



Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art
International Association of Art Critics
Asociación Internacional de Críticos de Arte



**Joint Stakeholders Submission to the Universal Period Review of Hungary
presented by Freemuse and International Association of Arts Critics (AICA)
and AICA Hungary**

**For consideration at the 53rd session of the Human Rights Council Universal
Periodic Review (November 2026)**

Freemuse, AICA International and AICA Hungary welcome the opportunity to contribute to the fourth cycle review of Hungary, under the 53rd session of the Universal Periodic Review. This submission focuses on Hungary's international human rights obligations relating to freedom of expression with a focus on freedom of artistic expression, and to the right to public assembly.

Third cycle recommendations

1. Hungary's third cycle review under the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism was held on 2 November 2021, during the 4th meeting of the 39th session. Under this review, 99 Member State delegations presented 267 recommendations for consideration by Hungary¹. Of these, 130 recommendations were accepted, 88 were noted and 49 not accepted².

2. As organizations primarily concerned with the right to artistic freedom - a vital component of the broader right to freedom of expression - we note that twelve of the recommendations addressing this right focus specifically on freedom of the press and media pluralism, intrinsically linked to artistic freedom. Six of these recommendations were noted by the Hungarian government and six were not accepted. In light of the pattern of attacks on media, journalists, rights activists and artists, we note the recommendation from Sweden that extended its request to:

¹ Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Hungary, 2 November 2021, A/HRC/49/8

² Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Hungary – Addendum, 22 February 2022, A/HRC/49/8/Add.1

“Ensure a level playing field for media by enabling editorial pluralism through independent media outlets, including the public broadcaster, and an independent media regulator.”³

3. Hungary is bound by international and regional obligations to protect freedom of expression, as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). All these instruments contain protections to freedom of expression, the most explicit provisions protecting the freedom of artistic expression and creativity are to be found in article 15 (3) of ICESCR, under which States “undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for creative activity” and in article 19 (2) of ICCPR, which states that the right to freedom of expression includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds “in the form of art.”

4. The cultural sphere in Hungary is regulated by the constitutional framework Fundamental Law of Hungary, international treaties and agreements, and Act CXL of 1997 on Museum Institutions, Public Library Services and Public Culture, which serves as the main legal framework governing museums, public libraries, and community cultural activities. The other fundamental piece of cultural legislation is Act LXIV/2001 on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, covering the areas of built heritage and protection of movable objects.

5. The Hungarian government, led by Viktor Orbán, has largely avoided overt breaches of its international obligations by exerting indirect control over the arts sector. Through centralized funding systems and opaque foundation structures, it limits the need for direct intervention while maintaining significant influence over cultural production. This approach allows authorities to present changes as organic, while in practice contributing to a more restrictive environment for artistic expression.

6. In relation to non-discrimination of LGBTI persons, there were 18 recommendations related to it. All but one were either simply noted or not accepted by the Hungarian government. The exception was the Spain delegation’s call to: “Guarantee compliance with the rules against discrimination and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.”⁴

Developments since the Third Cycle UPR

7. In April 2021, Hungary passed legislation transferring administrative control of universities and cultural institutions to private foundations led by government appointees, including allies of Viktor Orbán. All but five universities have been moved into these structures — two of which focus on the arts: the Hungarian

³ Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Hungary, 2 November 2021, A/HRC/49/8, para 128.122

⁴ Ibid para 128.79

University of Fine Arts and the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music. Those remaining outside the foundations are severely underfunded, effectively "punished" by the state. The law also reallocated substantial public resources—including state funding, university budgets, public assets, and EU recovery funds—to these foundations. Building on earlier 2020 legislation expanding the definition of public funds, this framework has raised concerns regarding reduced transparency and oversight, as foundations may exercise broad discretion over the use of public resources. Five of the affected institutions are higher education providers in the arts sector. These measures have raised concerns about the erosion of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, particularly within the arts community, where centralized governance may limit independent artistic expression, critical discourse, and diversity of cultural production.

8. In 2024, a new set of immigration and sovereignty-related legislation and policies were introduced by the government of Viktor Orbán around protecting Hungarian culture and national sovereignty. These included proposals to require knowledge of Hungarian culture and history for foreigners seeking long-term residency; increase state monitoring of organizations or activities seen as undermining Hungarian cultural identity or sovereignty and shift cultural policy toward national traditions and conservative values rather than European integration.

9. Following this development, 2024 immigration law implemented a “cultural knowledge” requirement. From 1 January 2025, non-EU residents applying for permanent residence in Hungary must pass a Hungarian cultural knowledge exam in order to demonstrate integration into Hungarian culture. The test covers topics such as national symbols, history, literature, institutions, and civic obligations.

10. At the same time, the Hungarian government passed or proposed other laws framed around protecting national identity. The Act LXXXVIII of 2023 on the Protection of National Sovereignty, commonly called the Sovereignty Protection Act, was adopted by Hungary in 2023. The law created the Sovereignty Protection Office, a state body tasked with investigating activities considered to threaten Hungary’s national sovereignty. Although the act primarily targets political influence and foreign funding, it also affects the cultural sphere, particularly organizations and institutions involved in cultural expression, research, and civil society.

11. In June 2021, Hungary adopted legislation restricting the representation of LGBTI themes under the stated aim of protecting minors. The law limits the availability of content depicting or promoting LGBTI issues in education, media, and advertising accessible to persons under 18. Key provisions include restrictions on daytime broadcasting and advertising containing LGBTI content, limitations on educational materials addressing sexual orientation and gender identity, and sanctions related to the dissemination of such content to minors. These measures raise concerns regarding disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression and

artistic freedom, including potential censorship of artworks addressing LGBTI themes or created by LGBTI artists. There are fears that such legislation could suppress cultural production and reduce the visibility of LGBTI voices in the arts — fears already borne out in practice: institutions are reportedly engaging in self-censorship, including removing words such as "queer" from artwork descriptions.

12. Primacy of children's rights provision reinforced previously adopted "Child Protection" law of 2021 and is used now to justify further restrictions on LGBTI-related expression and assemblies. The "Child protection" law has already banned the "display and promotion of homosexuality" in materials accessible to children, such as books and films. The application of this law was extended to photo exhibitions. In November 2023 the head of Hungary's National Museum was fired during the World Press Photo exhibition, featuring shots of LGBTI people in the Philippines. A far-right lawmaker demanded the government launch an inquiry into the exhibition which was followed by the director's lay-off. A week after the incident, another Hungarian museum, the Museum of Ethnography, barred minors from part of a photo exhibition showing homosexuality⁵.

13. The proposed "Transparency of Public Life" bill is also concerning. It aims to regulate or restrict NGOs, media, and other actors, including the artistic community, receiving foreign funding, potentially allowing authorities to blacklist or penalize organizations and people deemed to influence Hungarian public life. Even if it never goes into force, artists and cultural workers who oppose the increasing centralization of control over the arts—whether through their personal views or the content of their workplace growing difficulties in accessing funding, resources, and opportunities for professional advancement. In this context, Hungarian artists critical of the government report that obtaining state support has become increasingly difficult, and in some cases perceived as futile without conforming to governmental expectations, thereby risking compromise of their artistic and personal integrity. For example, according to Hungarian filmmakers, the government-controlled National Film Institute (NFI) overwhelmingly funds films that align with Viktor Orbán's right-wing ideology — a bias now compounded by the effective exclusion of films that critically examine Russia's historical role⁶.

14. The constrained opportunities for artists and cultural producers in Hungary—particularly those openly critical of Viktor Orbán—have contributed to an ongoing outflow of talent from the country⁷.

⁵ Second Hungarian Museum Bars Minors Over LGBT Content, *RFERL*, 13 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-museum-minors-ban-lgbt/32684505.html> (accessed 19 March 2026)

⁶ Hungarian film-makers struggle for funding despite production boom, *The Guardian*, 27 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/feb/27/hungarian-film-makers-struggle-for-funding-despite-production-boom-brutalist> (accessed 19 March 2026)

⁷ Artistic Freedom Monitor: Hungary. Systematic Suppression. *Artistic Freedom Initiative*. https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Artistic-Freedom-Monitor_Hungary_Systematic-Suppression.pdf, p.43 (accessed 19 March 2026)

Conclusion

15. This submission has outlined how Hungary has used legislative, constitutional, and administrative reforms to consolidate political influence over the arts and cultural sector. As demonstrated above, these measures have transferred control over cultural institutions and funding to opaque and politically aligned structures, eroding institutional independence and narrowing space for critical artistic expression. Taken together, these developments have produced a chilling effect on artists and cultural workers and are incompatible with Hungary's obligations to protect freedom of expression, artistic freedom, and participation in cultural life.

Recommendations

16. In light of the foregoing, the submitting organizations recommend that the Hungarian government:

- a) Take effective measures to prevent and address harassment, intimidation, and undue pressure against artists and cultural workers, including those critical of government policies; and ensure that no individual is subjected to surveillance, legal sanctions, or other forms of repression for participating in cultural or artistic expression, including in connection with public events or assemblies.
- b) Refrain from stigmatizing or discrediting dissenting artistic expression, including works addressing LGBTI themes, and ensure that artists and cultural actors are protected from discrimination, public vilification, and unequal treatment on the basis of the content of their work or their perceived views.
- c) Ensure that public funding for the arts and cultural sector is allocated in a transparent, independent, and non-discriminatory manner, and refrain from using financial mechanisms to disadvantage or exclude artists and cultural actors on the basis of their views or the content of their work.
- d) Regularly review Hungary's legislative and policy measures affecting the arts sector and take prompt legal action where they violate fundamental rights, including through infringement procedures and judicial proceedings before relevant European courts, while ensuring there are no undue restrictions on foreign funding of arts and cultural organizations.
- e) Pursue decentralization and independence of cultural institutions that support creativity and free artistic expression.