

We Shall Not Be Moved

An Overview and Conversation about the Situation of Independent Performing Arts in Hungary

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„Here’s the city and country together,
we shall not be moved...”

Peter Seegers

“Theaters in Hungary feel the chill of Viktor Orbán’s culture war”— the *New York Times* reported on 13 December 2019¹, marking one of the rare instances, when international press attention was directed at cultural policy changes in Hungary. Such was the case at the end of last year, when the contents of an omnibus bill were leaked with plans for further centralization and concentration

¹ Karasz, Palko, *Theaters in Hungary Feel the Chill of Viktor Orbán’s Culture War*, *New York Times*, 13 December 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/13/arts/hungary-theater-orban.html>

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of power in the cultural field, in particular in the area of the performing arts. The latter had become the new site of a culture war in Hungary, since the 'victory' of the opposition during the 2019 municipal elections — the greatest political gain of the opposition since 2010 — resulted in a change of guards in city councils across the country, not only in Budapest, but also in 10 out of 23 regional capitals, thus putting the monopoly of the Orbán regime on power to the test.

In the following, I will attempt an overview of the situation of independent performing arts in Hungary, spanning the period from 2008 until today, focusing on the major challenges after the change of government in 2010, and how the independent scene and particularly its advocacy group, the Association of Independent Performing Arts Professionals (FESZ) — the Hungarian equivalent of IG Freie Theater — responded to these, as well as what strategies of advocacy, protest and self-organisation were used. I will trace these developments to finally arrive at the present moment, in which the operational funding of the field is threatened by the tug of war for power between the government and the city of Budapest, provoked by the disruption of the earlier status quo by the 2019 municipal elections.

The End of Permanent Underfunding?

2008 was an outstanding year for the independent performing arts scene in Hungary, as it was the year in which the Performing Arts Law was passed. As a result of several years of lobbying and advocacy, this law created a separate category (Category VI) for independent performing arts organisations, thus regulating and guaranteeing their operational funding via an open call for applications to be published each year. Categorized as 'independent' were a diverse spectrum of not-for-profit organisations, from theatre and dance companies of varied but dominantly contemporary aesthetics to presenters, theatres and production houses that did not receive normative funding from the state. The law was widely regarded as a historical moment in terms of the artistic and

institutional development of the independent scene, which, since its 'emergence' from underground subculture after the political transition in 1989, had been struggling to create the necessary infrastructure needed to sustain both its artistic and organisational activities. Cultural politics under Socialism were in the best-case scenario being tolerated, and in the worst case it led to prohibition or persecution of the independent performing arts. Therefore, the institutionalization of the field could only begin in the 1990s. However, the political changes also brought new socio-economic challenges: the full employment and social net of Socialism, from which artists also benefited, quickly became a thing of the past and independent cultural producers found themselves confronted with the precarity of freelance work, forced to self-manage as entrepreneurs in times of deepening economic crisis.

Starting in the early 90s, important locally and internationally active institutions and festivals were created by and for the independent scene, such as MU Theatre and Trafó House of Contemporary Arts in Budapest or the MASZK Association/Theater Festival in Szeged. Here, artists could show their work. However, they didn't have sufficient means to co-produce or support the artists more structurally beyond project-based collaborations. The Performing Arts Law responded to the urgent need for more predictability and stability regarding operational funding, and also strived to ensure the possibility of long-term planning: although artists and organisations had to apply each year, the jury was to be elected for three years in order to ensure that the experts evaluating the applications could follow the artists' work over a long period of time.

2009 was the first year in which the field benefited from increased funding — 1,16 billion Hungarian Forints (4,22 million Euros) — with the new law coming into effect in 2010. In order to ensure the increased level of funding on a long-term basis, a percentage clause was negotiated: the independent performing arts scene (Category VI) was to receive 10 % of the entire budget dedicated to Categories I-VI, according to the Performing Arts Law. What did this mean exactly?

Regrettably, this did not imply 10 % of the total public funding for the field of performing arts, only 10 % of the state funds granted by the Cultural Ministry for municipal and regional theatres — excluding state-run theatres and additional municipal funding — and amounting to 1,3 billion Hungarian Forints (4,73 million Euros) for the independent scene, which was only 3,8 % of the funding for the entire theatre field. To give an indication of the size of the independent scene in 2010: Category VI included 108 registered organisations (across the country, with a significant concentration in Budapest), comprising circa 2.000 artists and cultural workers, with more than 6.000 performances annually.

The Poor Become Poorer

Unfortunately, the funding figures stated above — clearly not sufficient, but a significant improvement in terms of working conditions — were never paid out to the independent scene. In April 2010, the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition won the elections and the government changed, resulting in changes in the Cultural Ministry and the re-negotiation of the state budget in response to policy changes as well as the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis, to which the new government responded with severe austerity politics. Although the jury made its funding recommendations in June 2010 (which already meant that organisations and artists had to pre-finance at least six months of their activities from their

own resources), in July the ministry announced that due to budget issues it would only pay up to 50 % of the initial funding, withholding the other half, which — despite protests and appeals from the scene — resulted in a 34 % budget cut for the calendar year. The downward spiral continued in 2011, when the Performing Arts Law was amended and the 10 % clause was first reduced to 8 %, only to be abolished entirely in 2012, thus no longer guaranteeing a fixed level of funding. The jury elected for 3 years was also dissolved in 2011 and, from then on, curators were appointed on a year-to-year basis — usually on very short notice, thus impeding the necessary preparation for expert decision-making. The ministry increasingly elected pro-government and politically loyal professionals as curators. However, until 2018 the field's advocacy group FESZ held the right to be consulted on their appointment.

To make things worse, in 2012, 36,5 % of the independent scene's financing was once again frozen. As a result of vocal protests, petitions and appeals, in December 2012 (at the end of the affected calendar year), the Ministry announced that the funds would be paid, but this only happened retroactively in the first half of 2013. In order to illustrate the varying — predominantly sliding — scale of operational funding over the past years (especially, if one takes inflation rates and increased costs of living into account), I would like to share the statistics provided by FESZ:

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Funding (million Euros)	4,22	2,90	2,68	2,28	4,17	3,97	3,42	3,32	3,58	3,52	3,47

*In the years 2017-2019 the amount of funding in Forints did not change, but the Euro-Forint currency rate did.

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Multiple Shocks to the System

What did this pervasive unpredictability and precarization mean for the independent scene? As the numbers also show, in terms of funding, independent performing artists and their organisations are clearly minor players within the larger field of theatre and dance. The envisioned growth and development that the new law would have facilitated was immediately stunted as the years 2010-12 shook an already fragile and precarious system. Due to the irregularity of funding — delayed payments and budget cuts — many professionals found themselves in debt, having taken out loans to pre-finance their activities: Theatre and dance companies with ensembles were forced to re-consider their way of working, more connected and internationally acclaimed artists tried to survive with the help of transnational co-productions or increasingly chose to work abroad (such as theatre directors Árpád Schilling, Viktor Bodó, Kornél Mundruczó, or, more recently, the choreographer Adrienn Hód), the number of local and national co-productions increased as artists and institutions scrambled to pool resources. Several groups, including smaller stages and production houses, tried to reduce their activities to a bare minimum and survive on meagre project funding from the National Cultural Fund, or the more fortunate ones on the income from EU cooperation projects, while others had to stop working entirely, resulting in the dissolution of companies and the closing of spaces.

Parallel to the budget cuts, the threat of institutional take-over also loomed over the field. In early 2012, the choreographer Yvette Bozsik was announced as the new director of Trafó in Budapest, the most significant institution for contemporary performing arts in the country. With this move many artists saw their main partner in danger, as it was unclear with what profile and mission the renowned but politically disputed artist would take over Trafó. This appointment

was one of several in the first years of the FIDESZ-KDNP government — from the National Theatre and New Theatre to Kunsthalle and Ludwig Museum — by which the new political regime strived to consolidate their desired 'cultural change'². After vehement protests, Yvette Bozsik resigned from her appointment and, following a new call, the internationally acclaimed choreographer Josef Nadj was chosen as new director. This resulted in a curious scenario: the desire for change was fulfilled. However, Nadj had no ambition of intervening in Trafó's profile and mission. He therefore ensured a certain continuity for the next years — paradoxically, with former director György Szabó as artistic consultant at his side. That Trafó was spared from a real takeover might have to do with the fact that the institution is not of such high prestige and was not so central to the government's symbolic politics, thus becoming one of the pockets of freedom which allow politicians to waive accusations of exerting overt control over the cultural field.

² 'Cultural change' has been high on Viktor Orbán's agenda since (at least) 2009, when — already certain of winning the upcoming elections in 2010 — he spoke of 'culture's future role' in creating a central force of political power not divided by value debates but 'naturally' representing national values at the annual gathering of the FIDESZ party elite in Kötcse, a small village in Hungary. There, he described the function of cultural policy as creating and maintaining the political community, clearly not considering culture as a distinct sphere separated from politics (Kristóf 2017). His 2009 statements not only question the autonomy of the cultural field but also point to the later culture wars, manifested in the clash of two dominant cultural hegemonies, with the more liberal canon supported by the earlier social democrat-liberal government — and currently defended by the left-liberal political opposition — up against the post-communist traditionalism/neoconservatism of the present political regime.





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What Is to Be Done?

The above shockwaves also had an impact on the independent scene's advocacy activities. The lobbying and policy-making work around the Performing Arts Law as well as the 2010 protests against budget cuts were led by AFSZSZ, the Association of Alternative and Independent Theatres and BESZT, the Association of Hosting Theatres (or Presenters). However, the two coalitions did not survive this challenging period. Therefore, in 2012, a small core group of engaged professionals — including Árpád Schilling, theatre director, Balázs Erős, artistic director of MU Theatre, and Kata Csató, puppet theatre director — decided to reorganize the independent scene's grassroots advocacy work and formed FESZ, the Association of Independent Performing Arts Professionals³.

Adrienn Zubek, a long-time board member of FESZ and co-organiser of the 2012 campaign against the threatened budget cuts, recalls: "AFSZSZ fought heroically for what it could achieve at the time, but, as it often happens in the case of bigger organisations with a long history, you do not always have enough resources to sustain an active membership. The key to our success in reorganizing was that we adopted a different attitude. This meant creating a more horizontal and basic democratic organization which defined its new profile and line of work via a collective and participatory process of self-definition." This more inclusive and transparent way of working strengthened FESZ at a crucial moment, when intense campaigning and self-organising was needed, in order to oppose the existential threat to the field. These developments also coincided with broader political change: 2012 was the year of significant student movements across Hungary against the new higher education law, in which grassroots organizing and mobilizing played a central and highly mediated role, with mass assemblies held by students at various universities. The following year, 2013, can be seen as a year of

cross-sectoral alliances, as Adrienn also stresses: "We created Humán Platform (Human Platform)⁴ in order to represent all the fields that were impacted by the policy-making of the newly formed mega-ministry, the Ministry of Human Capacities, responsible for education, healthcare, social policy and culture, and organized collective protests with many other advocacy and activist groups. Our goal was to work together, to strengthen one another. It is a complete luxury for these fields to struggle separately." Unfortunately, as she also notes, this cross-sectoral cooperation did not prove sustainable on the long term. "Oppressive politics can bring about alliances and collaborations. However, existential insecurity and burn-out endanger both advocacy and activism. There is no healthy fluctuation of people: if you stop, there's no one there to continue."

Cooperation or Confrontation

Adrienn assesses the advocacy work of FESZ between 2012 and 2018 to have been relatively successful, which the increase in operational funds from 2013 also confirms: "After 2012, the government's strategy was to avoid scandal. They wanted us to keep silent, they didn't want protests. But with hard work and well-prepared proposals we could achieve quite a lot, even though there were no longer formalized channels for advocacy. For example, in 2015, we developed a strict criteria system for the evaluation of the annual operation aid applications. This happened collaboratively, all FESZ members could contribute, and it was finalized in an internal, democratic decision-making process. It was written from A to Z, according to the highest professional standards, with the strictest accounting. So, in the end, the Ministry adopted it." However, as Adrienn also acknowledges, trying to collaborate with the Ministry to improve the conditions of the independent scene has its limits. Therefore, FESZ also

³ <http://www.fesz.org>

⁴ <http://humanplatform.hu/en/about-human-platform/>



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took more confrontational steps, such as turning to the ombudsman in order to investigate the 2010 budget cuts and the 2012 freezing of funds. In the first case, it was revealed that these measures were based on unfair discrimination (as the budget cuts only effected the independent scene), in the second, they raised the question: what happens when the state does not comply with its own contractual obligations? What rights does one have in a legal agreement with the state? Unfortunately, neither case had legal consequences.

When talking about the challenges of advocacy work, Adrienn also mentions the heterogeneity of FESZ members, especially politically: “The members have very different opinions about how their interests should be represented and what approaches and attitudes — from the cooperative to the confrontational — they have regarding advocacy work. What makes a good advocacy group? In terms of self-critique, I often think that at the time of reorganization and transformation, we should have done a more rigorous self-definition process, even at the price of losing some people along the way.” FESZ currently has 100 members — of which 85 are organisations and 15 are individuals — with a board that is elected yearly by its members. The board has to apply as a group and formulate a programme in which they also describe their approach to advocacy work — an addition suggested by Adrienn — so that the membership can vote accordingly.

Embezzled Existence

“After 2018, a shift happened in government politics,” Adrienn observes. “The goal was no longer to keep us silent, but for us not to exist. No one informs us about policy-making, you have to do detective work and constantly read between the lines.”

A first significant step in this direction was the suspension of TAO, the corporate tax aid, introduced in 2009 by the previous social democrat-liberal government, which enabled

organisations in the field of performing arts and filmmaking to collect a sum equal to 80 % of their ticket income from private companies as re-directed tax. In 2010, the Orbán government controversially extended TAO to the field of sports. This corporate tax aid had played an important role in alleviating the dramatic consequences of irregular operational funding, even though it perpetuated inequality, as it clearly benefited those with higher audience numbers and therefore ticket income. Nevertheless, it also meant significant financial resources for the independent scene — in some cases up to 15 to 20 % of annual budgets — and, more importantly, resources that artists, organisations and institutions could calculate and plan with in advance, as it was quantifiable and guaranteed. Until the end of 2018, that is, when it was retroactively suspended — only for the cultural field, not for sports —, leading to a loss of money that had already been spent, as everyone had calculated with it for the calendar year.

Following appeals from the entire performing arts scene (as everyone was affected), in 2019, the government announced that they would compensate the loss of TAO with centrally distributed public funding, which could be directly requested by organisations in the amount corresponding to their earlier corporate tax aid. This resulted in outrage when the funding decisions were published: although officially only registered performing arts organisations could apply, large sums were distributed to applicants ranging from voluntary firemen’s associations to dubious private companies (tracked back to government politicians) and proxy NGOs, many of which had no identifiable performing arts activities and did not comply with the application guidelines. FESZ evaluated the results, showing that only a maximum of 1 to 2 % of the 37 billion Forints distributed (115 million Euros) actually benefited the independent performing arts scene, while many eligible organisations — independent as well as city theatres — had been rejected due to the lack of



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resources. This gives an extremely bitter aftertaste to the fact that the government suspended TAO on account of alleged embezzlement and misuse of funds. FESZ is currently working on an investigative documentary as well as planning legal steps, as, according to the association, the Ministry broke its own rules when distributing this funding.

A Tug of War Between the City and the State

This brings us to mid-December 2019, when the omnibus bill I mentioned in the beginning of the article was leaked. “We were investigating what will happen to the National Cultural Fund (author’s note: which the bill was planning to abolish), when we discovered that they were planning to scrap the operational funding of the independent scene,” Adrienn recalls. With the motto “Culture is a national minimum” (a word-play on the name of the National Cultural Fund, as ‘fund’ in Hungarian means ‘minimum’ in slang), FESZ initiated a demonstration in Budapest and an online petition that was distributed nationally as well as internationally, calling for solidarity. The demonstration was joined by three prominent city theatres, who were also directly affected by said bill, which, among other things, wanted to increase the Ministry’s influence over the appointment of the heads of municipal theatres that are co-financed by the state (which they all are).

The protest thus resulted in an unprecedented, albeit temporary alliance between different sectors of the performing arts scene, in particular the independent scene and city theatres. Following the demonstration, which was attended by 13,000 people and also supported by Budapest’s new mayor Gergely Karácsony, the bill was amended. However, the new version was passed without consultation in an end-of-the-year rush procedure. The National Cultural Fund and the operational funding of the independent scene were spared, but the tug of war around the co-financing of municipal theatres was upheld, making state funding conditional on greater political influence and leading to the territorialization of Budapest’s theatre system in March 2020. The earlier co-financing between the state and the city was re-negotiated in a ‘divide and rule’ spirit: Gergely Karácsony agreed to finance four institutions fully (the József Katona, Radnóti and Örkény Theatres as well as Trafó), ‘liberating’ them from potential state influence — but also making them wholly dependent on municipal funding—while six other institutions, which also form an integral part of the city’s theatre infrastructure, were to be exclusively funded by the state. Cynically, the two parties called their agreement *pax theatrum* (theatre peace), announcing it as their common position against a culture war, although it can clearly be seen as the direct result of one.



Territorialized Dependencies

What impact does this have on the independent scene? Unfortunately, the territorialization didn't stop at the city theatres but was also extended to the 2020 call for operational funding, which was consequently divided into the categories 'Budapest' and 'not Budapest', depending on the organisations' place of registration. As a result of protracted negotiations, the mayor Gergely Karácsony acquired the right to appoint the Budapest jury. "Their appointment happened like in a true democracy: the mayor asked FESZ as the advocacy group of the field to make recommendations and proposed our candidates to the Ministry. This is undoubtedly an improvement, but overall this division is both socially and politically damaging for the independent scene," Adrienn observes. "We would never have advocated for splitting the scene in such a way, not to mention that this completely exposes the organisations not based in Budapest to the whims of the government. A further complication is that there are a number of organisations who are active in Budapest but registered elsewhere. For example, the FÜGE Association, which runs the Jurányi Production House in Budapest and, absurdly, even has a public service contract with the city council. The FÜGE as well as the Roundtable, a Budapest-based theatre-in-education group, and important initiatives for the independent scene, such as the MASZK Association in Szeged — all in the 'not Budapest' category — lost up to two-thirds of their operational funding in comparison to last year."

FESZ is currently contending funding decisions in this category based on the constellation of the jury, which was not appointed according to the Ministry's own guidelines, thus posing a conflict of interest, among other issues. Concurrently, the advocacy group is also working on solidarity actions and co-operations to support the 'losers' of the current funding round, who are doing professionally relevant and valuable work. Should this 'divide and rule' logic be consolidated on the long term, several questions must arise, such as: How is the total budget to be divided between these two categories (and further subcategories; leading to an already contentious, politically motivated process)? And also: What happens if the government withdraws from the funding of Budapest-based artists and organisations, in order to coerce the mayor of Budapest into assuming full financial responsibility for 'his' share of the independent scene, which would in turn existentially threaten the field due to the city's lack of sufficient finances?

"In such a situation," Adrienn comments, "it would be a fateful mistake for the scene not to use its remaining capacity for advocacy. I believe that independent performing arts can have a disruptive function, if we take the mission to create critical art seriously. Independent artists are capable of generating a counter-discourse, a counter-public, even in our ever-narrowing public spheres, with guerilla tactics if necessary. This is also what the government is afraid of, that even the smallest voice can harm them. Change is cumulative, the smallest steps add up. Therefore, it is important to resist normalization and submissive attitudes, step by step, if must be."

Katalin Erdódi

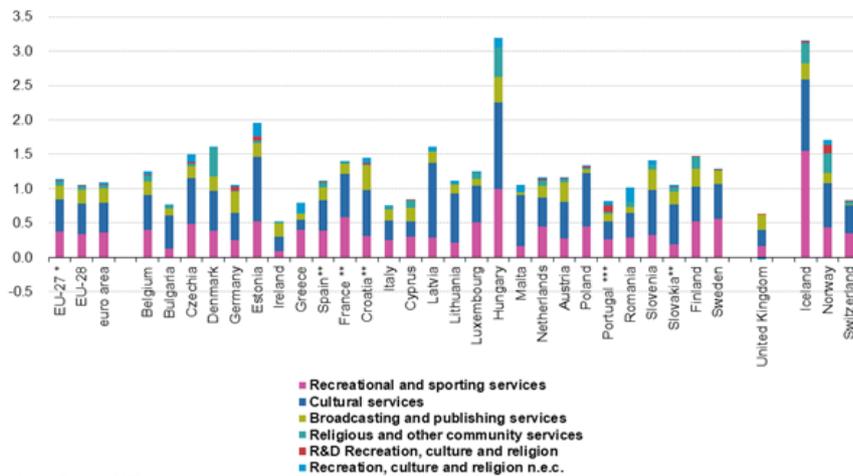
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Am 8. Mai 2020 erreichte den Vorstand des Europäischen Dachverbands der Freien Darstellenden Künste ein Schreiben des ungarischen Kulturministers Péter Fekete, in dem er Stellung bezog btr. der Anfrage des Dachverbandes

bezüglich der drohenden Budgetkürzungen für u.a. die freie Szene in Ungarn. Zum Zweck journalistischer Transparenz wollen wir dieses Schreiben hier ebenfalls mit abdrucken.

Total general government expenditure on recreation, culture and religion, 2018 (% of GDP)



* from 1 February 2020
 ** provisional
 *** estimated
 Source: Eurostat (gov_10a_exp)



Freie Szene — Orte schaffen

Räume und Infrastrukturen für Kunst und Kultur in Wien

Internationales Symposium am 3. und 4. September 2020

Semperdepot Wien

Budapest, 8th May 2020
to Ulrike Kuner



MINISTRY OF HUMAN CAPACITIES

Dear Ulrike Kuner!

On 30 April 2020, the Government of Hungary issued Act XCIX of 2008 on the support and special employment rules of performing arts organizations. In accordance with the provisions of the law, decided on the financing of the independent performing arts sector and the distribution of the available resources within the prescribed deadline. Hungary is one of the most comprehensive countries in Europe providing independent support to the performing arts.

Representing your theater, you expressed your concern at the end of last year because of the intimidation of the independent art and their guarantees.

Please allow me to seize this opportunity to thank you for paying special attention to the cause and protection of those working in the Hungarian performing arts.

I am pleased to inform you that in the Hungarian Performing Arts Act - the XCIX. Act on the Support of Performing Arts Organizations and its Special Employment Rules - a decision was made to finance the independent performing arts sector and to allocate the available resources within the prescribed time limit. Contrary to rumors, the funds did not decrease by a single penny, and their distribution was decided by an independent committee - responsible for the distribution of their own capital institutions - set up by the Mayor of Budapest.

I would like to inform you that in parallel with the distribution of the grants, some 3,000 independent artists have received additional state funding of approximately EUR 1,000. The amount will be paid to them in the form of an advance in view of the emergency situation caused by the pandemic, which may be offset by various performances in the sake of public interest following the end of the emergency. The Government of Hungary spends 1.2% of GDP on financing cultural life, thus leading the ranks of the Member States that spend the most on culture.

The Government of Hungary maintains an extremely wide system of state institutions, within the framework there are many theaters with independent theater-companies and buildings in our cities. In the capital of Budapest, in addition to the national institutions - the Hungarian State Opera House, the National Theater, the National Dance Theater and orchestras - the Government also finances the operation of 7 capital-owned theaters 100%.

In addition to our community-owned state, municipal and ecclesiastical institutions, we pay special attention to - and uniquely in Europe - funding the independent performing arts sector. As a result, there are more than 500 independent theater, dance and music groups in Hungary.

Given that political freedom is part of the freedom of independent art, it may often be the case that its representation or maintenance is embodied in opposition, anti-government behavior. Sometimes, many of the approximately 500 organizations use both the art itself and their relationships to achieve their political goals. In most cases, unfortunately, the goal is obviously not to elevate or keep art there, but rather to gain or at least influence political control. Thus, as in December, it may happen that false, untrue information is spread about our country and its cultural leadership.

I would also like to inform you that your previous concerns have been unfounded, as evidenced not only by the exemplary support of the independent performing arts organizations outlined above, The National Cultural Fund continues to operate in the service of performing artists. And the Minister of Human Resources does not choose the directors of the theaters.

My dear Colleague, the purpose of my letter was to reassure you that independent artists and art institutions in Hungary receive significant support, and the Government of Hungary and I will work to ensure that this remains. I hope that the time has come for individuals and organizations responsible for disseminating misinformation to apologize for using their professionalism and competence and the trust they have built in their audiences to achieve their own policy goals.

Yours sincerely,

Péter Fekete

Minister of State for Culture