

Cultural Resilience for Democratic Stability¹

Towards a Resilient Cultural Policy in Germany

Abstract

This article develops the concept of “Cultural Policy for Resilience” as a strategic framework for strengthening democratic societies through resilient cultural ecosystems. Taking Germany as its point of departure, it argues that the country's cultural sector is characterised by a dual vulnerability: the long-standing structural marginalisation and precarity of cultural ecosystems, and the growing societal vulnerability resulting from multiple, overlapping crises. Drawing on the history of post-war German cultural policy, the article contends that a programmatic renewal is required if cultural policy is to respond effectively to contemporary democratic, social and geopolitical challenges.

Building on insights from resilience research, historical institutionalism and comparative historical analysis and drawing on pertinent data from various world regions including Nordic countries, the study identifies eight evidence-based success factors that have enabled cultural policy to contribute to societal stability, adaptive capacity and democratic renewal in times of crisis. These findings are translated into a pragmatic policy framework comprising guiding principles, levels of action and concrete policy measures.

The article concludes that cultural resilience should become an explicit objective of cultural policy. Rather than instrumentalising culture, Cultural Policy for Resilience seeks to safeguard the institutional, social and creative conditions under which culture can fulfil its essential role in fostering social cohesion, democratic stability and long-term societal resilience.

Keywords

Cultural Policy for Resilience; Cultural Resilience; Cultural Ecosystems; Democratic Stability; Resilience; Germany; Cultural Policy; Social Cohesion; Adaptive Capacity; Governance

1. Introduction: 50 Years of German Cultural Policy

In 2026, the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft (German Society for Cultural Policy) celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Established in 1976, the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft was the ambitious attempt by its founding members, most notably Olaf Schwencke, to redefine culture as a major driving force for societal and democratic development and, in doing so, to establish cultural policy as an autonomous policy area in postwar Germany.² Complementing the federal governance system for culture and education in Germany, this “new cultural policy” was intended to be the conceptual antithesis to National Socialism’s abusive instrumentalization of culture between 1933 and 1945.

¹ The present article is a modified English version of Hilgert 2026.

² Sievers, Knoblich and Mandel, eds. 2026.



As with any major anniversary, this milestone provides both the Society and the German cultural sector as a whole with an opportunity to take critical stock and to look ahead by defining its tasks for the future. Which of the Society's basic assumptions have proved valid? Which goals have been achieved, and which promises are fulfilled? What lessons can be drawn from half a century of the Society's history, and what consequences follow for its cultural policy programme as well as for the future cultural policy agenda in Germany? Are cultural ecosystems in Germany adequately prepared for the manifold challenges that the country as well as the European continent are facing?

Against the backdrop of these questions, the present article develops the concept of "Cultural Policy of Resilience" as a policy framework for strengthening democratic societies through resilient cultural ecosystems.

2. Cultural Policy in Postwar Germany: Why Is a Programmatic Renewal Needed?

From the outset, the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft has distinguished itself through a strong, academically grounded and politically progressive programme. This is directly connected with the fact that, virtually from day one, culture was understood by the Society not as "a mere superstructure [...], a simple embellishment of everyday life, an ideological idealisation of social relations through invocations of the good, the true and the beautiful", but rather as a "method of human coexistence" and thus as "a productive element of social conditions".³

The Society's Foundational Policy Paper of May 1976 may be regarded as its founding manifesto; to this day, it continues to shape both the Society's self-understanding and its cultural policy programme. The programme debates of the 1980s, the 1998 Policy Declaration and the Fundamental Programme adopted in 2012 can be understood only against the background of the programmatic positions formulated in 1976, including, or indeed especially, where they contest those positions or develop them conceptually.⁴

When reading the Society's 1976 Policy Paper today, two aspects appear particularly productive for the current debate on Germany's cultural policy: first, the analytical precision with which it describes the deficits and policy needs of cultural policy in Germany at the time; and second, the continuing relevance of that analysis and the insight derived from it: remarkably few of the tasks identified then have been definitively resolved over the past fifty years.

Representative examples include the "glaring cultural policy deficits in public discourse and party politics", the "neglect of cultural research", the "absence of cultural policy concepts in municipalities, political parties, trade unions, associations, etc.", the "isolation of cultural policy planning from other sociopolitical measures", the need to coordinate regional cultural policy with that of neighboring regions, the coordination of cultural initiatives and their cultural policy support at the federal level, and, not least, the restoration of the "connection between cultural policy and educational policy".

The list of cultural policy desiderata formulated by the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft fifty years ago and still unfulfilled today could easily be extended. The obvious question is this: why has a theoretically advanced and academically grounded cultural policy programme, together with a highly

³ Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e. V. (1976), Grundsatzpapier.

⁴ For a comprehensive account and critical appraisal of the programmatic development of the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft, see Sievers 2026.



developed understanding of existing challenges, failed in post-war Germany to bring about a substantial upgrading and strengthening of cultural policy in comparison with other policy fields?

Or, to put the question differently: why do the "glaring cultural policy deficits in public discourse and party politics" identified by the founders of the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft still shape the political framework conditions for culture and its actors in Germany today?

If one wished to draw a cautiously positive interim conclusion about the work of the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft, one might say that the concerns for which the Society has advocated for half a century – concerns that center on the political standing and societal effectiveness of cultural policy – have lost none of their relevance or urgency. What lessons can be drawn from this assessment for the Society's programmatic renewal and, more importantly, for the strategic transformation of the German cultural sector as a whole?

3. The Dual Vulnerability of Culture

In my view, the fundamental premise of this programmatic and strategic renewal must be that the German cultural sector and its cultural ecosystems are currently characterised by a dual vulnerability.

I speak of dual vulnerability because, first, cultural policy – and with it the framework conditions for work in the cultural sector – does not, despite continuously increasing budgets, possess the political and societal centrality and stability that should be accorded to culture as a "method of human coexistence" and as an infrastructure of society's capacity to act. Instead of centrality and stability, cultural production in Germany has long been characterised by marginality and vulnerability. Marginality and vulnerability, in many cases, lead to precarity.

The reason for this, incidentally, is probably less a deficit in theoretical knowledge about challenges, tasks and necessary measures than a deficit in the practical implementation, evaluation and, where necessary, adjustment of those measures, as well as in their coordination across the municipal, state and federal levels.

Alongside this sector-specific, historically persistent vulnerability of cultural infrastructures, there is now a second form of vulnerability: the current cross-sectoral vulnerability of society as a whole. This broader societal vulnerability has entered public awareness with particular force since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law, and it increasingly shapes political, academic and cultural discourse.

Current and concurrent crises that threaten Germany's internal and external security, its economic performance, its social cohesion and, not least, the liberal-democratic constitution of its society have direct effects on cultural ecosystems as well. Their resilience is therefore also being tested by challenges affecting society as a whole.



4. “Cultural Policy for Resilience”: Rationale and Objectives

It is this dual vulnerability of culture – the long-standing, structurally conditioned vulnerability of cultural ecosystems and the vulnerability derived from crises affecting the polity as a whole – that urgently calls for an appropriate and contemporary response from cultural policy.

Grounded in social realities and programmatically ambitious, such a cultural policy must aim to reduce the marginality, vulnerability and precarity of cultural ecosystems while at the same time increasing their centrality, stability and adaptability. Central, stable and adaptive cultural ecosystems are, in turn, known to have positive effects on society and to strengthen its resilience.

I propose to bring together the concepts, strategies and measures of such a cultural policy – one that increases cultural resilience and thereby also makes society as a whole more resilient, while responding to the dual vulnerability of the cultural sector diagnosed above – under the guiding concept of “Cultural Policy for Resilience”.

Cultural Policy for Resilience seeks to secure cultural ecosystems through preparedness and by strengthening their capacity to withstand crises such as natural disasters, armed conflicts, pandemics and anti-democratic influences. It promotes a sustainable cultural policy that must be implemented at different levels – federal, state and municipal – while at the same time emphasising the importance of artistic and cultural freedom for a functioning democracy. Important practical approaches include strengthening networks, promoting self-reflection and accepting mistakes as opportunities for learning in order to become more resilient in the future.

Here, the concept of resilience denotes not only "robustness" or "resistance" in a narrow sense, but also the capacity to adapt and to engage in discourse. Cultural practice creates spaces in which futures can be imagined, societal conflicts endured, narratives shared and trust generated. A resilient democracy needs these resilient cultural spaces, which secure participation and foster the capacity to live with ambiguity.

A Cultural Policy for Resilience recognises this societal dimension of resilient cultural action without subordinating cultural production to a sociopolitical agenda. To put it plainly: Cultural Policy for Resilience does not mean instrumentalising art. Rather, it protects freedom in such a way that societies can withstand crises. For resilience does not arise from control; it arises from open spaces of possibility. A resilient cultural policy strengthens the conditions of freedom, not its content.

In the field of cultural funding, Cultural Policy for Resilience entails a shift away from a pure imperative of growth and innovation and towards stable, sustainable and enduringly resilient structures. Cultural policy in Germany is still too often fixated on projects and oriented towards innovation, events or flagship initiatives.

Cultural Policy for Resilience shifts the focus to sustainability, diversity, redundancy, maintenance, capacity-building and the stabilisation of cultural ecosystems. Only in this way can culture, as a "method of human coexistence" and as an infrastructure of society's capacity to act, unfold its socially stabilising effect especially in times of crisis. Put differently: *a resilient cultural policy can help Germany respond to multiple crises while strengthening cultural diversity, democratic values and social cohesion.*



5. Cultural Policy and Resilience: Evidence-Based Success Factors

The Cultural Policy for Resilience proposed here is not based on normative assumptions alone, but on an evaluation of historical experiences of cultural action in phases of societal crisis and transformation. The starting point is the question of the conditions under which cultural policy measures, by building or strengthening cultural ecosystems, have demonstrably contributed to the stabilisation, renewal and learning capacity of societies.

Methodologically, the approach follows a comparative, historically empirical pattern analysis (pattern matching), as established in policy research and historical institutionalism. It examines recurring constellations of cultural stabilisation, participation, institutional learning and psychosocial processing in post-war, transformation and structural-change contexts.

Accordingly, Cultural Policy for Resilience can be particularly successful when it takes the following eight factors into account:

1. Cultural Infrastructure as Public Provision

Societal resilience depends on reliable cultural spaces; it does not arise solely from economic or security-policy stabilisation.

In periods of crisis and post-war reconstruction, cultural sites – such as theatres, libraries, museums, and music and art institutions – stabilise everyday life, mark institutional continuity and create public spaces in which "normality", orientation and trust can be reconstructed. Cultural infrastructure thus works in ways comparable to other forms of public provision: it provides reliable access, routines and spaces for social encounter, and can thereby contribute to the restoration of social cohesion. Comparative studies of post-conflict urban reconstruction underline the significance of cultural infrastructure as a component of sustainable recovery strategies.⁵

2. Participation and Cultural Inclusion as Resources of Legitimacy

Resilience is not an administrative condition, but a social process. Trust, belonging and agency arise where people are recognised as subjects of cultural practice. Historical examples such as the settlement movement and the British community arts movement show that participatory cultural programmes increase the perceived legitimacy of public institutions, strengthen social bonds, and enable the productive negotiation of conflict and diversity, in the sense of cultural democracy.⁶

3. Symbolic Repair, Remembrance and Cultural Memory

Cultural policy bears responsibility for symbolic achievements of integration that cannot be substituted by legal or economic means.

After violence, dictatorship or profound rupture, symbolic resources are central: recognition, mourning, the public negotiation of responsibility and narratives of belonging. Policies of remembrance – from memorial sites to museums and rituals – act as symbolic repair and can support democratic reconstruction. Unprocessed symbolic ruptures, by contrast, remain latent factors of destabilisation.⁷

⁵ For example, IFLA 2022; Rovit 2016; Stanley-Price 2007; UNESCO and World Bank 2018.

⁶ For example, Addams 1910; Dupin-Meynard and Negrier 2020; Jeffers and Moriarty 2019; Kelly 1984.

⁷ For example, Bull and Hansen 2016; Hirsch 2012; ICTJ 2007; Williams 2008.



4. Decentralisation, Flexibility and Institutional Redundancy

Polycentric and federal structures enhance the adaptability of cultural systems. Decentralised systems avoid single points of failure and increase adaptive capacity: regional autonomy, diverse provider landscapes, multiple centres of decision-making, mobile formats and institutional redundancy – that is, the availability of several actors or places able to assume similar functions – increase robustness in the face of shocks and enable faster learning.⁸

5. Long-Term Orientation and Institutional Stability

Time is a central resource of cultural resilience. Multi-year, reliable funding enables staff retention, capacity-building, planning security and institutional learning. Short-term project logics generate volatility, transaction costs and risk aversion. Funding architectures in Scandinavian countries, for example, combine stability with arm's-length procedures to safeguard freedom while ensuring continuity.⁹

6. Cross-Sectoral Coordination

Resilience is a cross-cutting phenomenon. Cultural impact is amplified when cultural policy is coordinated with education, social policy, health policy and urban development, as in New Deal programmes or municipal reconstruction policies. Historically, this is particularly visible in programmes that address employment, social security, public spaces and cultural production together; culture here functions as a cross-cutting instrument.¹⁰

7. Culture as a Space of Transformation and Innovation

Cultural policy has not only a stabilising but also a transformative effect. In phases of structural change, culture often becomes a field of experimentation: new publics, new forms of work, new local value creation, and creative placemaking or culturally driven urban development. The success factor lies not in the event as such, but in the capacity to support cultural production as a space for controlled experimentation – with feedback effects on the economy, the city, and civil society, while remaining sensitive to risks such as gentrification and displacement.¹¹

8. The Psychosocial and Trauma-Processing Functions of Culture

Societal resilience often fails because of psychological and social strain, not because of material resources. Crises also have psychosocial effects: fear, loss, fragmentation of social networks. Cultural practice can create spaces for expression, meaning-making, mourning and collective processing, as a complement to clinical care and as a community resource. Empirical evidence for this can be found both in conflict and post-conflict research and in arts-in-health and psychosocial approaches.¹²

⁸ For example, Behnke 2024; Capano and Woo 2017; Carlisle and Gruby 2019.

⁹ For example, Duelund 2003; Harding 2025; Mangset 2009; Nordic Council of Ministers 2025.

¹⁰ For example, Encyclopaedia Britannica 2026, "WPA Federal Art Project"; Morphey, Ruggeri and Zhang 2024; UNESCO and World Bank 2018.

¹¹ For example, Courage and McKeown 2018; Merli 2002; O'Connor 2010; UNESCO and UNDP 2013.

¹² For example, Hirschberger 2018; Saul 2022; Somasundaram and Sivayokan 2013.



6. A Policy Framework for Cultural Policy for Resilience

What operational guiding principles, levels of action and measures can be derived from these normative and historically empirical foundations for a Cultural Policy for Resilience in Germany? The aim must be to provide policymakers and public administration with a pragmatic concept and corresponding instruments through which cultural resilience can be systematically strengthened, operationalised and made measurable.

In what follows, I briefly outline the most important elements of such a pragmatic policy framework for Cultural Policy for Resilience, focusing on central guiding principles, levels of action and concrete measures.

Guiding Principles

Cultural Policy for Resilience is based on structural sustainability, cultural education as a resource for competence, diversity as an adaptive strength, long-term stability, decentralisation and cross-sectoral cooperation. Drawing on success factors of cultural action in phases of societal crisis and transformation (see Section 5), I therefore propose the following guiding principles:

- Infrastructure and Access - Treat cultural infrastructure – spaces, personnel and funding – as a form of public provision.
- Participation and Inclusion - Actively involve different social groups in planning and implementation.
- Symbolic Repair and Remembrance - Deliberately cultivate places of memory, rituals and narratives in order to stabilise collective identity.
- Decentralisation and Flexibility - Strengthen regional adaptability and mobile formats as means of robustness in the face of local shocks.
- Long-Term Orientation and Stability - Ensure multi-year, predictable funding instead of short-term project funding.
- Coordination and Networking - Strengthen interfaces between culture, social policy, education, health and the economy.
- The Creative Economy as a Driver of Transformation - Use cultural funding as a catalyst for innovation, sustainability, the social economy and local value creation.
- Trauma Processing and Psychosocial Functions - Recognise culture as a form of collective processing of crises.

Deeper dimensions of resilience, sustainability as structural and ecological resilience, cultural education as a resilience competence, and diversity as adaptive capacity should also be taken into account.

Levels of Action and Measures

Concrete measures and instruments of Cultural Policy for Resilience are situated on five levels of action:



Level A: Governance and Institutions

As key measures at the level of governance and institutions, I propose a federal strategy for cultural resilience as an overarching steering framework, the creation of a National Council for Cultural Resilience, the appointment of regional cultural resilience coordinators with an interministerial interface function, and regional and municipal cultural platforms that serve as resilience hubs for coordination, rapid response and participatory planning. The priority should be to build on existing formats of exchange and coordination and, wherever possible, to avoid creating new superstructures or parallel structures.

Level B: Funding and Legal Framework

We need a National Resilience Fund for Culture. This earmarked fund for prevention, emergency assistance, rehabilitation and transformation projects would provide the financial and legal framework for implementing a federal strategy for cultural resilience and is indispensable as an investment in the future viability of cultural ecosystems.

Level C: Infrastructure and Accessibility

Measures at the level of infrastructure and accessibility are equally important. We must expand mobile cultural provision, strengthen digital resilience through digital archiving, hybrid formats, Open Access concepts and digital sovereignty, and extend barrier-free spaces in society through cultural offerings adapted to physical, economic and linguistic needs.

Level D: Social Cohesion and Participation

Measures in the field of social cohesion and participation are also essential to the success of Cultural Policy for Resilience. These include, in particular, a fund and technical assistance for bottom-up projects and community-led initiatives, intercultural mediation programmes that build bridges in heterogeneous and diverse societies, and a strengthening of culture in education and care through binding interfaces with schools, hospitals and senior citizens' centres.

Level E: Monitoring, Research and Learning

Resilience presupposes the capacity to respond adaptively to experience. The level of monitoring, research and learning contributes to the effectiveness of Cultural Policy for Resilience by developing a set of indicators that combines quantitative and qualitative metrics on participation, infrastructural resilience and psychosocial impact, by promoting the exchange of good practices at national and international levels, and by providing for short evaluation cycles to adapt and improve measures.



7. Quick Wins

A significant challenge for Cultural Policy for Resilience in Germany is that the vulnerability of the cultural sector and of society as a whole is already markedly elevated. It is therefore important to achieve rapid improvements in resilience through measures that can be implemented quickly and easily. Such quick wins might include:

- standardised rapid-response packages – for example, technical assistance, small operating grants and support for material repairs – for cultural institutions after disasters;
- Cultural Safeguarding Audits, that is, assessments of collections, archives and venues in terms of vulnerability and the prioritisation of protective measures;
- funding for artists who work participatively in crisis regions through Resilience Fellowships, for example in trauma processing or community arts;
- Hybrid Infrastructure Grants to support hybrid formats such as digital archives, streaming and virtual exhibitions, and to strengthen technical redundancy; and
- training for communities and institutions in emergency plans, museum rescue and digital safeguarding, in the form of Community Emergency Trainings.

8. The Architecture of Sustainability

Quick wins create trust and demonstrate the capacity to act. Sustainable solutions, however, do not arise in a sprint, but in the architecture of our cultural ecosystems and institutions. They require strategic planning and reliable framework conditions that enable the implementation of the stated goals in the medium and long term.

The Cultural Policy for Resilience presented here is both the order of the day and a task for generations. The urgently needed programmatic renewal in cultural policy must go hand in hand with a readjustment of state funding instruments. Only in this way can the achievements of German cultural policy since the end of the Second World War be secured and further developed in the face of the profound challenges of the present.

This requires realism, transparent communication and coordinated cooperation between municipalities, the Länder and the federal government. It requires the courage to set priorities as well as the willingness to make difficult decisions.

The future of art and culture in Germany should not be left to chance. Instead, we should act from the conviction that the strength of a free society is inseparably connected with the strength of its cultural ecosystems, and that it was precisely the deliberate shaping of cultural policy in Germany that has made a crucial contribution since 1945 to the stability, learning capacity and power of renewal of our democracy. Therefore, cultural resilience should become an explicit objective of cultural policy in every democratic society, not just in Germany.



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