

Illiberal Cities: Manifestations of Authoritarianism and Contested Spaces

On **January 20-21, 2025**, the **Illiberal Cities Workshop** took place at the Georg Simmel Center for Urban Studies, Humboldt University. The workshop was organized by the Urban Futures at Risk research group and supported by the Einstein Foundation. The event brought together scholars from various disciplines to examine how local governance has become a key battleground between authoritarian trends and democratic resistance. Participants examined how authoritarian regimes instrumentalize urban planning, infrastructure, and governance to consolidate power, marginalize opposition, and reshape public spaces while also highlighting urban spaces as arenas for democratic contestation and resistance.

The workshop featured two keynote lectures, three thematic sessions, a book launch, and a roundtable discussion.

Keynote Lectures

The keynote lectures provided conceptual frameworks for understanding authoritarian urbanism as a global evolving phenomenon not limited to particular geographies:

- **Andrei Semenov** (Nazarbayev University, Astana) in his lecture “*Authoritarian Urbanism in Eurasia*” highlighted the relationship between urban development and authoritarian governance in Eurasia, examining how large-scale urban projects serve as tools for elite consolidation, mass control, and political stability.
- **Daniela Zupan** (Bauhaus University, Weimar) in her lecture “*Authoritarian Urbanism: Conceptualization and Contemporary Manifestations*” explored the conceptual foundations and contemporary manifestations of authoritarian urbanism, demonstrating how urbanism is used as a governance tool and how its forms and functions have evolved in different historical and political contexts.

Thematic Sessions

- **Local Democracy and Illiberal Transformations.** Workshop participants analyzed the role of populism and authoritarianism in eroding democratic norms, highlighting how local governance structures are being systematically weakened in illiberal regimes.

Discussions revolved around the dismantling of democratic institutions, the rise of neopatrimonialism, and the use of emergency laws to curtail local autonomy.

- **Authoritarian Urbanism and Local Governance.** A central thematic focus of the workshop was the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes extend their control at the municipal level. Participants examined how these interventions serve to reinforce state power, limit local democratic agency, and create controlled urban environments that align with authoritarian governance strategies.
- **Urban Frontlines: Negotiating Democracy, Infrastructure, and Resistance.** Participants examined urbanization as a tool of state power—from large-scale infrastructural projects and urban renewal policies to digital surveillance. Case studies from Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia demonstrated how urban environments can serve both as instruments of authoritarian control and sites of resistance through grassroots mobilization and counter-publics.

Book Launch: *Reclaiming Democracy in Cities*

At the workshop, a special session was dedicated to the launch of the book *Reclaiming Democracy in Cities*, edited by Gülçin Coşkun, Tuba İnal-Çekiç, and Ertuğ Tombuş (Routledge, 2024). The session provided an opportunity to discuss the key themes of the book, particularly in relation to the broader debates on urban governance, democracy, and resistance against authoritarian practices. The conversation touched upon the challenges of local democracy, the role of urban spaces in political struggles, and the various forms of agency exercised by citizens and local actors in reclaiming democratic governance.

Roundtable Discussion

The workshop concluded with a roundtable discussion that reflected on the interplay between neoliberalism and authoritarianism in urban governance, as well as the emerging strategies of contestation and resilience in illiberal urban contexts. Scholars and activists from diverse disciplines convened to examine a variety of examples, including how urban development can either reinforce authoritarian control or foster democratic participation.

The rich discussions at the workshop underscored the pressing need for continued academic engagement with the political dimensions of urban governance. Future collaborations and

networking initiatives were proposed, with the aim of fostering further comparative research on the relationship between authoritarianism, urban governance, and democracy.

