

THE CULTURE OF FREEDOM

CULTURAL POLICY FOR HUNGARY
IN THE 21ST CENTURY



MINISTRY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

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BY

ANDRÁS BOZÓKI

HUNGARIAN MINISTER OF CULTURE

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Cultural policy for Hungary in the 21st century

“Our culture is in crisis” – nowadays this is what we hear from so many cultural analysts and activists, crying that freedom has not brought better and more diverse culture to the citizens of Hungary. Time spent uselessly in front of the television is increasing, while the distance between those who are cultured and those who hardly know and enjoy culture at all is ever growing.

“We need more freedom!” insist internationally renowned artists and cultural experts who prefer to see culture not as an idolized relic, nor as a collection of compulsory reading, but more as a lively playground, with no spatial or financial barriers to access the cultural goods on offer.

“We need more support!” exclaim the curators of public collections and the specialists of heritage protection, who know very well that the culture of today is the rare heritage of tomorrow. But there are also those in the art world who are satisfied with the comfort of state funding, who fear competition from their rivals and the judgment of the public.

“We need more money!” demand the many agents of the cultural sphere from the government, believing that only money could satisfy the dual needs of freedom and protection.

I argue that in order to really take a position on these many demands and to help solve these problems, we must first recognize that we live in a *new cultural era* – an era in which the significance and accessibility of culture have profoundly changed. We need to realize that day after day, new scenes and forms of producing and consuming culture are created, new audiences are born. We need to realize that the world has opened up for us, we can see the museums and libraries of the world while traveling abroad or over the Internet, getting instantly informed about novelties and new cultural developments. We also need to realize that the world, and especially Europe, is no longer ‘out there’ but is here at home as well, in the Hungary belonging to the European Union. And it is not only we who are curious about the world – the world is curious about us as well.

Culture has a vital role in shaping the future of the peoples of the Republic of Hungary and the Carpathian Basin over the next fifteen years. It is precisely culture that has this role because

- culture creates the framework and scene, form and content for the *self-respect* of the individual, the communities, the regions and the nation;
- cultural *experiences* are one of the most important mediums for self-determination and for generating a feeling of belonging for the individual, for the various communities, and for the renewing Hungary;
- cultural *diversity* is a source for innovation in the economy, politics, science, the arts, and everyday life – it is a treasure that needs to be protected from overpowering institutionalism, the profit-oriented market and the ‘tyranny of the majority’;
- cultural *competition* on both the domestic and international stage is a catalyst for cultural renewal and enrichment – it is, in short, a means for becoming better, stronger and more successful;
- culture is also a *social* issue: culture keeps alive and recreates those communities that have been afflicted by social crises or economic shocks. There is no human dignity without culture.

BUT WHAT IS CULTURE?

The culture I am speaking about is pleasure and enjoyment, distraction and acquiescence. It is community creation. It does not reside within thick encyclopedias, but rather in *experiences* shared with one another and in the creative desire and knowledge reaped from them; in everyday routine and daring innovation. Culture is at once *democratic*, in the sense of belonging to everyone, and *elevated*, in the sense of being satisfied only with the highest standards. Culture is diverse and flexible. More and more independent initiatives, groups and communities are created and appear on the market, bringing about exciting cultural feasts for their audiences, with the help of very little state support or protection. Because culture is also *competition* – competition for the applause, the attention, the prizes, the elevation. Every culture aspires to conquer: to convince the audience of its truth and class.

It is only from culture that the *self-respect* of all communities and nations can grow, without which we would not be able to understand the world, the lifestyle and the creations of other communities. Culture also has a social function: it keeps local communities together; it provides them with poise and identity, even if the places where they live, their social environments, are suffering unemployment, economic or social crises. Culture helps recognizing, protecting and caring for talented people. Without culture there is no community, without community there is no human dignity.

The culture I am speaking about may contribute to the creation of a free society of free people, but it needs care, protection, opportunity and freedom. The freedom of culture may be sustained if its social medium – the culture of freedom – becomes strong.

CULTURAL POLITICS ACCORDING TO THE NEW ERA

By winning new partners in the public and private sectors, the Minister of Culture may be able to find more financial support for culture. But even if the minister's budget were limitless, the leaders of the cultural institutions and the operators of the funding allocation mechanisms would still need to take into consideration how the world turns. And it does turn, and the time is now! Let's set our watches!

On acknowledging the dawn of the new era, first of all we have to consider what we deem important. We have to look into and inspect every nook and cranny of Hungarian culture and ask if it has to work in the old, familiar way or needs change. We have to review the cultural institutions, the local and regional initiatives, and the system of foundation support. And immediately there are clear tasks to be done. We need to help the survival of live music and folk culture, their recognition both at home and abroad, the strengthening of contemporary arts and the development of creative branches of industry and design. And we also need to pay more respect to the attractiveness of culture, its community-creating ability.

But let us now leave the pressing everyday problems, the heating bills of the libraries, those sometimes embittering cultural consumption statistics! In what sort of world, what Europe, what sort of Hungary do we wish to live? What can cultural policy do in order to create a just, abundant, and pleasant world where it is good to live?

COMMUNITY, SELF-RESPECT AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

We are members of many types of community, but for all of them it is *culture* that creates belonging and continuity. Based on our common traditions and mutual experiences we are able to understand one another better than the members of other communities. But in order to savor and appreciate our new *European* identity, we Hungarians have to redefine our *Hungarian* identity as well. It is only a Hungary that is proud of its values and has a realistic self-image that can become an equal partner and a true winner in the common Europe. And it is our culture that is the source of our national self-respect and our modern Hungarian identity.

Our mother tongue of Hungarian and our historical past form a cultural community that reaches across the borders of Hungary. Yet our historical past, present and future also make Hungary a political and cultural entity in which we want all national, ethnic or religious communities to feel at home with their own mother tongue and culture; where it is not only tourists and foreign investors who receive hospitality, but also the immigrant, the guest worker, and the refugee. Respect for human rights and human dignity is only authentic if everyone receives it.

The mandate of cultural policy states that we should protect and promote the traditions and cultural capital of the Hungarian peoples, the diverse communities of European Hungary. Our efforts to improve the current conditions of our culture will be successful only if we pay attention to those unique characteristics that form our identity. Today the Hungarians integrating into Europe are a divided cultural community, with differing opportunities, abilities and desires to use culture. The cultural habits of the richest and poorest layers of society also differ more than they do in the old European Union states. Due to the frequent reconsiderations of our basic values and the existential fear about the uncertainty of earning a living over the past fifteen years, citizens feel less protected and more vulnerable in Hungary, as well as more willing to compromise on the quality of cultural products than those living in more consolidated societies, where the strong traditions of the local community weaken these dividing forces.

Creating equal cultural opportunities is not charity work but self-protection dictated in the community's interest. From the social experiments of the 20th century we have learnt that the indiscriminate forcing of equality is always a deception of the self and the public. I want to emphasize this recognition by changing the focus of cultural politics: instead of the democratization of culture, we should work to strengthen *cultural democracy*. The objective is the recognition, appreciation, and promotion of diversity in the community: the diversity of cultures and cultural performances. This is how the mainstream and the alternative cultures could recognize, understand and appreciate each other.

During the time when we could watch only one television channel and make a trip to the much-admired West only once every three years, the creators of cultural policy were able to determine unchallenged what the 'cultured people' should be like, what they should know and appreciate. In the new era beginning now, the coordinators of cultural policy must be more patient, less prescriptive and ready to play the role of an observer when interpreting what constitutes the core of Hungarian culture. But we still take pleasure in the desire to understand each other easily in the language of high Hungarian culture and to widen this interpretive community – the contemporary ironic and relativistic perspective has not eradicated from us the aims of the Enlightenment.

What should cultural policy aim for? It should venture to create increasingly better conditions for these rightful endeavors. Governmental cultural policy should not directly interfere in the cultural life of communities, but it may indirectly help them by setting up the frameworks, with incentives, examples and dialogue.

DIVERSITY AND COMPETITION

The culture of modern democracy is open. Our national culture is built up from our common knowledge, values and customs, but also from the endlessly shifting mosaic of the cultures of diverse groups and communities living in Hungary. National culture takes sustenance from this diverse mass; diversity provides the basis for its development and the capacity for perpetual renewal.

In the cultural arena, due to the existence of scarce resources and the dependence on state redistribution, the shaping of national culture is eternally accompanied by conflicts – these conflicts are not to be ignored but rather turned to our advantage. Let us view these conflicts as opportunities to understand each other, to discover the possibility of working together! Conflict channeled into a stream of cooperation and limited by the norms of tolerance becomes *competition*, and without it national culture would stiffen into a collection of catalogued items in a glass cabinet.

The culture of modern societies becomes plain and colorless when the communities forming the society live in oppression, where the autocratic, official culture does not permit us to represent and express ourselves freely. If we stand by diversity, then we want everyone to be able to select freely the values that govern their life, to determine freely the identity that expresses their sense of belonging.

The state may not levy a cultural tax on its citizens for the purpose of imposing the judgment of the cultured elite that there is one *single correct* or *exclusively valuable* culture. What is more, the state administration needs to learn and exercise self-restraint in connection with the cultural diversity of a modern democracy. The principles and practice of resource allocation should both follow the norms of openness and transparency. Let the endeavors of the most diverse of ethnic, religious, political, generational, and lifestyle communities flourish – without infringing on the freedom and dignity of others – in order for them to enter the mainstream of culture. The autonomy of cultures and cultural performances produces their diversity; but, if they become isolated, walls may develop between the various groups. Multiculturalism in itself is not enough: we have to be able to interpret each other's thoughts; we have to understand each other's messages. Therefore, cultural policy needs to encourage the openness of cultures and create a space for dialogue among them.

Cultural events, products and services need to be made accessible to as wide an audience as possible, and we need to make it easier to acquire the instruments and learn the skills to make conscious cultural choices. The state waives its claim to establish cultural canons and leaves it to the diverse communities of society to reinvent their own tradition and promote their own heritage.

FIVE PILLARS FOR A NEW CULTURAL ERA

1. CULTURE IS EXPERIENCE AND A PLAYGROUND

Forget the shushing museum attendant! Culture should be an open playground, a source of joy and discovery – the discovery of our own traditions and possibilities and those of others. The institutional framework for culture should also serve this purpose!

Our communities are not merely interest communities, nor are they a troublesome destiny imposed on us, but the building blocks of our jointly built and lived world, the mortar for which is *solidarity*. Solidarity is borne in mutual appreciation and play, in common thinking, dispute and creativity.

2. CULTURAL FREEDOM

We are now able to enjoy the freedom of learning, studying and creating. Let us also enjoy the freedom of choosing between works of art and the creative communities! Let us enjoy the freedom to have an access to the intellectual achievements and cultural goods in the widest possible sense, so that we ourselves could create new cultural goods – by which we could reproduce and improve ourselves, our environment, and our community! By getting to know each other's creations we can learn to appreciate other opinions, values and ways of thinking.

Within our broader community, several cultural endeavors and cultural expressions may flourish. The new cultural policy undertakes responsibility for all of them, especially for the reason to give everybody a chance to participate in and understand cultural arenas of the community that are different from their own. This is the most important interpretation of *creating opportunities*. The most important area of the government's cultural policy is making cultural goods generally accessible. In the 21st century, the simplest way of doing so is by exploiting the newly emerging technical possibilities of storing and mediating knowledge and information and making use of the new channels of communication.

3. ACTIVE AND ATTRACTIVE CULTURE

If the waves are too large, we should ride on them before they swallow us! If the images of the media invade our everyday life, let us invade the media with our values and works of art! If we are flooded by a sea of information, we should determine the intellectual and esthetical points of reference for ourselves and our friends! If there is a traffic jam, we should get out of the car and walk or jump on our bikes! Why not take the lead?

It is no use locking ourselves up in our national culture and banning cultural expressions regarded as undesirable by saying that we want to 'protect' our own culture. Where could be the lines drawn anyway? The possible answer to this is having a proactive policy where we assertively uphold our own values and promote our cultural products on the unrestricted domestic and international cultural market. In the interest of realizing this aim we must activate our intellectual and financial capital. We must take action in the interest of exporting domestic cultural goods, but we must be just as devoted to obtaining valuable products from the cultural selection offered by other countries and introducing them to the Hungarian public. Let us 'conquer' by becoming attractive for the members and representatives of other cultures!

4. CULTURAL EQUALITY IN EUROPE

The change of the political regime and the accession to the European Union brought us back freedom: at last our self-esteem can now rest on our true strengths and not on a delusion of grandeur. Hungary is an autonomous, independent country, which now, for the first time in its long history, is standing on the side of the winners. Now the EU is 'us', not an external great power; their predicament is also ours. We cannot make excuses any more about oppression or occupying forces, or say that Hungary is eternally cursed. Our achievements are the result of our own work; we are the forgers of our own successes. The road to success is to have a realistic view of ourselves: we have a lesser known language, a small cultural market, but we are a talented people. We are talented in culture, in arts, in sciences; we work diligently and are able to make use of the opportunities presented to us.

The European Union is one arena where Hungarian culture can be introduced; it is a market for the creative industries, where we can demonstrate our talent and present our achievements. In this environment we can avoid feeling inferior or untalented; we can leave our typical culture of complaint and decadence behind. And we can also overcome our delusion of grandeur: our feeling of superiority to our neighbors – or even to western cultures. We are equal with them.

The political and cultural success of Europe is based on overcoming national hatred, resolving historic grievances. Belonging to Europe means common interests and common values at the same time: besides the emerging culture of democracy it also highlights the importance of the cultural heritage of the Danube region and the historical tradition of Central European collaboration. Together with our Central European neighbors we suffered for centuries from feeling suppressed and falling behind the West. Today we can enjoy freedom and make use of the new cultural opportunities together. The European Union is also a community of cultural values. The European cultural diversity enriches all member states within the Union: the common Europe is also an arena for the recognition, mutual appreciation and preservation of national cultures. This is how the Hungarian and European identities can strengthen one another.

5. OPEN CULTURE

My aim is to open up institutions and their closed structures. Let us throw wide open the gates of libraries, museums, archives and theatres! Boxes are not essential in a theatre, catalogue cards are not indispensable accessories in a library. Let us open up our cultural heritage, to enable all generations to build upon our traditions freely! Let us put our common cultural wealth onto the Internet to make it really accessible to everyone!

Culture is a meadow where everybody can take their cattle to graze. Culture is a well from which everybody can drink to grow strong and be able to dig new wells and build new roads to these wells. Freedom of culture is freedom of recognition, which is not restricted any more by technology. As a result of technological advancement, the institutional structure based upon the century-old definition of intellectual property is also starting to fall apart.

By now the internet has become a widely accepted tool for propagating culture, not only in the field of education but also in the process of active creation. Circulation, the circle of representation is the same as it used to be: thoughts, opinions, lines of poems and tunes are whirling around us, and new thoughts, opinions, lines of poems and tunes are created from them, only much faster this time. The channels through which individuals and communities can access their cultural heritage should be opened up and used creatively. Although the technologies of recording and mechanical reproduction may change over time, the works of art are eternal.

THE HUNGARIAN T.E.A.

I started my work as minister of culture guided by three basic principles: *Transparency*, *Equality of Opportunities* and *Alternatives*. In our society, the competition of cultural achievements may enrich our lives, self-perception, and identity with new knowledge, joyful experiences, and relaxed entertainment only if the work of Hungarian culture is synonymous with transparency, equal opportunities, and alternatives.

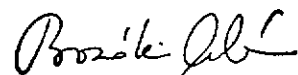
Transparency requires clear and fair procedures in the cultural institutions and in the world of grant applications and systems of foundation support. As proponents of democracy, this is what we can contribute to establishment of a republic free from corruption. The credo of transparency and controllability encourages me to help to restructure those systems of support that work in an unfair and unjust way or reward those artists and cultural producers who have good opportunities to win support anyway. It is important to check how support is used and to harmonize the competing aims and institutional structures with each other, as it is the taxpayers' money being spent. We must look around us inside and outside: this is what the planned reform of the National Cultural Fund and the screening of the activity of public funds and non-profit-making organizations is aimed at. Public support for creative activities must arrive at the creators themselves – it must not be swallowed by different committees, authorities or apparatuses along the way.

Creating equal opportunities is an obligation to make culture accessible to everybody by providing people with a service and system of institutions that can reduce the differences between the opportunities of the rich and the poor, the urban and the provincial, Hungarians living within or beyond the country borders, Hungarian citizens of Hungarian or other nationality. I might say that *equal opportunities* are my most important principle. Everybody deserves opportunities, whether we are talking about the possibility of creating or consuming culture. *Equal opportunities* must be given to minorities existing beside a majority, to villages beside cities, and to amateurs together with professionals. Our cultural policy initiatives emphasize the equality of opportunities. The reason why the programs based on these initiatives are successful is that they were created with the help of the stakeholders, as a result of discussions with them. Under the aegis of equal opportunities – following the logic of the program prepared together with pop musicians – I am inviting the representatives of the other arts to take part in the preparation of the program in their own fields.

Realizing and recognizing *alternatives* requires openness: being interested in, paying attention to and wanting to understand the cultures inherited from the past and being transformed in the present. Consequently, *alternatives* mean at once accepting, recognizing and promoting the diversity of cultures and bolstering cultural differences that have remained in the background so far. *Alternatives* also imply making it easier for public culture, street theatres, street music and amateur artists to appear and perform; they imply supporting initiations of contemporary, modern arts.

I have a wide interpretation of the meaning of culture. *Alternatives* include the culture of the body and health, the culture of protecting our environment, and even the culture of manners and behavior. My aim is to take actions in the interest of improving communication between people. The right methodology cannot be giving commands, but rather paying attention and encouraging dialogues. In this way I hope to act like the park designer who, before planning a path, observes where people usually cross the park. Only after people have beaten a track can the path be paved.

The *Hungarian TEA*, the new culture policy asserting the principles of *transparency, equal opportunities* and *alternatives*, is at the intersection of these three basic principles. My aim is to make the above principles determine the aims and practice of cultural policy by strengthening each other. I am inviting everybody to continue a dialogue on the values outlined above, on the cultural policy of the new century – now, at the beginning of the new cultural era.



András Bozóki

Hungarian Minister of Culture

The basic version of the manifesto was prepared by the strategic consulting body at the request of the Minister of Culture as a precursory study to the new Hungarian cultural strategy to be concluded by the end of 2005. The authors of the manifesto are Marcell Sebők, László Harsányi, Dóra Husz, Péter Inkei, György Karsai, Dávid Kitzinger, Miklós Sükösd, András Török, and Anna Wessely.