

CAPONEU policy indications

Interim report
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CAPONEU
The Cartography of the
Political Novel in Europe



**Autonomy
Institute**

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Introduction

The CAPONEU Project

CAPONEU is an interdisciplinary research project that examines the contemporary social and political life of the political novel in Europe. The project suggests that throughout the 20th century and into the present novels have played distinct and important roles in the production, dissemination and contestation of politics – in the full diversity and ambiguity of this term.

As a form, novels remain an important part of public and cultural life across Europe, and a common tool deployed in literary and political education (albeit in different ways) throughout Europe. Through and beyond formal education, novels are involved in the production of cultural identity, be that national, European, language-oriented or any other socio-cultural oriented identities.

They are therefore a subject of concern to policy-makers in a variety of areas, in particular but not exclusively those working on culture and education.

Research-to-impact workshops

As part of CAPONEU, the Autonomy Institute has been running research-to-impact workshops for members of the project. These workshops have focused on policy development, offering participants insight into the process of converting academic research into policy.

This report reflects on some challenges which have come out of the process of thinking through policy in relation to CAPONEU's work, and suggests ways these might be worked through. A number of policy ideas related to the social and cultural lives of political novels have come out of the first two of these workshops. It also presents work-in-progress descriptions of these proposals for further reflection and development, and indicates how they might be built upon.

Broadly, these policy ideas can be divided into two strands, which workshops have addressed in parallel:

- 1. Educational Policy**
- 2. Cultural Policy**

These strands have focused proposals into broad platforms while offering an initial framework for targeting stakeholders and actors. They should not be viewed as absolute or permanent, however, and could be changed or further broken down in the future.

We (Autonomy) have synthesised and fleshed out what was drafted/expressed in workshops, including merging some similar proposals together – while trying to avoid overly determining or shaping these ourselves. We've also added a few policy suggestions of our own and reflections on general themes and questions from the workshops.

The document embodies a moment of collaboration between Autonomy and the wider consortium – and so we welcome feedback and feed-in from other members, whether or not they attended the first two workshops.

Educational Policy

As a project principally concerned with the political novel as a core part of European political, cultural and social heritage, it is perhaps not surprising that CAPONEU members are keenly interested in the pedagogical function and potential of such works.

A number of recommendations were brought forward in this area, generally oriented towards furthering the mobilisation of political novels as political texts in schools, and in intervening in the ways that such texts are taught.

Six policy proposals have been developed in workshops:

1. **New models of teaching political novels should be developed**
2. **Reading guidelines should follow stricter political questions**
3. **Curricula should include more novels in translation**
4. **Political novels should be recognised as integrated in other disciplines and areas of life**
5. **Professional development courses should be offered to secondary education practitioners**

1. New models of teaching political novels should be developed.

Political novels *are* epistemic interventions within pedagogic practice and teaching should not shy away from this. New models for the teaching of political novels should be developed, distributed to educational institutions and integrated into syllabuses. In particular, the teaching of political novels as political texts should be encouraged.

Teaching on the novel should recognise their capacity to model political and social innovation. Students should be engaging with what novels show us about political action, or about different models for politics and society, and with how they present this.

These changes should be considered from secondary education to the university level. In some contexts, there is a risk this could politicise the discipline and receive push back from conservative quarters – something which should be considered when developing this policy further.

Autonomy note: The specific approach being proposed here needs to be fleshed out, either via reference to existing pedagogic frameworks or to be fleshed with a few extra sentences here. We might want to focus on this in future workshops.

Some more consideration might also be taken of the extent to which this practice might already exist in some places, but not others. Some countries, schools or individual teachers may teach literature as a more technical discipline, others as a more cultural or even political one. One version of this proposal could therefore be to protect/guarantee the teaching of novels/literature as political texts at the EU level.

2. Reading guidelines should follow stricter political questions.

In addition to formal literary questions (narrative voice, character constellation, writing style, etc.) reading guidelines in universities, schools and reading groups, should also ask political questions, such as:

- How does the novel portray the relationship between state and society?
- What are the main challenges for a society emerging from a revolution, but whose subjects still cling to pre-revolutionary attitudes?
- What ideas does the novel contain and how, if at all, are they negotiated between different characters, groups or positions?

- From which perspective can the novel be seen as political and from which not?
- What kind of ideology lies in the background of the novel, i.e. against what ideological horizon does it emerge?

These guidelines should be distributed to educators in secondary and tertiary education, as well as to book clubs, cultural centres and libraries.

Autonomy note: These guidelines will need to be further fleshed out. Additionally, as in the policy one, texts may already be being taught in this way in some places but not others. A good way through/forward might be to aggregate best existing practice and derive guidelines from there.

3. Curricula should include more novels in translation

In some countries, such as the UK, there is currently a paucity of texts taught in translation. Instead, a number of texts in translation, from Europe and elsewhere, should be included in the curricula set by governments, schools, universities, prisons and other environments in which texts are set or taught.

This would allow perspectives of those who do not write in English to be encountered by students at different levels. This policy questions the existing mobilisation of literature curricula in the production or disruption of national and regional identities – and suggests they ought to contribute towards the development of “global citizens”.

Such a policy fits within existing frameworks, such as [UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development](#) (ESD). “Global citizens” are more able and willing to construct or participate in global networks, which is beneficial for trade and business, as well as for global development. Such

globally-minded citizens are especially important for confronting planetary phenomena like climate change.

Existing university modules – especially from decolonial and postcolonial departments, where this is more the norm – might be taken as best practice for such a policy.

Autonomy note: This policy proposal compliments suggestions from the Cultural Policy strand well – especially those focused on translation.

(Not yet published) work from the Political Novel in Action workstream suggests that the teaching of novels in translation is more common in some European countries than others (and is especially rare in the UK), but that where translated texts are taught they are normally extracted from a “European” cannon.

Some national contexts might be taken as an example of good practice – though this European cannon is itself limited, and it could be productive to think explicitly about how provision could move beyond it. It could be helpful to consult educational and sociological literature in this regard.

4. Political novels should be recognised as integrated within other disciplines and areas of life

Novels are repositories for collective historical and worldly thought, experience and knowledge, which are used by a great many actors as part of their writing, practice or philosophy.

This should begin with a more conscious recognition of existing integration (which is widespread). It might involve recognition in different disciplines of importance of novels

(e.g. their role in influencing political actors/ their place in philosophy), such as:

- a. Politics
- b. History
- c. Philosophy
- d. Religious studies

Autonomy note: The specific proposal being made here needs to be clarified, i.e. Who should be acknowledging this, and how? This might be targeted towards literary scholars specifically or to people working in these other domains.

5. Professional development courses should be offered to practitioners in secondary education

The political novel should be integrated into pedagogic practice as *content*, but also as an opportunity to innovate on *method*.

Civil society already uses film as a method in education, and could be taken as an example to draw upon. Such a policy introduces the political novel ‘upstream’ of classrooms, so as to educate the educators in preparation for better deployment of diverse curricula.

Autonomy note: The method in question needs to be outlined, either here or in another document. Whether this policy is targeted towards literature/ language provision or towards other disciplines needs to be clarified.

Cultural Policy

The circulation of political novels beyond the classroom – in civil society, as commodities and as a unit of cultural exchange – is also significant, and of interest to the project.

The five proposals listed here all focus on the political novel as an aspect of cultural policy. They propose a number of interventions, which could be made at a European or at national levels, to build infrastructures for the promotion and translation of political novels in a number of languages.

1. An EU prize should be established for best European political novel – including translation into the European Union’s official languages
2. A series should be established of affordable political novels in translation
3. Greater diversity should be encouraged in literary publishing and festivals, including translation
4. Resources and training should be developed for library reading groups to use political novels in civic political education.
5. Coordination should be established for the cultural promotion of political novel at the local, national and European levels

1. An EU prize should be established for best European political novel – including translation into the European Union’s official languages

Enhancing social cohesion and solidarity between EU countries is part of the core aims of the European Union; meanwhile European Union policy frequently invokes an idea of a “common vision” for Europe. But maintaining both a common vision and a diverse, inclusive culture between a number of distinct languages and cultures is not straightforward.

The novel is one common aspect of European culture, and centrally implicated in notions of European identity. In order to protect and promote the novel, an annual EU-funded prize should be established for the best new political novel written in Europe (in any language). This prize would be distinct from the existing [EU prize for literature](#) in its specific attention to political novels. Political novels in particular offer a venue for confronting a number of contemporary Europe-wide crises, including the climate crisis and the rise of the far-right.

However, the proliferation of texts is not equally distributed between languages. A smaller number of languages enjoy wider publication and translation, leaving less hegemonic cultures and languages marginal in the literary economy of Europe. Texts should therefore be considered from any language, and part of the award should include the translation of the text into the twenty-four official languages of the European Union.

Similar awards already exist in specific countries, though there is no similar European award. This means, however, that there are existing infrastructures for the application of such an award (including judges, processes, administrators, etc.) which should be drawn on in its construction. Germany, for instance, holds an annual [German Book Prize \(Deutscher Buchpreis\)](#).

Autonomy note: It's important that this proposal is distinguished from existing prizes. The translation aspect is one way to do this – though it might also be articulated as a reform to the existing EU prize.

2. A series should be established of affordable political novels in translation

Political novels are not affordable or readily available everywhere in Europe, and translations are generally

subject to market forces. While there are some small independent publishing houses that specialise in the translation of global majority literature into English (such as [Tilted Axis](#), which positions itself against the “hierarchisation of languages and forms of translation”) – such efforts work with limited resources and generally only translate texts into English.

A subsidised series should be established (funded by the EU or national governments) of translated political novels in a number of languages, with a focus on representing literature which has not yet been translated from its original language. The series should include anthologies of excerpts in translation (from the texts in the series), to be used in education and reading groups.

Such a series raises editorial questions: a public conversation about what constitutes “political” literature, or what warrants translation. The series might embrace an ongoing discussion of what ‘the political’ constitutes, allowing this to be renegotiated through public debate every year. Editorial choices offer an opportunity for intervention in this discourse, asserting certain texts as political.

The series might be put out as a tender or published by a government agency and distributed by independent bookshops. Precedent in this regard exists in the German [Federal Agency for Political Education](#), which publishes subsidised affordable non-fiction in German.

Autonomy note: This policy is merged from two: a proposal for an affordable novel series and another for the production of anthologies.

3. Greater diversity should be encouraged in literary publishing and festivals, including via translation

Interventions are needed into the EU's existing cultural landscape to allow for a more global focus. Existing EU cultural funds should be directed towards encouraging diversity in literary publishing and festivals, via translation and inclusion of global majority literature. Publishers like Tilted Axis are already involved in this work, but have limited resources.

Autonomy note: This policy is still in the very early stages of development – what specific intervention might be aimed at literary festivals?

With previous proposals, it might fit into a smaller platform specifically around the politics of translation.

4. Library reading group schemes

Amid the rise of the global far right, and ecological crisis, training should be developed for librarians running reading groups to deliver citizenship and political education via the political novel. Training materials might be offered to local/national governments, who in turn would offer the training itself to librarians.

Text portraits developed for the CAPONEU project are a resource which might be made available/ promoted to help librarians.

Autonomy note: This proposal is also quite early-on, but can be developed in the next workshop.

The claim that political novels can help assuage the far right, while reasonable, needs to be made more clearly. Artificial intelligence was also flagged as a potential resource to help develop/distribute this

scheme, and as a way to promote institutional buy-in – though exactly how this would be applied needs to be developed further/clarified.

5. Coordination should be established for the cultural promotion of political novel at the local, national and European levels

Each of these cultural policies (and several of the educational policies) require some degree of coordination between local, national and international contexts, the state and the publishing industry, and would likely require the participation of a number of different stakeholders.

Existing infrastructures have been identified which might be drawn on or activated, including the Booksellers Association of UK & Ireland, the European Literature Network in London, or the Federal Agency for Political Education in Germany. Links and collaboration needs to be built between these potential participants – both for the promotion of the political novel in general, and for the realisation of the specific policy proposals outlined in this document.

Autonomy note: We've drawn this proposal together from a few similar proposals, including one in the educational policy strand.

A specific strategy for achieving the overall objective of coordination between industry, civil society and governments would be helpful. For instance, one might suggest the establishment of fora (or the use of specific existing fora) for this to take place.

Further policy suggestions

Epistemic infrastructures are basic prerequisites for creative work. Authors need income to feed themselves and places in which to live before they can write – and this is especially true if we want a diverse literary culture which is not overwhelmingly populated by the very rich, or by members of cultural elites.

Though not yet discussed in workshops, here we offer three suggestions, all oriented towards promoting a vibrant literary culture across Europe, within which the political novel can flourish. These are listed here in brief for discussion in the final workshop and would be fleshed out before a final report.

1. A European basic income for authors

Similar to the [Irish basic income for artists](#) scheme, regular unconditional cash payments would be made to a cohort of authors selected from across Europe. Such a non-place based funding scheme is aimed at creating conditions under which the production of novels can flourish across Europe.

This would require a scoping phase, and could be tested as a time-limited trial – with literary production taken as one measure of success.

2. Establish a cross-Europe author residency

A political novel writers residency could be established to embed authors in political movements across Europe.

3. Spotlight on new generation novelists

Emerging authors – especially those writing in languages with smaller literary economies – should be promoted and supported. Established authors might, for instance, be asked to nominate unknown writers for a promotional list, events or training.

Themes and reflections

Communicating the political novel

Neither “the political” nor “the novel” can be straightforwardly or uncontroversially defined. Indeed, these terms are highly contested even within the CAPONEU project – itself a possible barrier to building policy suggestions as a group, let alone communicating them.

While working with and through the ambiguity of these terms can be productive for literary and cultural analysis, it has been remarked upon as an obstacle to the process of developing specific policies. In particular, it has been noted that the absence of clear or concise definitions for the political novel, while theoretically appropriate, might represent a barrier to communication with the wider public.

While there may be no universal solution to the problem of defining the political novel within related policies, a few strategies for working with the term have emerged from workshops:

One suggests that the political novel is an example of an “essentially contested concept” – a notion for which definitions are themselves politically instrumental and therefore evasive of empirical justification or stable consensus.

Any context in which the “political novel” is invoked, such an approach suggests, will inevitably itself become a location of contestation of the term. This means that in the context of something like a literary prize for political novels, that decisions made in this case by a panel of judges as to which texts qualify for the award will themselves play a role in contesting the term – as will public reactions (positive or negative) to awards. Such public debate is not

necessarily a problem, and might be part of the political life of political novels.

Another approach suggests an affirmative framework in which novels which can be coded as a political novel qualifies by merit of its characterisation as such. This requires a baseline of justification for a novel to be political (it must either be justified or demonstrated as being coded as such), but prevents examples being identified or ruled out on specific criteria. If a novel is invoked as political, it becomes political.

Such an approach is oriented towards the acceptance of as broad and interesting a corpus of “political” texts as is possible, without deferring to normative criteria or well-established (and possibly exhausted) examples. Such an approach holds utility in cases where positive descriptions of “political novels” are necessary, allowing the body of such work to adapt to local needs, interests and demands.

Notably, neither of these routes propose an explicit definition of the political or the novel, but instead suggest ways of communicating with and around notions of the political novel. While it’s important to think strategically about how the political novel is being deployed in a policy register, it may be unproductive to draw policies into difficult conceptual debates about the term.

National contexts and assumptions

One difficulty in developing this policy is the question of applying similar policies across a number of distinct educational and cultural jurisdictions. This is not only a question of navigating different policy/governance structures, but also of confronting different situations on the ground.

Reading through our proposals as they currently exist, the assumed baseline appears quite broad: some seem to suggest that literature is currently taught as not-political, for instance, while others suggest the need to confront the sorts of national/global politics curricula are already engaged in.

This doesn't mean we can't work on policy together, generally aimed at the European level, but it might suggest different ways of articulating or implementing policies. For instance, we might look more often at existing best practices in Europe and suggest it be promoted/reproduced elsewhere, or in other cases we might want to describe a policy as a protection, or as a guideline, to promote practice where it does not already exist.

Audiences and further development

Several questions have been raised in workshops about how the policy ideas we've been developing might be meaningfully promoted, brought to the appropriate stakeholders and realised in practice.

Drafting a policy document is only part of the process of making policy happen. A number of strategies might be followed for bringing these policies to sympathetic audiences, or to build some legislative support for them. A good suggestion made in workshops was for the consortium to compose a statement to support a policy document, and with which to approach governmental bodies. Such a document might point towards precedent in existing EU policy documents, for instance, for promoting an idea of pan-European culture, identity and universality a basis for many of our proposals.

A complementary route could be to organise a roundtable with politicians from across Europe, and with other stakeholders such as publishers, booksellers, representatives of NGOs and academics, through which to discuss the platform and the possibility of bringing some of

its concerns forward. Such a roundtable could be organised in one country, or ideally with representatives from across Europe and from the European Commission itself.

European and national policy-makers are clear targets for this policy, but there are others – some already identified in specific policies – that might be also considered. Literary festivals are one example, as are nationally-oriented booksellers groups, independent publishers, educational institutions, libraries or prisons. Headteachers networks and conferences could be a useful target for curriculum or pedagogy oriented policies, for instance.

We recommend that before proposals are taken into these venues, that they are fine-tuned towards their audiences, or even refined to smaller, more cohesive platforms. There are a few strands already running through these proposals which might be developed into such a targeted platform. Shortfalls in the existing political economy of translation stand out as a specific issue around which such a platform might be built, for instance. Similarly a platform of infrastructures for literary production, including the literary prize, subsidised book series and the proposal of a basic income for authors.

Alternatively, a platform could be built around methodological shifts for political novels in educational settings, or around the deployment of political novels against an insurgent far right.

Next steps

The proposals presented here are still in a draft form, and will be returned to in the final policy-to-impact workshop. Contributions from other consortium members is an important part of developing them into richer proposals – so please feel free to reach out to us with feedback, ideas or additions in the meantime.

We'll regroup later this year for a final workshop in which we'll work on the policies here and consolidate a platform for a final report.