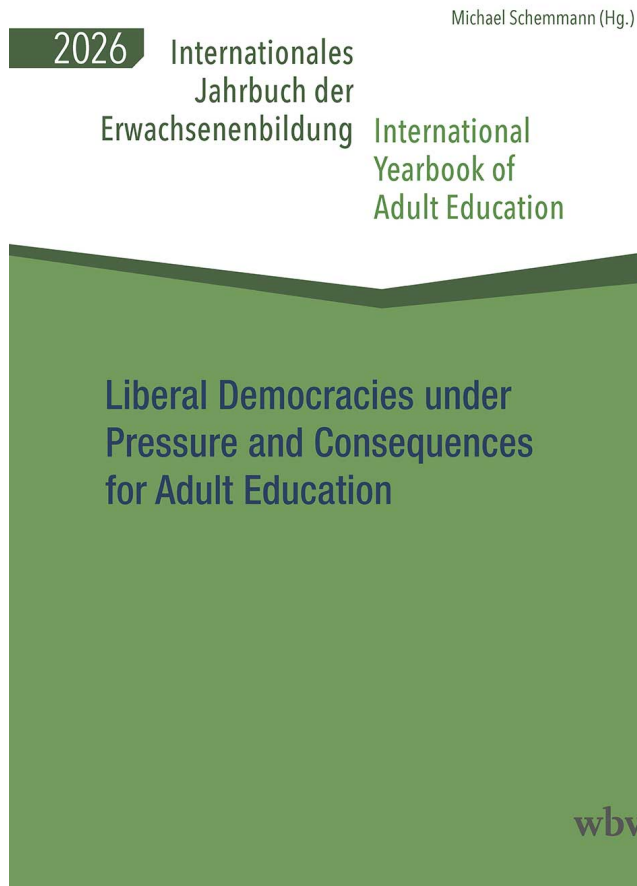




This introductory article will start off by briefly focusing on the research activities regarding adult education organizations under pressure. Next, the concept of this year's volume and articles will be presented. The article will conclude with some remarks on our own account.

Zitiervorschlag: Schemmann, Michael (2026). *Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education. An Introduction to the Topic*. In: *Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung 2026. Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education*, S. 9-13. Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. <https://doi.org/10.3278/I80123W001>

E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Michael Schemmann

Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education. An Introduction to the Topic

An Introduction to the Topic

aus: Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung /
International Yearbook of Adult Education 2026
(9783763980123)
Erscheinungsjahr: 2026
Seiten: 9 - 13
DOI: 10.3278/I80123W001

Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education. An Introduction to the Topic

MICHAEL SCHEMMANN

This year's volume of the International Yearbook of Adult Education takes the fact that liberal democracies around the world but also in Europe get more and more under pressure as a starting point. Some authors already discuss the end of liberal democracies (Patzner, 2023). However, probably like no other segment of the educational system, adult education is characterized by its closeness to society and is thus highly dependent on social and political developments. Consequently, it can be assumed, that adult education is particularly affected by attempts of right-wing extremists policy actors to influence adult education. With this volume we want to contribute to this debate.

This introductory article will start off by briefly focusing on the research activities regarding adult education organizations under pressure. Next, the concept of this year's volume and articles will be presented. The article will conclude with some remarks on our own account.

1 Researching liberal democracies and (adult) education under pressure

Research on pressured liberal democracies and consequences for education is currently carried out particularly in the higher education system with a focus on academic freedom.

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) (FAU Institute of Political Science/V-Dem Institute, 2025) points to an erosion of academic freedom that can be observed worldwide. The AFI is published by the universities of Erlangen-Nuremberg and Gothenburg and presents a global ranking that measures the degree of academic freedom in 179 countries based on indicators of freedom of research and teaching, institutional autonomy, and freedom of academic exchange. The findings of the AFI 2025 point to a decline in academic freedom in 34 countries, including democracies such as Finland, Israel, Portugal, Argentina, and the United States (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The case of the United States and the threats to comparative and international education is also analyzed in an article by Salajan and Jules (2025).

The findings of the AFI 2026 update show, that academic freedom has declined in 50 countries over the last decade (Kinzelbach et al., 2026).

Furthermore, AFI case studies show that in various countries, politicians opposed to pluralism have sought to control academia as soon as they came to power (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The same methods are employed: the institutional independence of academic institutions is eroded, academic freedom is restricted, and research that contradicts political views receives less funding or is attacked in other ways.

As regards liberal democracies under pressure and adult education there is rather little research to be found. However, one international study provides evidence of the vulnerability of adult education under populist governments. The examples of Brazil or India show that funding for adult education and literacy provision were cut dramatically (Grotlüschen et al., 2023).

I would also like to highlight a project carried out by a group of researchers at the University of Hamburg. Titled “Firewalls in Education”, the project focuses on the attempts of right-wing influence on adult education organizations, as well as the organizations’ counter-strategies (Buddeberg et al., 2025, p. 42). The findings demonstrate the presence of right-wing influences at all levels of the adult education system, the macro, meso and micro levels. As regards the reactions, the study shows that these range from a dialogical strategy in the sense of talking to the right to a boundary strategy involving firewalls against the right (Buddeberg et al., 2025).

2 On the concept and the individual contributions

When developing the concept for Volume 49 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education, we took the fact that adult education as a sub-discipline of educational science is more closely intertwined with society than other sub-disciplines as a starting point. Therefore, adult education is highly dependent on social and political developments. Historically, adult education has also been strongly linked, on an international level, to democratization processes within nation states and democracies.

Against this background we focused on the research question of how the increasing threat to liberal democracies affects adult education. In particular, adult education researchers were invited to analyze the changes in adult education in a particular country in which populist, right-wing and therefore anti-democratic parties are part of the government. As can be seen, the authors chose different approaches to tackle the research question which also reflects, that it is a delicate task for the authors to carry out this analysis in respect of possible repercussions. We would also like to mention that one already submitted manuscript was withdrawn due to advice by the author’s university.

Balázs Németh’s article *Adult Learning and Education in Hungary. Trends and Issues* analyzes the development of adult learning and education in Hungary from 1998 till 2025. Besides giving a general analysis of the development, he highlights certain phases, e. g. the Covid-19 phase and discusses their impact on the development of adult learning and Education. Furthermore, Németh also employs policy papers and surveys

from international organizations to reflect the situation of adult learning and education in Hungary.

In their article, *Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges* Martin Kopecký and Michal Šerák analyse the relationship between adult education and democracy in these countries. They take a historical approach, studying adult education and democracy as of 1918 to the present day. They focus particularly on the case of Czechia. However, by comparing it with developments in Slovakia, the article provides further insights into the relationship between the two countries. Despite significant differences between Czechia and Slovakia, the authors argue that the potential of adult education for democratic learning, emancipation and civic participation remains unrealised in both.

Rachel Charlott Mayr and Anke Grotlüschen use the fact that adult and continuing education is under pressure from the far right as a starting point for their article *Right-Wing Pressure on Adult Education and Language Provision for Adult Refugees and Migrants*. Their contribution focuses on language provision for migrants. Based on an analysis of ten studies identified through a scoping review, they present findings showing that right-wing and far-right influences have an impact on policy frameworks and public discourse around language provision. One consequence is that mainstream parties adopt right-wing positions. Furthermore, language provision is also redefined as an instrument of control rather than a social right. It becomes embedded in narratives of cultural threat and national unity. The contribution also outlines research gaps.

The article *Responding and Responsibility. Governance, Resilience, and Vulnerability to Authoritarian Politics in Austrian Adult Education* by Peter Schlögl aims at analyzing how right-wing and far-right policy agendas influence adult education in Austria. He particularly focuses on the governance of the adult education sector and studies which features create resilience and which features create vulnerability. As such he identifies provider diversity, loose coupling in a multi-level system of governance and strategic agency of organizations and researchers as factors contributing to resilience. Financial dependence, models of indicator-driven governance, symbolic reframing and the rapid creation of parallel institutions are considered as factors contributing to vulnerability. The contribution also drafts policy options to protect democratic adult education and also analyzes the role of adult education researchers in this process.

Next to the articles to the key subject section, this year's volume of the International Yearbook of Adult Education also includes one article in the section Miscellaneous. Dörthe Herbrechter, Amina Burger, Tabea Leibold and Julia Koller analyze the process of implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in adult and continuing education. By employing both qualitative group interviews and quantitative survey data from newly established PLCs they gain insight into the compatibility of PLCs for processes of professionalization in adult and continuing education. Overall, they find evidence for good chances of implementation.

This year's volume is completed by three reviews written by Gwennaëlle Mulliez, Timo Kann and Tabea Leibold.

3 On our own Account

I would like to thank all authors of the contributions, who prepared their manuscripts within the deadlines. What is more, I am also grateful to all reviewers of the articles and to the authors of the review section.

My personal thanks goes to Tabea Leibold who runs the editorial department of the International Yearbook of Adult Education. She constantly works on improving the quality of processes which guarantee the standard of the International Yearbook of Adult Education.

Volume 50 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education will focus on the topic “Professional Learning of Teaching Staff”. We welcome contributions to the key subject of this volume as well as contributions to the sections Miscellaneous and Reviews.

4 References

- Buddeberg, K., Grotlüschen, A., & Cafantaris, K. (2025). Dialogue or Firewall? How the Providers of Adult Education in Germany React on Influence of the Extreme Right. *The Adult Learner*, p. 42–64.
- FAU Institute of Political Science/V-Dem Institute (2025). *Academic Freedom Index*. <https://academic-freedom-index.net> (Last Accessed: 18.06.2026).
- Grotlüschen, A., Belzer, A., Ertner, M. & Yasukawa, K. (2023). *Adult learning and education within the framework of lifelong learning* (Vol. 81.). Bonn: DVV International. https://www.dvv-international.de/fileadmin/files/Inhalte_Bilder_und_Dokumente/Materialien/IPE/IPE_81_ALE_within_Framework_04-2023_web.pdf (Last Accessed: 18.06.2026).
- Kinzelbach, K., Lindberg, S. I., Lott, L. & Panaro, A. V. (2025). *Academic Freedom Index 2025 Update*. FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg Institute of Political Science and V-Dem Institute. https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2025.pdf (Last Accessed: 18.06.2026).
- Kinzelbach, K., Lindberg, S. I., Lott, L., Panaro, A. V. (2026). *Academic Freedom Index 2026 Update*. FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg Institute of Political Science and V-Dem Institute. https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2026.pdf (Last Accessed: 18.06.2026).
- Patzner, N. (2023). *Das Ende der liberalen Demokratie? Die Feinde der Freiheit haben die Klimakrise entdeckt*. München: Novum.
- Salajan, F. D. & Jules, T. D. (2025). Academic Freedom Under Siege: The Global Fallout of US Authoritarianism and Its Threats to Comparative and International Education. *Comparative Education Review*, 69(3), p. 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1086/736480>

Author

Prof. Dr. Michael Schemmann

Michael Schemmann is Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Cologne. His research interests concern structural developments in continuing education, research on adult education organizations and international-comparative adult education research.

Contact

Prof. Dr. Michael Schemmann
University of Cologne
Chair of Adult Education/Continuing Education
Innere Kanalstraße 15
50823 Cologne, Germany
michael.schemmann@uni-koeln.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0806-7632>