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

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Spatializing authoritarian neoliberalism by way of cultural politics: City, nation and the European Union in Gdańsk's politics of cultural policy formation

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epc**Thomas Borén** 

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Abstract

This paper develops perspectives which seek to spatialize authoritarian neoliberalism through arguing for greater engagement with the *politics* of urban cultural policy formation in the neglected context of post-socialist East and Central Europe. Through analyzing the politics of urban cultural policy-making in Gdańsk, Poland, the paper spatializes authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring how relations between the urban and the national, and between the urban and the supranational, shape urban cultural policy, drawing upon literatures on political economy, policy mobilities, cultural policy research, and the concepts of authoritarian neoliberalism and the relational-territorial nexus. Gdańsk is a liberally run city, strongly aligned with the European Union (EU), opposed to the authoritarian neoliberal national level politics in Poland. The paper analyses urban-national tensions and relationships between Gdańsk and the EU to unpack the contested spatial nature of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Keywords

Authoritarian neoliberalism, politics of cultural policy, relational-territorial nexus, Gdańsk, Poland, European Union

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a recasting of the political geography of Europe. In particular, national politics in many European contexts has undergone a marked shift to the Right, producing various examples of what is increasingly termed ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff and Tansel, 2019). As a concept, ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ has quickly gained traction in critical social science scholarship, particularly focusing on how neoliberal reforms and authoritarian statisms intertwine, and how this is impacting on the transformation of key societal sites within capitalism (Bruff and Tansel, 2019). However, relatively few studies have begun the task of spatializing authoritarianism (Di Giovanni, 2017; Jenss, 2019; Kinossian and Morgan, 2014; Tansel, 2019). Such an approach seeks to decentre predominantly state-based perspectives. Instead, a more nuanced, place-based analysis seeks to disaggregate the nation-state to understand how authoritarian neoliberalism plays out in and through a number of interacting scales and spaces (cf. Varró and Bunders, 2020). How are different forms of authoritarian neoliberalism formed and contested in the context of multi-scalar relationships between the urban, national and supranational – in this case, between Gdańsk, Polish national politics and the European Union (EU)?

The rise of different forms of authoritarian neoliberalism in Poland and other countries in post-socialist Europe has created new – and reformulated old – arenas of ideologically motivated struggle. However, little is known about the urban politics of this. Do cities align themselves with national political imperatives, or do they act in a context of tension between (self-governing) ‘liberal’ cities and national governments with an authoritarian bent? The field of culture and cultural policy is one key arena where this conflict is taking place. Ultimately, culture and cultural policy is deeply entwined with the shaping of the political subjectivities of citizens, and since there are substantial differences between liberal and populist national-conservative ideas in the cultural field (Inglehart and Norris, 2016) the conflict can be tense, a twenty-first century reformulation of ‘culture wars’ (Anderson, 2020: 609). It is in these multi-scalar inter-relations that facets of coercion within authoritarianism are laid bare. Therefore, understanding more about the ways in which cultural policy is ‘made up’ in place, how it relates to other scales (which might be informed by a different ideology), and what the outcomes are in this new context, is one way of spatializing authoritarian neoliberalism beyond the state.

By developing these issues in the neglected context of increasingly politically authoritarian post-socialist Poland we make two main contributions. First, by analysing the politics of cultural policy formation, the paper extends understandings of the broader project of spatializing authoritarianism in the moment when this political reshaping is taking place. Analysing the nexus between neoliberalist-authoritarian statisms and the sub-national urban begins to unpack the ways in which the urban is reacting to the rise of national-scale authoritarian politics. This, moreover, allows for analysis of the ways that cities and key urban sites within them (e.g. spaces of policy-making) are transforming as they maneuver this new political context. Second, by responding to calls to study the *politics* of cultural policy making (Belfiore, 2020; Grodach and Silver, 2012a; Peck, 2005; Shin and Stevens, 2013), we provide an analysis of the relational nature of the processes involved. By exploring the multi-scalar relations between a city, the national and the EU-level in a field of mobile policy ideas, we show the political contestations and convergences among actors at different scale levels and bring out the tensions inherent in the relational-territorial nexus of policy making (McCann, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2013).

To achieve this we analyse the politics of urban cultural and creativity policy-making in Gdańsk, Poland. Gdańsk is a mid-sized city (population c. 460,000) in the north of Poland broadly characterized by a liberal administration that has actively opposed the national-conservative government of Poland. Culture and creativity have become central to urban policy-making, and the city has lively independent and city-led cultural scenes. Since 2015, when the right-wing populist, national conservative, Christian democratic Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS)) Party won an outright majority in the parliamentary election, Poland has been governed by an arguably authoritarian neoliberalist regime, which the relatively liberal-tolerant local politics of Gdańsk is in tension with. For local authorities and actors in Gdańsk negotiating this tension with the national government, the EU, with its inherent internationalism, appears as a long-term ally, but also a structuring force that further shapes urban (cultural) policy formation. This makes it an excellent case through which to spatialise authoritarianism by exploring the relations of the city with the national and supranational levels. Furthermore, this provides a starting point from which to understand how cities maneuver in this new context of the broader and still emerging political landscape of authoritarian neoliberalism in Europe.

The analysis is based on 16 semi-structured interviews carried out in 2016–18 with a variety of actors involved in shaping culture, creativity and cultural policy in Gdańsk. These were contextualized through the analysis of various strategic and planning documents and, following Peck and Theodore (2012, 2015), a number of ethnographic-style informal talks and visits to cultural spaces. Initial fieldwork, analysis of documents and local knowledge allowed us to ‘map’ the cultural policy ‘ecosystem’ and its intra-urban relations (see Borén et al., 2020), providing a framework from which key representative actors were selected for interviewing. This multi-method approach represents a way to ‘study through’ (McCann and Ward, 2012) the politics of policy-making. Respondents were chosen as representative of the wide range of local actors, including within the urban authority, key cultural intermediaries, NGOs and key cultural producers, entrepreneurs and grassroots arts scenes, allowing for a range of perspectives on cultural policy making. The interviews were carried out in English or Polish at the wishes of the respondent, with Polish language interviews either directly translated or transcribed into English later.

The following literature review develops the approach to conceptualising spatializing authoritarianism, considering the relationship between the urban, national and supra-national scales, and how the politics of urban cultural policy formation provides a key arena in which to analyse these. Then the empirical analysis unfolds in two sections, analysing first the contested relations between the city and national government, and then relations between the city, the state and the EU.

Spatializing authoritarian neoliberalism and the politics of urban cultural policy formation

The rise of elected but authoritarian parties has typified recent politics in a number of different contexts in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond (e.g. Italy, Brasil, Turkey, Russia, the USA), producing regimes conceptualised as forms of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff, 2014, 2016; Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Di Giovanni, 2017; Jenss, 2019; Tansel, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). However, literature increasingly argues for the need for a more spatialized understanding of these regimes which goes beyond the focus on the nation-state to analyse a range of interacting politicised spaces (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Di Giovanni, 2017; Jenss, 2019; Knuth, 2019; Koch, 2013; McCarthy, 2019; Middeldorp and Le Billon, 2019;

Neimark et al., 2019; Tansel, 2019). As one example, the impact of these changes on the politics shaping urban policy-making, and the resulting urban policies themselves, have received very little attention. In this new context, the relational-territorial policy-making nexus (Temenos and McCann, 2013) is being reshaped as actors at various levels promote, and are guided by, different ideologies in the process of preparing for mobile policy (Peck and Theodore, 2015; see also Varró and Bunders, 2020).

Recent developments in Poland demonstrate how its government can be categorised as an example of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff, 2014, 2016; Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Tansel, 2017a). The term is used to refer to regimes using a governmental logic that combines authoritarian political leadership with the further neoliberalisation of markets. Tansel (2017b) and Bruff (2016) outline the distinctive characteristics of such regimes. First, neoliberal policies and reforms are proactively supported by a number of state administrative, legal and coercive mechanisms. Economically, Poland quickly adapted the key principles of neoliberalism after 1989, guided by international consultants, the influence of organisations such as the World Bank, and ultimately through the EU-accession process and EU-membership in 2004. As Shields’ (2007) analysis makes clear, a form of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ has been a characteristic of Poland’s national politics since the early 2000s, when the increasingly national-conservative government deployed a rhetoric seemingly negating further neoliberalisation and adaptations to the EU and the ‘West’, but which in practice involved reinforcing neoliberal policies in a form of what Shields (2007) calls ‘neo-populist neoliberalisation’. However, PiS policy has also embraced economic approaches more associated with the left, including high welfare spending and state interventionism.

In the social, political and cultural spheres in authoritarian neoliberalist regimes spaces of popular resistance against neoliberalism are encroached, formal liberties are increasingly curbed, and there is a ‘significant escalation in the state’s propensity to employ coercion and legal/extra-legal intimidation’ (Tansel, 2017b: 3). Such regimes do not seek out compromise or consensus with political opponents or popular movements to solve common problems, but rather rely on exclusionary and oppositional practices towards those that do not comply (Bruff, 2014; Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Tansel, 2017b). Coercion, as Di Giovanni underlines, is a ‘distinctive feature of authoritarian forms of neoliberalism’ (2017: 111).

In Poland, these characteristics were further strengthened after the 2015, 2019 and 2020 election victories by PiS into a form of ‘new authoritarianism’ (Sutowski, 2018), synthesizing the democratic imaginary with familiar populist tropes of an attack on ‘the elites’, a broadening of imaginings of the ‘national community’ beyond those of the middle-classes, and a ‘morally justifiable’ dominance over marginalised groups in society (see also Applebaum, 2018; Bustikova and Guasti, 2017). Attempts were made to limit the independence of the justice system, some of which the EU ruled unlawful (Flemmich, 2019; Kochenov and Bárd, 2018). There were also attempts to further encroach upon the public service media’s role in critiquing the Polish government (Przybylski, 2018). More recently, Polish President Andrzej Duda (who is allied with PiS) has campaigned in the current (June 28th 2020) presidential election against “LGBT ideology”, continuing a long-term opposition to gay rights by PiS (Walker, 2020). Authoritarianism in Poland may not have gone as far as that in Hungary (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017), but taken together these measures point to an all the more authoritarian national government seeking to control Polish society through methods associated with authoritarian neoliberalism.

This coercion puts pressure on all stakeholders in an authoritarian state, and particularly for the analysis here the cultural sector and sub-national political entities such as regions and cities, which in liberal democracies often have a significant degree of freedom. For authoritarian regimes it is important that cities comply if for no other reason than that

they represent a significant and alternative power-base from which national politics may be challenged, as is currently (June 2020) happening in Poland as Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski challenges the current President Andrzej Duda, the PiS-candidate, for president. In addition, implementing national level policy could run into problems if challenged in practice by local urban actors.

Thus we align with Bruff and Tansel's (2019) advocacy that a political reading of authoritarian neoliberalism is needed. However, we argue here that this cannot be properly undertaken unless power, including resistance, is understood from the perspective of a relational view of space as politically open to change (Massey, 2005), but also always grounded somewhere. Analyses of authoritarian neoliberalism could thus usefully deploy the concept of the territorial-relational nexus (McCann, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2013) to explore multi-scalar relationships between the urban, national and supranational (cf. Varró and Bunders, 2020).

Literature has emphasized the role of cities as important economic, social, cultural and political agents in a world of global flows and internationally mobile policy, a perspective particularly advanced by literatures on neoliberal urbanism. However, how cities or the cultural sector are negotiating their new situation in nation-states run by authoritarian neoliberal regimes is under-researched. Cities may in fact play important roles for the authoritarian state in delivering state policies, e.g. on housing (Di Giovanni, 2017; Tansel, 2019), security and austerity (Jenss, 2019), and branding, planning, architecture and heritage sites (Di Giovanni, 2017; Grcheva, 2019). Thus in some cases the politics and policies of cities align with the imperatives of the authoritarian neoliberal nation-state. Di Giovanni (2017), for example, demonstrates how Istanbul's (Turkey) 2010 entry into European Capital of Culture competition became part of state politics, while Grcheva (2019) shows how planning in Skopje (North Macedonia) aligns with national priorities.

Most often, however, the authoritarian neoliberal state strategies behind these urban developments carry a threat for the autonomy and democracy of cities, include a rescaling of responsibilities and power which most often involves centralisation but sometimes, e.g. as with austerity measures, pushes the responsibility for potentially unpopular practices onto the urban level. These strategies can also carry the threat of loss of accountability, transparency and further limitations on the democratic opportunities for citizens, media, political opponents or social movements to engage with or critique decision-making. However, in most of the literature, cities and urban cultural policy formation are awarded subordinate and passive roles in relation to the state. National-urban conflicts are not the focus of attention, and agency among cultural and cultural policy actors is neglected. In short, studies of authoritarian neoliberalism have yet to turn to the detailed analysis of the politics of urban policy making.

Cultural policy and 'creative city' strategies are central to urban policy making around the world (Evans, 2009). Recent literature has focused on this as a key example of policy mobility (e.g. Borén and Young, 2016; Peck, 2012; Prince, 2012, 2014; Rindzevičiūtė et al., 2016) in which the formation of urban policy, and cities themselves (Andersson, 2014; Cook, 2018; McCann and Ward, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2012), are increasingly understood as relational-territorial entities. That this is a highly politicised process has received attention in the literature, especially regarding the introduction of Floridian-style creativity policy in cities around the globe (Peck, 2005). This type of policy has been the subject of a quite devastating academic critique regarding its academic limitations, its social consequences, and for making culture and cultural policy into a vehicle for the further neoliberalisation of the city (McLean, 2014; Markusen, 2006; Mould, 2015, 2018; Peck, 2005, 2012; Pratt, 2008; Scott, 2006, 2014). **AQ1** Existing literature has expanded our knowledge of

political struggles, particularly *resistance* to the impacts of urban cultural and creative city policy, especially by artists (Borén and Young, 2013; d'Ovidio and Rodríguez Morató, 2017; McLean, 2017; Novy and Colomb, 2013; Sachs Olsen, 2019).

Beyond these concerns, however, analyses of the formation of urban cultural policies have been critiqued for their apolitical approach (Grodach and Silver, 2012a; Shin and Stevens, 2013). In their review of the last 15 years of research on cultural and creative industries Cho et al. (2018) find that politics hardly features. Cultural policy-making can itself be a form of coercion, as it acts to obscure the importance of its political implications. According to Belfiore (2020: 384):

official cultural policy discourse is problematic in that it effectively obscures, and thus shelters from scrutiny, power imbalances, unequal distribution of cultural authority in society, and unequal access to the means of symbolic representation and meaning-making.

Going further, Lee (2016) finds that 'creative economy' discourses in South Korea are actively deployed to *depoliticise* the introduction of neoliberal economic policies (see also Peck, 2005, 2012).

However, emerging calls in the cultural policy literature emphasize the need to understand the formation of cultural policy as a highly-charged political field (Bailey et al., 2004; Belfiore, 2020; Dinardi, 2015; Grodach and Silver, 2012a, 2012b; Lee, 2016; Marx, 2020; Shin and Stevens, 2013; Vos, 2017; Warren and Jones, 2015; Žilič-Fišer and Erjavec, 2017). As Grodach and Silver (2012b: 4) argue:

[A]cademic and policy discussions of urban cultural activity have tended to focus on economic dimensions, asking whether arts, culture, and creative activity really do drive economic growth, and if so, how. However, given the politically fraught nature of cultural policy creation and implementation, urban politics has to be brought into the analytical picture.

Analysing UK debates around 'cultural value', Belfiore (2020: 385) argues for a perspective which is 'more cognisant of the reality that [cultural policy] is an arena for power struggles and a site of inequality'. At the same time, this makes the formation of urban cultural policy something open to contestation among the different stakeholders involved. Shin and Stevens (2013: 13) adopt the perspective that:

the formation of cultural economy should be approached not only in terms of the nature of urban and regional policies, but also in consideration of the dynamics of local urban politics. The integration of the cultural economy shapes, and is shaped by, power relations among different stakeholders over time.

Marx (2020) makes the point that laws around cultural policy do not so much define what cultural policy is as designate which actors have the power to make those decisions. The making of urban cultural policy thus becomes a matter of the distribution of power across these actors at multiple and overlapping scales – the local and national state, urban administrations, cultural intermediaries, civil society, social movement, artists and activists. This also points to the importance of considering the situatedness of urban cultural policy formation. We argue here that the range of actors can be considerably extended across a range of scales, from the local and national states to transnational relations and influences. This opens up a view of cultural policy as something shaped by political agreement, compromise and contestation across a range of actors at different scales.

Almost all of these analyses, however, have used the conceptual framework of neoliberal urbanism. This critical literature has not engaged with the new political landscape and the rise of authoritarian neoliberal governments in Europe and beyond, or with the emerging policy relations that stem from conflicts linked to the changing relations of power that this new political landscape implies. Much of this critique was written before the new political trends gained power and it fails to engage with contemporary ideologically-charged relations evolving between cities and national governments. This means that there is not much understanding of what the emergence of these regimes mean for the politics of urban cultural policy formation.

The processes shaping Gdańsk's politics of cultural policy are therefore next explored by exploring, first, the relationship between the urban and the national, and then between the urban and the transnational (EU). The approach adopted is not to treat these as separate scales in a fixed, pre-constituted hierarchy, but to consider the politics of cultural policy formation as a territorial-relational entity (McCann, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2013), one which is messy, overlapping and incomplete and being shaped in and through these political interactions. The intention is to contribute to the spatializing of authoritarian neoliberalism through an analysis of urban cultural policy formation in this new context.

Spatialising authoritarian neoliberalism I: Urban-national tensions in cultural policy formation

Cultural policy formation has been reshaped from the early 1990s in Poland. Considerable administrative and financial authority for culture was devolved to regional, district/urban and commune levels as part of a wider decentralization of the state (for a full account see Szulborska-Łukasiewicz, 2015). Central government has promoted a pro-neoliberal stance since 1989, particularly as part of the EU-accession process and following EU-accession in 2004, which also penetrated cultural policy as a strategy of a 'marketisation of culture' (though this has not been thoroughly achieved – Lewandowska, 2018: 153; see also Szulborska-Łukasiewicz, 2016).

Prior to the PiS majority election victory in 2015, the ruling Civic Platform Party's policy (while in an unsuccessful coalition with PiS 2005–7 and in government 2007–15) was more open, both pro-Polish and pro-European. Co-operation with local government was stronger in this period, and there were fewer tensions between Gdańsk and the government. However, the takeover of power by PiS in 2015 completely changed this situation and introduced many tensions into this relationship and effectively destroyed the cooperation between central government and local government in the city. The central government's influence on cultural policy was strongly reshaped from 2015 (and again from 2019) with PiS's overall policy orientation (which also inflected cultural policy) characterized as 'a mixture of nationalism, strong executive authority, Euro-scepticism and antagonistic style in foreign relations' (Lewandowska, 2018: 156), mixed with a strong discourse of traditional Polish Catholicism. In ideological terms, despite decentralisation, in reality 'the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage remains a single source of 'aims, norms and ideologies' ... in Polish cultural policy' (Lewandowska, 2018: 152).

Therefore the politics of cultural policy formation in Gdańsk must be understood in the context of political opposition to the national ruling party and the (re-)construction of a local place identity which counters dominant nationalist discourses. This is not to argue that Gdańsk is totally divorced from the national scale, as there are still relations with the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, but it is to say that Gdańsk's cultural politics

is shaped in tension with these national trends. Unpacking the nature of these urban-national tensions provides one way of spatializing authoritarian neoliberalisation and disaggregating understandings of it based on the nation-state (cf. Bruff, 2016; Tansel, 2017a, 2017b).

While there is a danger in representing the city's politics as homogeneous, Gdańsk is characterized by a strong discourse that is shared by a range of actors, including the urban administration, civil society, cultural intermediaries and institutions, individual cultural producers, and in the cultural policies of the city. This discourse draws on historical sources of identity, which have been reshaped and strengthened during post-socialist transformation, EU-accession and in relation to wider shifts in Polish national politics. Principally, it consists of a narrative about the city as politically and culturally distinct in Poland, as an open, tolerant, immigrant-friendly port city, aware of difference, and being the city of *s/* Solidarity. As one artist put it:

... you probably heard that Gdańsk has this open policy that supports migrations and toleration and the Mayor¹ attend the Parade of Freedom and Equality... We have a different policy, yes. Gdańsk is different. It has the identity different from the national view. It's a part of a policy of this Mayor and it's mostly because people are more liberal-oriented here. It's one of the only cities in Poland that always chooses liberal candidates... Ok, I think Gdańsk is not a typical city in this way because of this thing of the freedom movement. But many cities don't have these policies at all. Most cities in Poland are 'apolitical'. They have a mayor that is known that he is a member of a party but doesn't tend to engage in a national policy. That's the way in which Gdańsk is different and it speaks loudly as a city to support some ideas and some viewpoints.

To some extent this is part of a longer trend of urban-state relations, as the ongoing legacy of resistance to the Communist system – notably discourses of solidarity/Solidarity – shape local politics and its relationship to national politics. This supports the narrative of Gdańsk as a city which is placed counter to, and is actively positioning itself against, the national (Communist Poland in the past, right-wing nationalist Poland in the present). Indeed, this identity stands in marked contrast to how PiS wants Poland to be imagined. Overall, the politics of memory in Poland have become ever more polarized, with discourses shaping Polish identity between the extremes of a Soviet-imposed totalitarian regime and 'the people or the nation: as a rule patriotic, freedom-loving and God-fearing, represented by freedom fighters, civilian resisters, innocent victims or embodied in collective actors such as the workers, rebellious youth or indomitable clergy' (Stola, 2012: 56).

As a result, the Ministry now favours programmes and events that have a more traditional, conservative, religious or nationalistic element. However, for Gdańsk – as a city seeking to build an identity of being open and tolerant – it is politically and ideologically difficult to align itself with national politics and cultural policy. In the words of a leading senior officer responsible for urban policy:

Yes, it makes it a very difficult political situation between central government and local authorities, because... You know, we are focusing on our place. We are the place where Solidarity was born and we don't want to talk only about 'solidarity' in an historical way. We want to talk about solidarity in present times. So, for us it is very important to be authentic in this message. Especially in this time of European history, when some countries make some national focus. Gdańsk was always an open city and we've always focused on a united Europe, because it was, let's say, also the reason that we are rich – European market was [and is] very important for us.

But of course, it makes some difficulties with government, so it is very difficult to go to some Ministries and to say that you are from Gdańsk.

So Gdańsk is doing the opposite of aligning itself with Poland's 'new authoritarianism' (Sutowski, 2018), a stance which plays a role in tensions between the city and central government (e.g. Ministries). These tensions relate to opposition by the city to the imposition of central government values and policies which in turn reveal the nature of the coercion applied by the authoritarian state (Di Giovanni, 2017; Tansel, 2017b).

One high-profile example of this tension and coercion is provided by Gdańsk's Museum of the Second World War. The museum, a €91 m institution in a new building with spectacular architecture, planned to be of interest for cultural tourism not only for Europe but all countries affected by WWII, was due to open in December 2016. The origins of the museum date back to 2008 as a joint initiative between the City of Gdańsk and the then national government of Poland, led by Donald Tusk, originally from Gdańsk and a known liberal. The idea was to have a museum that showed 'a full view on the 1939–45 *global* conflict, without limiting it to the "politics of memory" of any political party' (Gdańsk Mayor Paweł Adamowicz in Huffington Post in May 2016, *emphasis added*). Gdańsk City was one of the co-founders of the museum and donated the land (worth €12 m) on which the museum stands. However, the 2015 PiS election victory led to a change within national government about how the museum should represent World War II in a way more aligned with their nationalist discourse, and the City were not even informed in Spring 2016 about the plans of the new Ministry of Culture to reorient or even close the museum.

However, museum director Paweł Machcewicz – a historian from Warsaw and earlier advisor to Donald Tusk and appointed by him – was legally protected as responsible for its programming and content, creating an obstacle for the new national-conservative government which wanted the museum to change its exhibition to something more 'patriotic' in line with their ideology. In March 2017 the museum was ready to be opened, and did so for a short time with the original exhibition, but following manoeuvres by the new Polish Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński (a sociologist and PiS-representative) the museum was 'merged' with another 'museum' (the legal status of which was questionable) which allowed the Ministry to replace its leadership and try to change its narrative. When it was time to open the museum the national government replaced Paweł Machcewicz with Karol Nawrocki, a historian promoting PiS' perspectives on history, to secure a more 'nationally attuned' exhibition (Ciobanu, 2017; Nelson, 2017; Szyndzielorz, 2017). This directly illustrates the use by the authoritarian state of a mixture of legal and extra-legal power (Tansel, 2017b) and manipulation.

The example of the museum reveals the tensions around cultural policy between opposing sides in the political conflict and highlights the role of coercion (only the 'right' narrative from the point of view of the state is allowed) and the readiness to use doubtful, albeit formally legal, methods (the 'merging') to push through the will of the national government (cf. Di Giovanni, 2017; Tansel, 2017b). Another example is the European Solidarity Centre, another of Gdańsk's flagship cultural institutions, which was declared a 'defiant institution' and had its budget cut by 40% in early 2019 (Rykiel, 2019). The Minister responsible, Piotr Gliński, said it would regain government support if control for the institution was handed over so that it 'would then promote "the true history of Solidarity", i.e. in line with the political vision of the current ruling team' (Rykiel, 2019: 22).

This type of interventions can also be traced in other areas of cultural policy. One example is a cultural education programme for young people which operated in every

voivodeship (province) in Poland, but which was subject to political interference, as outlined by senior staff at a cultural intermediary in Gdańsk:

... the best example of this is this “Very Young Culture” (“Bardzo Młoda Kultura”) which was certain for three years and everybody prepared for three years and all of a sudden ... after six months [the new government] decided to change it completely. The financing, the scope, everything ... To some extent it was replaced by “Independent Poland” which is a new cultural program for education about Polish independence or on the centenary of Poland’s Independence which we are celebrating this year [2018]. So, it’s more like a national culture educational program ... And then on the local level we have this cultural policy which is connected to intercultural dialogue which is not really present on the national level, so Gdańsk is completely different from the national government in this aspect.

The disjuncture between the national level policy, which is more aligned to the central government’s imagining of ‘Polish culture’, and the city-level identity and politics of cultural policy formation is striking, and further revealed in an interview with a municipal officer:

... yes, yes, that was that shift now because the government is now strongly supporting “national culture”, mostly national heritage and that kind of stuff. And we used to be more about the community, [irrespective of] nationality or ethnicity. So, yes, that is the gap.

So the disjuncture between the urban and national scales is important in shaping the political approach to cultural policy at the urban level and this is further reinforced by the changing relations between the city authorities and the Ministry of Culture. Polish cultural policy is implemented and financed at the central, regional, district/urban and commune levels, with local levels of finance proportionately significant relative to national levels (Szulborska-Łukasiewicz, 2015). However, the changing levels of support from the central Ministry to the city are significant, both in reducing the level of funding and in signaling central government’s political stance towards Gdańsk. From being in a privileged position under the former government, in which it drew down Ministry funding, the picture now is that central funding for culture for the city is declining due to this political opposition, as these individuals in the cultural administration comment:

Gdańsk is perceived by the national government to be not on their side, and actually the [former] Mayor is also quite official about it, so there is quite a shift in the ministerial grants in Gdańsk. They are getting lower and lower ...

It’s a very difficult subject, really. Because I think this year none of our projects get the funds from the Ministry, yes, I think none. And for example, four or five years ago ten of our projects were co-financed by the Ministry ... I think it is ... [that] Gdańsk is not very ... Ummm ... “of the right political flavour” ...

This sense of difficult relations with the Ministry was heightened in the period running up to the local elections in 2018, when officials in the urban administration were said to be acting cautiously while awaiting the outcome of the elections:

So, they are all scared. There is kind of sense of paranoia. There are also a lot of controls because, you know, Gdańsk is one of the cities that central government is going after, so they are

all like really scared. Which I can understand but it should not paralyze everything, you knowbut I can understand that kind of sense of fear there...

Cultural intermediaries are also aware of this tension between the national level and the city. As one grassroots organisation put it:

...Is there a tension? Yes, yes. That's why Gdańsk is being...in different ways...punished. They wanted even to divide the administrative structure...they wanted to create an additional voivodeship [province] as the way to limit the money the city receives... There are different ways that they thought would punish the city.

This tension between Gdańsk and the new authoritarian government creates an ideologically motivated scalar dynamic (Jenss, 2019) that plays out in the politics of cultural policy. It is a toxic battle between liberals and conservatives, where the city defends its identity enshrining the values of openness and solidarity, and the government looks to preserve what it considers to be Poland's 'national ethos'. The state uses legal means (controlling funding for culture, attempting to change administrative territorial structures – cf. Tansel (2017b)) to exert control and coerce the direction of local cultural politics and policy formation and does not seek compromise with the city as a political opponent (Bruff, 2014). Exploring the nature of urban-national relations through the lens of cultural policy disaggregates authoritarian neoliberalism, something that becomes further apparent when considering relations with the EU.

Spatialising authoritarian neoliberalism 2: Urban-supranational relations

Exploring the practice and politics of urban cultural policy-making in Gdańsk in this context of urban-national tension as above reveals one aspect of the spatialised nature of authoritarianism. This section extends this by analysing how it is further shaped at a different set of scales by relations between the city and the EU, and Poland and the EU, adding another dimension to the territorial-relational policy-making nexus (Temenos and McCann, 2013).

Poland acceded to the EU in 2004 and the Accession process involved an alignment with its essentially neoliberal economic policies. Cultural policy was an important aspect of the accession process, not least because Accession brought significant funding for the cultural sector. In 2007–13, Poland ranked first among EU countries in terms of allocation and use of funds allocated to culture (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, n.d.).² This supported a significant increase in infrastructure investments and projects in the field of cultural heritage protection in this period, intended to bring Polish cities closer to Europe in terms of the opportunities to use culture and the quality of cultural spaces. Accession also stimulated debate on culture at the national and urban levels. The participation of 11 Polish cities in the European Capital of Culture 2016 (ECOC) competition made culture an important focus of urban policy, causing huge interest among urban centres and engaging a wide range of urban stakeholders (Celiński, 2017; Kubicki et al., 2017).

This had significant implications for the shaping of urban policy-making around culture in Gdańsk, particularly in the context of the increasing tensions between the city and central government. One member of the urban administration highlighted that 'Actually...in

Poland we are number one using European funds per capita, so Gdańsk is the best city in taking the money.’ In some ways this strongly shaped the local politics of cultural policy-making, as Gdańsk has had to develop strategies and documentation which harmonize with EU priorities for funding, to play the game of drawing down EU funding. This is clearly expressed in one interview, which makes clear the necessity of aligning to the requirements of the EU funding programmes:

European politics create these main European [cultural] programmes, and based on these main programmes we then read about different strategic documents, and then influence national, regional and local policies. So I think that local and regional documents [and policies] are a reflection of European.

A pragmatic approach to designing policy and applying for EU funding is thus characteristic of Gdańsk’s approach, but this is by no means politically neutral. Vos (2017) traces how the EU sees cultural programmes and funding as important in facilitating EU-enlargement and socio-cultural cohesion in Europe, thus making cultural funding a type of ‘soft conditionality’ shaping EU-national relations.

However, Gdańsk’s relationships with the EU are more complex than simply aligning passively with strategic requirements and funding schemes. In fact what emerges is a complex mix of pragmatism, the bureaucratisation of activities within the city by the EU, but also of the agency of the city and its key actors. This is further shaped by the increasingly strained relationship between Poland and the EU caused by the PiS government’s portrayal of the EU as a corrupting influence over ‘traditional’ white/nationalist/Catholic values which characterize its particular brand of populist-nationalism. This has been exacerbated by disputes with the EU over the independence of the judiciary and the treatment of civil society and the free press. This led to the European Commission triggering the first phase of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union in December 2017, which empowers it to deprive a country found guilty of violating EU values of its voting rights. The situation has ameliorated, however, as the next EU multiannual financial framework round of 2021–27 approaches, but the tension around cultural values remains.

Gdańsk’s use of EU funding pre-dates 2015 and has been significant over a long time period, and alignment with the EU has offered an alternative strategy in negotiating the now increasingly strained state of political relations with the national. The EU offers Gdańsk a way to ‘scale jump’ and circumvent the state. This has involved the city making changes to its cultural institutional infrastructure. The first key part of this process was Gdańsk’s participation in the ECoC competition. Kubicki et al. (2017) note this had a significant impact in the institutional sphere of the Polish cities who competed, particularly around managing cultural institutions and defining the role of culture in the socio-economic development of cities. It motivated urban stakeholders and demanded a new element of co-operation from them, triggering a profound transformation of Polish urban policy towards using culture as a catalyst for socio-economic change, a view which was apparent in the Gdańsk interviews.

Though Gdańsk’s ECoC application was not successful, the ideas and institutional changes implemented during the competition were so influential that they were embedded into the city’s organizational structure and policy. The city authorities transformed the Gdańsk Office 2016 (responsible for preparing the application) into an urban cultural institution – the City Culture Institute (ICC) – which is currently one of the most active entities

in shaping the city's culture. Joining this competition significantly influenced the dynamic development of urban cultural policy-making in Gdańsk and embedded it in the urban narrative and urban politics as a significant policy driver. As one interviewee noted:

... as a city we lost the [ECOC] bid, but the whole process didn't stop, and the ICC was formed, and they also paid attention to establishing an Observatory of Culture and developing culture... So, that was really important. And during that process of course they established many links with other European cities [and] they entered this Creative Cities Network as well. So, it all started to add upon each other, and many employees started to go to many seminars and conferences... They also organize seminars and conferences in Gdańsk and so on...

What can be seen here is that success in engaging with EU programmes was complex. On the one hand it involved the city aligning directly with the expectations of the EU (strategies, appropriate institutions), fitting in with the EU's use of culture as 'soft conditionality', but on the other hand demonstrating creativity in shaping the city's responses and creative infrastructures. This is further illustrated through a change in the very language used around culture and creativity which was brought about by this engagement with EU programmes and funding. Here, interviewees discussed how a new Polish word for 'creativity' ('kreatywny') had to be invented to align with EU programmes, and displaced the old term 'twórczość' (which has no direct equivalent in English but can be translated as 'creation' or 'artistic output'):

I think it all started by the European Union... this push on "creativity". Naturally, in Polish we say "twórczość"... We started using the word "kreatywny" through the EU push into these creative arts for sort of sustainable development...

... but this is also the truth that this jargon of applications and grants always enters our everyday language. It's like "innovative" earlier. We didn't have this, we didn't use it before. Like "innowacyjny" – we would say probably "nowoczesny" [contemporary, modern] but not "innowacyjny" [innovative].

... When we are writing some applications for funding... maybe it is because of European Union we use this "kreatywny"... and when it comes to artists we talk about "twórczy"...

Here the language used in local policy circles was adapted to that of the EU in order to 'talk the talk' expected by EU officials (cf. Kuus, 2015). Engagement with the EU thus bureaucratized processes and changed culture at the local scale, but this also illustrates a dynamic response by the city authority in developing capacity and expertise in representing the city in a way that aligned with EU expectations and circumvented relations with the central Ministry.

Furthermore, in addition to attracting non-state sources of funding an important response to the prevailing urban-national tensions has been a process of aligning the city's identity and values with those held to be 'European'. As one member of the urban administration related:

I think the most important factor today – of course we can talk about structural funds, we can say about new possibilities in developing the city – but a very important reason why Gdańsk has changed during the time that we are part of the EU, for me it's more important [than funding] that we can make more and more co-operation with different countries [and] programs. So now

we can discuss...with the people who are travelling around the world, travelling around Europe, who know something about how different cities can develop. So, from the cultural point of view it is also very important that they were somewhere, and they have some friends from the different parts of the world...

Here it is clear that engagement with the EU goes beyond funding and is beneficial because it allows for engagement with globally mobile ideas and individuals (Borén and Young, 2020). Engagement with EU programmes and funding is thus part of a wider ‘creative infrastructure’ which combines formal programmes and the requirements of funding streams with opportunities to encounter ideas and knowledge on an international scale, which can then be adapted to local circumstances.

This alignment with an imagined ‘European identity’ featured strongly when Gdańsk entered the ECOC competition using the slogan ‘Freedom of Culture. Culture of Freedom’ to emphasize the concept of creating a ‘European’ vision of culture in which freedom, solidarity, tolerance and openness constituted the most important values in the city. Gdańsk’s application involved co-operation with the entire metropolitan area and a diversity of actors – cultural institutions but also creative communities (Czekanowicz-Drażewska, 2010). The application also emphasized the idea of strengthening international co-operation with partner cities, including Hanseatic and Baltic cities, as well as those on the Amber Route (an historical north-south trade route from the Baltic Sea through Poland to the Mediterranean). In addition, it emphasized that Gdańsk wanted to develop intercultural dialogue by engaging with recent migrants into the city in an open and tolerant way. Here there are clear attempts to align the city with the (equally imagined) identity of the EU as an international/modern/European entity to bolster Gdańsk *vis-à-vis* the state.

And, indeed, while the bureaucratisation of processes accompanying EU programmes are at times a barrier to key actors engaging with the EU, the notion of the EU as a source of ideas and values is sometimes more important than funding, as one activist indicated:

I think that EU funding can be a horror to the underground scene... The amount of paperwork in the city is actually scary, see, but EU would have been harder. That’s why I think that nobody’s interested [from the independent scene] because they see the paper and it’s like “OK, it’s too hard for me”. But EU as a part of inspiration? For sure!

The nature of interaction with the EU, particularly as a mechanism to circumvent engagement with the state, has therefore been a powerful force in shaping the local politics of cultural policy formation in Gdańsk. In terms of spatializing authoritarianism, considering the city’s and Poland’s relations with the EU has added a further layer of complexity, disaggregating a view of Poland as simply an authoritarian state and revealing complex interactions between the urban, national and supra-national.

Conclusion

In this paper we have used a focus on the *politics of* urban cultural policy formation in the neglected context of post-socialist East and Central Europe as one lens through which to contribute to the larger project of spatializing authoritarian neoliberalism. We have done this through an analysis of a case where a city is opposing authoritarian neoliberalist politics and resisting coercion, but aligning itself with a supra-national organisation, the EU. We thus contribute to spatializing authoritarian neoliberalism by undertaking a multi-scalar analysis (see also Jenss, 2019; Varró and Bunders, 2020) of the politics surrounding urban

cultural policy formation using the concept of policy formation taking place within a relational-territorial nexus (following e.g. McCann, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2013). This perspective has allowed us to go beyond analyses of the ruling PiS party at a national level, to reveal how authoritarian neoliberalism operates but is also contested at a range of scales below and above the nation-state.

We have explored the tense relations between different spatial scales of power that challenge national politics and provide resistance to coercion. In terms of spatialising authoritarian neoliberalism, our analyses has explored the politics of cultural policymaking and how localities such as cities may provide alternative political scenes fostering a different set of values which in practice demonstrates the limits to authoritarianism, at least in Poland. We argue that adopting relational thinking and an approach to power as contested across various administrative levels would benefit further analyses of authoritarian neoliberalism, as this would add a clear spatial and dynamic component to this literature.

Analysing the case of a city located in an authoritarian neoliberalist new EU member state has also uncovered relationships between the urban and the supranational which are relatively little explored. Unlike most cases considered in the literature there is a significant influence from 2004 of EU policy, programs and funding on the formation of urban cultural policy and its politics, which has also played a part in negotiating the tension with the national – interestingly Gdańsk can be seen to be ‘scale jumping’ by linking to the EU. This has proved to be a powerful, but not all-encompassing, force shaping the nature of urban-scale political responses in the area of cultural policy, sometimes structuring activities to match EU expectations but also providing a resource to support Gdańsk’s counter-narrative to the national political scene and allowing it to circumvent coercion by the authoritarian neoliberal state.

Adopting this analytical approach allows for consideration of whether neoliberalism itself is changing in these new contexts. Bruff and Tansel (2019) argue that there is not so much a decentring of neoliberalism as a reproduction of neoliberalism in the face of crises and populist challenges. This aligns with Sheild’s (2007) analysis which makes clear that in the Polish case, despite some of the ruling PiS Party rhetoric, there is if anything a deepening of neoliberal logics in the economic sphere. The same can be said of Gdańsk, which is positively embracing strategies around culture and creativity that could comfortably be labeled as ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ (this is clear in a number of the city’s strategic planning documents), although the city does address other policies with a more progressive focus. The EU is certainly still pursuing its neoliberal agenda and Gdańsk is comfortable with aligning with that. Furthermore, not everything that Gdańsk does is in opposition to state policies. This does not suggest that there is a significant challenge to neoliberalism as an economic project, but points to the need for future analyses to carefully consider how the inter-relationship of authoritarianism and neoliberalism is playing out.

Understanding urban cultural policy formation thus requires much more of an engagement with the politics of its formation, and an understanding of the conflicting views of what culture is and should be. Culture and cultural policy are a key arena for ideological struggle, and the ideological nature of the drivers involved requires more consideration. In the context of the rise of populist-nationalism, policy makers at various scales might now be driven by radically different agendas about what culture and cultural policies are desirable.

The time is therefore right for further contextualised and situated analyses of what these new political forces mean for urban cultural politics and urban cultural policy-making in Europe and beyond. Focusing on the politics of urban cultural policy-making links to current calls in the literature to improve understandings of how authoritarian neoliberalism works and to analyse its spatial nature (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Di Giovanni, 2017;

Jenss, 2019; Kinossian and Morgan, 2014; Tansel, 2019). The case presented here points to the need to broaden the range of cases which are used to inform such understandings, with the post-socialist and post-EU-Accession context noticeably neglected. Extending the range of contexts in which these processes are considered will develop understanding of the impact of the shifting ideological landscape on policy formation. As forms of populist-nationalism gain traction across a diverse range of contexts – in Europe including Poland and Hungary, Italy, Sweden and Brexiting UK, but also in Russia, the USA and South America – their impact on urban policy formation needs to be understood.

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Notes

1. The late Gdańsk Mayor Paweł Adamowicz was first elected to office in 1998 and he had just been re-elected for the sixth time in a row in November 2018 when in January 2019 was sadly murdered on stage when attending a charity concert (Rykiel, 2019). Paweł Adamowicz had a profound influence on cultural policy in Gdańsk (Borén et al., 2020).
2. Details of EU support for the period 2014-20 is not yet available on a sectoral basis for Poland. However, Poland was again the largest recipient of EU-funds in this period and most funds were again allocated to the Operational Programme: Infrastructure and Environment (though the exact proportion allocated directly to culture is not currently known and will probably be published in 2021). (<https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/strony/o-funduszach/zasady-dzialania-funduszy/fundusze-europejskie-w-polsce/>) (last visited 15 June 2020).

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