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Call for Papers for the workshop

“Turning the tide: Opposing challenges to democracy across contexts”

European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, 26-27 March 2026

Organizers:

Sonja Priebus (European University Viadrina), Theresa Gessler (University of Hamburg), and Aleksandra Maatsch (Jean Monnet Chair at the University of Wroclaw)

Description:

An increasing number of democracies around the world are subject to processes of ‘autocratization’ or ‘democratic backsliding’. Within the European Union, several states are affected by multifaceted authoritarian tendencies. In Hungary and in Poland, right-wing governments have dismantled democracy and the rule of law, with Slovakia since 2023 having embarked on a similar path of autocratization. In Germany, the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is set to win the upcoming general elections in some Eastern states and is likely to put democracy under pressure. One more recent non-European example is the United States under President Donald Trump’s second presidency, where, for example, media pluralism and the independence of the judiciary have come under threat.

While research has mostly analysed processes of autocratization and, in particular, actors driving these processes, actors resisting those attempts have been largely neglected (Gamboa 2022). Hence, opposition to autocratic tendencies has received disproportionately less academic attention than the actions of autocratic incumbents.

This workshop centres on all forms of *opposition* to trends of populism, autocratization and democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe (including Germany), with the aim to enhance our still limited theoretical and empirical knowledge on opposition activities. It is guided by two major questions: 1) Who are the opposition actors? 2) At which levels do these opposition actors operate?

As these questions suggest, we employ a broad definition of opposition *“as any activity, or combination of activities, taken by a changing set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of the motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization”* (Tomini et al. 2023, p. 121). By using this definition, we wish to encourage research beyond the traditional parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties, i.e. on other actors engaging in opposition to autocratic challenges, such as non-governmental organisations, civil society, professional groups or opposition-led municipalities.

In addition, whereas research often focuses on the domestic level of contestation, we wish to expand our perspective to the subnational, European and international levels.

We are therefore specifically interested in papers which:

- Analyse opposition activities by a broad range of actors, including non-governmental organisations, civil society, professional groups or opposition-led municipalities;
- Analyse different arenas (parliamentary, extra-parliamentary) and different levels of opposition activity (subnational, sub-regional, European, international);

- Compare opposition activities across cases and different contexts in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Overall, we want to unpack the variety of strategies used by opposition actors and also assess the effectiveness of varying strategies.

The workshop aims to bring together scholars at different career stages. We intend to publish a selection of the papers as a *Special Issue* in a high-impact journal.

To apply, please submit an abstract of max. 300 words plus a brief biographical note (max. 100 words) to priebus@europa-uni.de by 5th December 2025. Successful applicants will be notified before Christmas. Travel expenses of up to 400 € and accommodation will be covered.

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