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Orbán's Manipulation of Arts and Culture Sector Poses Grave Threat to Hungarian Democracy, New Report Finds

Report outlines Orbán's campaign to dismantle cultural institutions, restrict artistic freedom and peddle a nationalist narrative

NEW YORK – In recent years, a resurgence of authoritarianism has emboldened governments across Central and Eastern Europe to crack down on popular expression, dismantling fundamental pillars of democracy and undermining the rights and freedoms of individuals. Consistent with this development, human rights scholars and free speech activists have found that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's regime has systematically encroached on the freedom and integrity of artists and cultural institutions in Hungary and fostered an environment of self-censorship in the arts. A new report from [Artistic Freedom Initiative](#) (AFI) exposes Orbán's underhanded consolidation of control over Hungary's arts and cultural sector, and his mission to refashion it as a state-controlled entity to advance a singular nationalist narrative.

The report, "[Systematic Suppression: Hungary's Arts & Culture in Crisis](#)," provides an analysis of the Orbán-controlled FIDESZ party's strategy to systematically erode democratic processes and institutions that promote and protect creative expression, and to assert control over Hungary's fine arts, theater and performing arts, literary and arts education communities. FIDESZ has commandeered the arts and cultural sector by transferring control of institutions and funding to party-run foundations and loyalists, while reducing transparency in the management of these same institutions.

The report identifies and outlines Orbán's systematic "mechanisms of suppression," including:

- **Constitutional and legislative changes** aimed at restricting free expression and expanding government regulatory authority over the arts;
- **Bureaucratic encroachment** into and control over arts institutions; and
- Government consolidation and **manipulation of the media** to propagate nationalist cultural narratives and suppress contesting voices.

Starting with the passage of Hungary's controversial 2011 Constitution, Orbán has gradually implemented infrastructural reforms to arts and cultural governance. The central administrative change was the designation of the Hungarian Academy of the Arts (MMA), a FIDESZ-controlled private foundation, as the preeminent governing body on national arts and culture. Through the MMA, Orbán has seized authority over funding and leadership appointments in Hungary's arts and cultural institutions. According to the report, these changes have resulted in a dramatic shift towards conservatism within Hungary's arts scene. Even more disturbingly, the party has been able to transfer the outright ownership of key national cultural institutions to the MMA, an unaccountable right-wing foundation.

The 2019 Culture Bill also codified major funding cuts to Hungary's arts and cultural sector, abolishing the Hungarian corporate tax system which had historically served as a primary funding source for theater

companies. Under Orbán's new system, federal funding of locally-run theaters is contingent on stringent regulations, including federal approval of appointed leadership – creating a cycle of perpetual control.

“In its many forms, art has the power to challenge dominant political narratives and serve as a counterweight to centers of power that makes it vulnerable to manipulation and control,” said [Johanna Bankston, MSc](#), **human rights research officer at AFI and an author of the report**. “Orbán's government has implemented policies that effectively institutionalize its authority over all public arts and cultural institutions, funding mechanisms, media outlets, and arts educational institutions. If this campaign succeeds, Hungary's citizens will only be exposed to art that reflects the political views of the FIDESZ Party – effectively extinguishing freedom of expression and systematically chipping away at Hungary's democratic values.”

The report also finds that Orbán's party has worked to mobilize the public against artists and arts institutions through its manipulation of Hungary's media, using pro-government media outlets to attack liberal artists and institutions. Through the Media and Press Acts, the government has shaped public opinion of the arts by directing negative coverage towards artists that are critical of the Hungarian government or promote perspectives that challenge the party's nationalist narrative. The consistent media scrutiny around progressive artists, and particularly art that celebrates the LGBTQ+ community, motivated the creation of an “anti-pedophilia law,” prohibiting the display of content which shows homosexual relationships or indicates transgender issues.

AFI's findings illustrate the debilitating isolation experienced by artists and culture workers in Hungary due to the increasingly restrictive political environment created by Orbán and his appointees. Artists who stand in opposition to Orbán's nationalist values can lose funding, be subject to a civil suit or prosecution, have their work removed from exhibitions, theaters or the airwaves, face a critical media, or find themselves confronted with a hostile public that is manipulated by the same State-controlled media.

As the report outlines, arts institutions in Hungary have chosen not to work with certain artists or engage with certain material in fear of potential negative repercussions from FIDESZ, such as funding or job losses. Some artists and cultural workers have resigned from positions within Hungary's cultural institutions citing government abuse, harassment, and the marginalization of critical voices. Many Hungarian artists have been forced to self-censor to ensure their continued professional survival, while others have been compelled to leave the country in order to continue their practice openly.

“The government's installation of shadowy foundations and bureaucratic state structures has allowed it to hide its manipulation of Hungary's arts and culture from international monitors, claiming the sector is undergoing an organic process that reflects the evolving perspectives of the artists and desires of arts institutions,” said [Sanjay Sethi](#), **co-executive director of AFI and an author of the report**. “Behind the curtain, Orbán's actions are in violation of the protections on civil, political, social and cultural rights that Hungary has committed to through its ratification of key international human rights treaties and conventions, and his party should be held to account for its efforts to diminish the diversity of creative expression in Hungary.”

The report includes pointed recommendations to the Hungarian government, including ensuring all legislation and state practices are in accordance with international and EU obligations, particularly the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights. The report calls for the repeal of the “anti-LGBTQ+ law” as well as the safeguarding of media plurality through delegating media licensing to the Hungarian Media Council. The report also recommends

instituting policies that restore independent ownership and management of arts and cultural institutions, extend protections for artists and cultural workers, and expand government subsidies to support and diversify Hungary's creative sector.

AFI urges the international community to demand accountability for Hungary's violations of international and EU human rights obligations and maintain pressure on its future adherence to standing commitments. The report also provides specific recommendations for legal and advocacy NGOs including challenging the legality of Hungary's Media and Press Acts and "anti-pedophilia law," and launching an investigation into Orbán's discriminatory funding schemes.

In partnership with the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and Columbia University's Harriman Institute, AFI researchers reviewed relevant laws, policies, practices, and events which have shaped the artistic environment in Hungary in the past decade to compile the report. English and Hungarian human rights reports, U.S. Department of State reports, legal databases, policy briefs, news articles and other media were also considered. Anonymous interviews were conducted with key individuals in the Hungarian arts and cultural sphere to document the lived experiences of artists and cultural producers in the region. This report is the first installment of the [Artistic Freedom Monitor](#), an ongoing series of country-by-country human rights reports with a specific focus on freedom of artistic expression.

To speak with Sanjay Sethi, Johanna Bankston or other experts from Artistic Freedom Initiative about the report, its findings, and issues related to freedom of expression and the suppression of artists' rights more broadly, please contact Alexa Lamanna at AFI@westendstrategy.com or 202-320-2766.

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About Artistic Freedom Initiative: Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) is dedicated to safeguarding the right to artistic freedom that facilitates pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk. [Learn more here.](#)