497 collections have been documented in 20 countries, and 983 persons and 516 institutions have been studied. This is a living database that can be further extended. It can be regarded as a first larger step towards mapping the hidden heritage in public and private collections in the region.

The result is a **unique repository** of forms, genres, individuals, and organizations of cultural opposition (**COURAGE registry** - <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/>). It documents the diverse efforts to maintain and communicate the legacy of cultural opposition after the end of communist rule. COURAGE has significantly broadened our understanding of the role of culture in opposing authoritarian regimes. It highlights the tremendous creativity of non-conformists and the courage of individuals who dared challenge the stances and narratives of oppressive states. It also draws attention to the wide variety of ways in which individuals and organizations can oppose the status quo and bypass official channels. It reveals the intensity of transnational connections, both among the socialist countries and between East and West. Cultural opposition and dissent were European phenomena, and this heritage is thus of European significance.

COURAGE has yielded important insights into practices of preserving the heritage of cultural and political movements. Our research showed the **diversity of the stakeholders and the diversity of the forms** of their collections. These differ from a variety of perspectives:

- Forms of ownership and funding (public, private);
- Degree of professionalism (trained experts, curators, and archivists on the one hand; activists, former dissenters, and enthusiasts on the other);
- Sizes of collections and of the holding institution (from large state archives and museums to individuals who keep artefacts in private residences, sometimes for instance literally in the attic);
- The character of the artefacts (archival documents, photos, audio and video materials, interview transcripts, publications, grey literature, leaflets, posters, paintings, etc.);
- Target audiences (researchers, teachers, students, general the public, etc.);
- Thematic scope (the variety of topics shows how diverse the sphere of oppositional activism was, and it also shows that the dissent can find expression in very different spaces).

These differences reflect the multitude of actors engaged in activities to preserve cultural heritage. This is a field in which government-led and state-sponsored initiatives interact with different kinds of private and social initiatives. **Cultural heritage is produced and maintained both bottom-up and top-down.** The COURAGE research points to the **potential of collaborative approaches** to the study of cultural heritage, which draw on *pro-bono* initiatives and the interests of individuals, while the government can play an important supporting role. The collections serve as important places of communication, where groups reaffirm their identities.

One of the main conclusions of the project is that the memory of opposition is an important field of co-production and **citizen science**. We also concluded that the potential of this approach to the study of this field to yield new insights and further an understanding of this aspect of Europe's shared history has not been fully exploited. State and private actors often do not sufficiently communicate and cooperate. Sometimes, this is the result of a lack of information, and sometimes it is the result of institutional constraints. Sometimes, **mutual distrust** also plays a role.

The study of cultural heritage has the potential to **engage people** of different ages and social statuses, and it thus supports social inclusion, integration, and democratic cultures. Active engagement with the past strengthens societal resilience through self-reflection, which is a prerequisite for critical thinking and informed decision making.

At the same time, the diverse forms and values of cultural opposition remind us that **history should not be written in black-and-white**. Our research highlights the contested nature of historical “truth” and the need to approach the past from different perspectives and reveal different voices. History should also embrace **the heritage of those who were marginalized** by dominant actors. The preservation of cultural heritage, therefore, also means avoiding the marginalization of opposition for a second time. In other words, initiatives and movements could fall in oblivion only because the communist state once wanted to eradicate every trace of their existence. The same is true of post-communist memory politics: understanding cultural opposition in its full diversity requires a revision of the established dissident canon and work towards a more inclusive one, which acknowledges difference and dissonance. COURAGE discovered many small and previously unknown collections, and it thereby has furthered efforts to resist forgetting. These collections prove that for a full understanding of the past, one must look beyond official accounts. COURAGE research has disclosed new sources, given voice to unknown stories, and opened new horizons of interpretations.

At the same time, COURAGE discovered many **problem areas**. The **lack of funds** is the most frequent problem encountered by initiatives to preserve the heritage of cultural opposition. The East and South-East European countries belong to the poorer parts of Europe, and they have relatively modest state budgets. Most governments allocate only very limited means to culture in general, even less so to the preservation of cultural heritage. The differences between the countries, however, are significant, not only because of different levels of wealth. Culture occupies very different places on the list of priorities in the agenda of national governments in the region. Hungary and Poland, for instance, display a strong interest in showcasing history. While this brings more money into the study of history, it comes with the drawback of politicization. Again, the risk emerges that only a certain version of the past will be officially promoted.

The lack of government funding is compounded by the centralized nature of the political systems of most of the countries in the region. This makes it even more **difficult for local initiatives to get access to proper funding**. As a consequence of this, the physical integrity of artefacts from the cultural opposition is endangered and a more systematic description prevented. Given the limited or non-existing economic value of this heritage, commercial funding cannot make up for the lack of state funding. This also results in limitations in the professional expertise of the people who maintain small, personal collections. The survival of these collections often depends on personal attachment and investment, and this is hardly a sustainable strategy for the future. Our research concludes that initiatives such as the recent position paper on the Future of Archives of Protest, Liberation, and Emancipation Movements in Germany shows the importance of preserving the memory of cultural activism and opposition outside the “official structures.”

COURAGE has shown the **importance of digitalization but also its limits**. Digitalization is an important means of preserving heritage, but it is even more important as a means of showcasing it. So far, documents on paper have a longer lifespan than digital ones; digitalization, therefore, must not lead to the destruction of original, unique materials. But digital copies allow museums and archives to display things for which physical space is lacking. Digital materials also facilitate cross-country exchange and communication. They open new channels for the communication of knowledge about cultural opposition to audiences less likely to visit a traditional museum or archive, especially members of the younger generation. Digitalization, thus, can be an effective instrument of democratisation of cultural heritage, as it opens new forms of access and engages new audiences. Furthermore, digitalization has the side effect of urging archives to conform to well-established metadata standards when they describe materials that were often unprocessed or had been catalogued according to non-compatible regional standards until digitalization. This is an added value that makes these collections more accessible.

Our research has shown how successful collections can be in fostering **interest among members of the younger generation** if they use multi-dimensional and appealing forms of communication. This involves concerted efforts to convey history to today's audiences, to use multiple channels to stimulate communication (exhibitions, films, games, etc.), and to engage with the audiences. At the same time, our research highlights the continuous importance of professional preservation and documentation of artefacts for research purposes. The significance of collections must not be judged only by the number of visitors and users. The collections have the important function of serving as archives of knowledge and preserving evidence of the past. Research trends cannot be predicted, so even collections that may seem of little interest today could become very popular in the future, but for that to happen, they must be able to survive.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COURAGE highlights the importance of **research and scholarship in the humanities for reflective societies**. The study of history plays an enormous role in furthering a more nuanced understanding of the present and of collective identities, which are always rooted in notions of the past. Our research strengthens self-reflective social consciousness by showing how narratives of the past have been constructed and manipulated, and that there is not one "truth." An informed society reflects on its genesis, comes to terms with problematic aspects of its past, and is conscious of the complexity of its history. By encouraging reflection, critical thinking, and awareness of the historicity of our experience, cultural heritage encourages integration and innovation. The diversity of cultural heritage can tell us about different historical experiences and the relativity of our own traditions; it is a place of learning, reflection, and communication. This is a way the study of culture and cultural history can make society more inclusive and cohesive (see "*Getting cultural heritage to work for Europe*," 2015).

But in order to fulfil that role, **cultural heritage must be critically assessed and professionally preserved**. It will need more and better targeted funding, as noted in the high-level Horizon 2020 conference on cultural heritage in London in March 2018 ("*Innovation in cultural heritage research*"). Given the limits of state expenditures, especially in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the EU has a particular responsibility in supporting efforts to preserve these important aspects of our shared European heritage. An inclusive Europe means that people can find "their" history integrated in the European tradition. COURAGE, therefore, suggests political action especially in following fields:

- **Launch a systematic European effort** to preserve the heritage of dissent in Europe (a European network or a research, documentation, and training centre).
- **Fully acknowledge the diversity of East and South-East European histories**, and in particular the legacy of state socialism, to achieve a shared vision of Europe's complex history.
- **Pay more attention to the humanities** in European research funding and to the specific needs of disciplines in the humanities, keeping in mind also the cuts in national funding for humanities and social sciences in many countries. Economic growth is not the only factor that unites Europe. Culture is also an important element of this unity.
- **Strengthen cultural heritage as citizen science**, as an important field of co-creation, and volunteer efforts. Public institutions and national legislators need to embolden and support these kinds of initiatives, but they also need to respect their autonomy. Grass roots history initiatives provide important arenas for societal self-reflection and innovation.
- **Open archives**. The history of state socialism is contested in many countries, and this leads to social divisions. The best antidote is information. National legislation should

allow as much access to archival documentation from this period as possible, including opening archives of the ministries of interior and secret police.

- **Provide more funds to document** cultural opposition and dissent under state socialism. The intangible and material history of cultural opposition faces the risk of falling into oblivion. National governments and the EU are encouraged to seek ways to safeguard this history.
- **Support the professionalization of initiatives outside of state institutions.** Many important documenting activities are done outside of state institutions. They often depend on civic enthusiasm. Public institutions, therefore, should provide means to support for such initiatives (e.g. through training and the transfer of best practices).
- **Foster systematic networking** between the collections to facilitate the circulation of knowledge, the transfer of best practices, and the formulation of shared positions vis-à-vis policy makers. We strongly recommend open calls made by state, regional, and European institutions to promote cooperation.
- **Connect research with teaching.** Our communication with members of the younger generation and teachers proved that the cultural history of dissent is neglected in curricula or is presented solely through political events. Thus, it is worth influencing European educational programs to promote teaching about cultural opposition under socialism.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives: COURAGE has researched:

- the **genesis and trajectories of the private and public collections** on the cultural opposition movements in **all** former socialist countries in Europe;
- the **political and social roles and uses** of the collections;
- the **roles of the exile** in supporting, preserving, and disseminating these collections beyond the Iron Curtain and back home;
- the **material culture** represented by these documents, objects, and audio-visual footage; how the materials in the collections are **organized**; the social background and life trajectories of the **staffs** of the collections (including age and gender);
- the **sociology of institutions, stakeholders**, their legal frameworks, financial backgrounds, ownership and management, the social and cultural composition of their audiences;
- the **networking and cooperative capacity** of different types of collections.

Methodology:

COURAGE described collections which document the cultural activities of groups or individuals who were marginalized, silenced, prohibited, persecuted, or prevented from pursuing their activities by the communist authorities. Some of these activities were tolerated by the regime at different times. COURAGE documented collections of works by artists (active in literature, the theatre, the fine arts, music, and film), intellectuals, clandestine or dissent religious groups, civil society movements (human rights movements, feminist movements, environmental movements), communist party dissidents or reformists, youth subcultures, exile groups, and nationalist movements.

A “**collection**” was considered to be any aggregation of physical and/or digital resources documenting cultural opposition under socialism.

Collections were **selected by country and topic**. Data on the collections were gathered through interviews with creators, stakeholders, owners, operators, or founders of the collections based on archival and desk research and a comprehensive questionnaire (statistical

data (a data sheet) and narrative questions on the history of the collection, the persons involved, the experiences of oppression, opinions about the heritage of cultural opposition today, etc.)

All descriptions of collections are **published in English and the local language** in the online database.

The data from the collections are **analyzed** in the COURAGE handbook and the Country Reports and are used in the Curriculum, the exhibition, and the film festival for education and for the promotion of the cultural heritage of dissent in the former socialist countries.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Cultural Opposition – Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries (COURAGE).
COORDINATOR	Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences – MTA BTK – Budapest, Hungary Primary Coordinator Contact: Sándor Horváth horvath.sandor@btk.mta.hu
CONSORTIUM	Charles University in Prague – CUNI – Prague, Czech Republic Comenius University in Bratislava – UNIBA – Bratislava, Slovakia Croatian Institute of History – HIP – Zagreb, Croatia Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Sciences – MTA TK – Budapest, Hungary Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Computer Science and Control – MTA SZTAKI – Budapest, Hungary Lithuanian Institute of History – LII – Vilnius, Lithuania Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology – IFIS PAN – Warsaw, Poland Trinity College Dublin – TCD – Dublin, Ireland University of Bucharest – UB – Bucharest, Romania The University of Oxford – UOXF – Oxford, United Kingdom University of Regensburg, Institute for East and Southeast European Studies – IOS – Regensburg, Germany
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon 2020 Topic: Cultural opposition in the former socialist countries Type of action: Research and Innovation action Call: H2020-REFLECTIVE-2014-2015/H2020-REFLECTIVE-SOCIETY-2015 https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/reflective-4-2015.html This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 692919
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BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 484 917.50 €.
WEBSITE	http://cultural-opposition.eu/
FURTHER READING	<u>Apor, Balázs, Péter Apor, and Sándor Horváth, eds. <i>The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe</i>. Budapest: Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences,</u>

[2018.](#)