

## **Democracy on the Defensive: East European Art Criticism in the Era of Illiberal Globalisation**

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The rapid rise of neo-nationalist politics and steady creep of populism into the artistic sphere can no longer be viewed as an aberration confined to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, since illiberal values now threaten to take over the global system of economic and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, artistic communities in countries of the former Eastern Bloc have experienced the sharp end of corrosive cultural policies and undemocratic practices designed to suppress internationalist outlooks, channel artistic production and critical reflection into national and patriarchal paradigms and rewrite the narrative of post-communism by obfuscating the progressive legacy of the revolutions of 1989. This paper considers the ways in which art critics have sought to draw attention to the myths propagated by the cultural wing of political populism and reacted to the spread of reactionary positions in local media and art institutions whose autonomy has been undermined by centralisation and censorship. It examines the reaction of art critics to contemporary artistic practices that echo or amplify populist tendencies in society. On the other hand, how openly has art writing dealt with the political issues raised by exhibitions with a directly anti-populist message? At the same time, we consider whether art critics have themselves been drawn unwittingly into reinforcing anti-globalist and conspiracy theory narratives about the post-communist transition. Finally, this paper will also examine unusual cases that are reminiscent of communist times of political leaders directly intervening in the field of art criticism by expressing strong judgements about contemporary art projects that are critical of the traditionalist and revanchist agenda of populism.

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### **Comment:**

'This paper addresses the topic of 'art criticism as a reaction to populist tendencies in (cultural) politics' by examining the response of critics both to the spread of populist ideology in the cultural sphere and to art projects dealing with the rise of political populism in Eastern Europe.'