

Festivals and democracy before and after Hungary's regime change in 1989¹

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The history of festivals in Hungary over the past few decades mirrors many of the main changes that have occurred in Hungarian society.

In the communist era – which we generally still call “socialist” – the central agenda of the cultural policy was to raise and educate the masses, i.e. the democratization of culture. The state set out to enhance the useful spending of leisure time and to create a “socialist type of man”. Nevertheless, especially from the 1960s onward with the consolidation of the Kádár regime, cultural life was livelier and more colourful than that dull slogan suggests.

The 1960s produced films of global fame and the 1970s saw the birth of alternative and experimental theatres. Symphony composers could create modern contemporary pieces and jazz shook off the label of imperialist poison. Famous names appeared on concert posters, from Oscar Peterson to Stan Getz, Miles Davis and Charlie Mingus. In the visual arts the public could experience the avant-garde and devotees could find their way to a happening or two. Demand and opportunity for access were still largely a privilege of the Budapest elite.

All this behind the Iron Curtain, which was known for curbing free movement and international ideas.

Festivals before 1989

Nevertheless, even with all of these challenges, between 10 and 15 per cent of today's festivals were born during the two or three decades before the regime change. The early period was dominated by festivals of classical music or folk art. Several of our iconic festivals belong to those veterans, such as Bartók International Chorus and Folklore Festival which was established in 1961, and Debrecen Floral Carnival and Nyírbátor Music Days which both began in 1966. Various gastronomy festivals sprang up: traditional wine grape harvesting feasts began to attach a folk programme, and the first Danube fish soup festival gained national fame.

The festival scene showed the same rifts as the cultural life as a whole, epitomized by the famous three Ts that stand for the Hungarian words for “forbidden”, “tolerated” and “promoted” art (*tilt, tűr, támogat*). Most prominent was the official, promoted art, while the rest were less visible by definition. How was this manifested in festivals?

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Folklore played a privileged role in cultural policy from the 1950s by “raising” the art of amateur folk artists and distributing it in a variety of forms, which gained broad awareness for the genre. Professional and amateur folk dance ensembles were easily able to present their art at large national and international events and festivals.

The internal logic of folk art involves constant renewal and reinterpretation, which makes it sustainable. The dance houses grew out of spontaneous grassroots initiatives in the 1970s, in an attempt to correct the deficits of the official cultural policy. It was a new urban youth movement that sought manifestations of national identity by recreating and spreading folk dance and music in urban environments. The authorities were having trouble deciding how to categorize the dance house. It ended up finally in the tolerated category, to the extent that as early as in 1982 it was given a festival: the National Dance House Assembly. That festival celebrated its 34th edition in 2015.

The divisions along the three Ts also occurred in classical music although to a much lesser degree. Classical music generally attracts a smaller audience and the nature of the genre hardly lends itself to dissent. That makes its links to counterculture much weaker.

The majority of music festivals in that period celebrated classical works with a few experiments in contemporary music. In 1984, nevertheless, one of the cultural houses of Budapest hosted a six-day “counter-festival” with the involvement of musicians, visual and film (video) artists, many of whom were dissidents under police surveillance. In spite of the organizers’ marketing efforts (posters, press conference, etc.), it remained a challenge to get large groups in society to engage with contemporary artworks; neither did the political content have a significant impact among the population.

Cultural dissent also appeared in a festival-like setting at the popular summer resort area around Lake Balaton. In the early 1970s the “chapel shows” (so-called because they were held in a former chapel) featured performances and happenings of neo-avant-garde and other progressive art which gained cult status among the intelligentsia and provoked bans and other restrictions by the authorities.

Some events and pop concerts gave space to the culture of resistance too. Instead of playing the mostly sweet and standard songs of the “dance festivals” (TV shows in the 1960 and ’70s that the Party tolerated and promoted), fresh rock and punk performers pushed the limits of the system in the name of freedom and creativity. These rebellious shows sometimes happened in the framework of festivals.

The 1970s’ biggest festivals – the ones reaching the most people and so the most democratic – were television broadcasts. The sole television channel played a pivotal role in people’s education, and it was easy to control the programmes that reached the masses. One may regard the weekly broadcast competitions, quiz nights and talent shows as festivals (though of a very specific genre), which were viewed by the entire country with excitement. These shows undoubtedly represented high quality. The most famous of them was probably the folklore quiz *Repülj páva* (“Fly, peacock” – referring to a well-known Hungarian folk song). These programmes may be considered as a manifestation of cultural democracy not only because they reached a lot of people but

also because they gave opportunities and publicity to ordinary people and unknown talented artists. The (cultural) policy of the socialist regime – representing the working class, the everyday citizens – was thus justified.

Otherwise, working class citizens would not have had many options for taking part in cultural programmes at this time. It was mainly the local authorities that prepared the cooking and folk activities for village gatherings. These events were usually connected to villages' saints' days and their primary aim was not to strengthen local identity as it is today.

The main idea behind the cultural policy in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s was high level entertainment. Supporting quality in culture was not particularly emphasized since, unlike today, a popular commercial cultural offer that could invade the cultural sphere did not exist. It was well before the conception of the *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, before the depreciation – or, from another point of view, before the democratization – of values. Catering for bottom-up needs was out of the question in society at this time; it did not even occur to people that they could organize or ask for festivals or any cultural or entertainment events that would suit their own taste and requirements.

The institutional frame of festivals

Before the 1989 regime change, there were fewer regulations and the level of institutional framework was not as sophisticated as it is today. The EU's regulations did not influence the state's regime either, given that Hungary only became a member 15 years later. Accordingly, festival organizers at the time did not have to follow strict rules. For instance, crucial issues from a festival organizer's point of view such as the number of toilets or parking spaces per capita were unregulated. Open-air cooking was also allowed. Most important of all, however, is that organizers did not have to look constantly and sometimes desperately for state funds. Before 1989 the functioning of institutional structures was relatively predictable. Festivals needed to be authorized by the local government or by the appropriate ministry and earlier even by the local party commission, but once this was done, the festival usually got funded somehow, meeting less ambitious standards than today.

Interviewees tell us that at least two things were needed for a festival to come into being: a good idea and good contacts. Devoted organizers found the right person (i.e. the right "comrade"), and did not need a slush-fund to convince them about the festival. If a cultural operator or a vanguard of the movement (a trade union leader, a keen youth leader, a party secretary, etc.) came up with a good event idea (an "art project" as we would say today) and if the right person to support it was found, they were allowed to give it a go. Mostly authorization was accompanied with the right amount of money and usually the following year a "reminder" phone call was enough to realize the event, or even sometimes the local, regional or central budget had already allocated resources for the festival by then. Just like in other fields, the communist era was paternalistic in the field of culture. And the paternalist approach meant that if the festival's idea was taken

up by a patron, the festival was most probably realized. It is important to note, however, that far fewer people had the idea of organizing festivals than today, so those who did thus had a greater chance of getting them off the ground.

In the closed society of the regime, broadening the opportunities for international connections was an important function of arts festivals. And as carefully measured reciprocities were a governing principle in cultural relations, festivals indirectly contributed to the mobility of Hungarian artists too.

Practically all international relations of artists and festivals were carried out by Interconcert, an organization established for this purpose. Festival organizers submitted their demand for foreign artists to Interconcert, which in fact acted as an art agency in this regard. Shortage of foreign currency – transactions in “hard” convertible currencies were centrally and strictly regulated – created a situation of tough competition for invitations from abroad. Good connections were key and gratification ranged from flattering words to outright corruption.

In fact, the stakes were highest for Hungarian artists travelling abroad. Besides enhancing their professional careers, foreign tours (“bread and butter tours” as they were known) helped maintain a proper standard of living; smuggling goods back in by those privileged enough to travel to the West was widespread and generally accepted. The state and the Party ensured that only those who could represent the country properly (which included being political reliable) were allowed to travel. Hungarian artists had the double charm of coming from behind the Iron Curtain yet from a relatively liberal communist country. This dual character made Hungary attractive for Western artists too, as a compensation for the lower fees.

Festivals after 1989

The political and economic regime change had a strong influence on festival life as well. Freshly gained freedom gave space to creativity and inspired new initiatives. The big boom in festivals occurred in the 1990s; about a third of today’s prominent festivals in Hungary were established then. Since then, it has become the form of entertainment that attracts the largest audiences. There are between eight and ten festivals taking place every day around the country, altogether attracting between 7 and 8 million visitors. According to data from 2003, some 60 per cent of the population visited at least one festival or village gathering within a 12-month period.

Although the festivals boom came in the years right after the regime change, it is difficult to judge whether it is due to the political and economic changes or rather to the changes which happened at the same time or somewhat earlier on the European festival scene.

Before 1989 the artistic value and effect of festivals was emphasized. Today, when estimating the benefits of festivals, the aspects of business, economic development, tourism and marketing have also come to the fore. Festivals have become marketable products and organizing them is a separate segment of the cultural industry, with all the

positive and negative effects of that reality. It is an advantage of the new festival scene that the pool of organizers and programme suppliers has broadened. Cultural institutions are not the only festival organizers any more. Civil organizations and private entrepreneurs are free to start new events, and performers and co-workers no longer need to be authorized. The authority Országos Rendező Iroda (National Organizing Office), which was previously in charge of granting permissions for artists and controlled the cultural events' quality, ceased to exist. There are no restrictions on inviting artists from abroad, ideological or otherwise.

However, with the end of state paternalism, not only did the prohibitions and restrictions disappear but predictable financial support crashed too. Unpredictable state support has demanded smartness and creativity on the festival organizers' part: those who are familiar with national and international fundraising possibilities and at the same time able to reach private sponsors and donors will be the successful ones. Networking still plays a pivotal role in the process, but these days one should have a good relationship not only with one party's representatives but also with those of different political parties, as well as the actors of the central and local power. A festival organizer must also be on good terms with business and the civil sphere.

Growth in numbers has had an impact on quality. A lot of gastronomy festivals have been created lately in which business interests rule, and only a few of them actually deserve to be called gastro-cultural festivals thanks mainly to the extra high-quality artistic programmes that they offer.

The boom in festivals has brought about diverse genres seen on the international scene. Today we can hardly find any festival representing only one artistic genre – whether it's exclusively classical music, theatre, dance or film. Today the majority are multigenre festivals offering classical and pop music, theatre, literature, dance and other programmes. Besides the art cavalcade, non-artistic agendas have also appeared such as environmentally friendly festivals with the obvious aim of educating visitors on green issues (for example, urging youngsters to collect and recycle plastic cups). Civil society organizations in different fields (such as health and drug issues) may be present informing and consulting with visitors. At some major festivals, visitors are urged to donate blood, while others are committed to certain social issues and offer their income or a share of it to charity.

A festival's social responsibility manifests itself also in the carefully selected location and target group of the event. Some festivals offer programmes for marginal and/or disadvantaged groups and accordingly choose their venues such as homes for the elderly, prisons, or village streets and squares. On the other hand, some festivals draw the attention of the majority to disadvantaged social groups by including tolerance activities in their programmes. By sitting in a wheelchair or being blindfolded, for instance, visitors may experience those situations that people with disabilities live with every day.

At the same time, festivals often aim to strengthen local communities and thus shape local identity. Festivals based on local habits and products may raise pride and strengthen the feeling of belonging in local people. In cases where a community “receives” a festival from an outside organizing team, the locals working to help realize the festival may form a stronger community by the end.

The broadening of the festival scene has included new locations. Besides traditional premises, recently abandoned factories, industrial facilities, streets, squares, churches, meadows, restaurants, private houses and gardens have all become important festival venues.

In the last two decades festivals’ thematic offers have broadened too. There is hardly any plant, herb, spice, food or drink that does not have its own festival. Every month of the year may provide a good opportunity to celebrate a natural product in the frame of a festival – be it onions, chestnuts or lavender. What is more, today not only do typical Hungarian dishes have their own festival (strudel, goulash, fish soup) but one may taste foreign countries’ gastronomic culture as well. In 2015, for instance, the first Asian Steamed Bun Festival took place in Hungary.

It is easy to see, therefore, that all the changes that have happened in the festival world since the regime change have contributed to today’s cultural democracy. The festival supply has definitely broadened – anybody can find the festival that best suits their taste and interests, although they will need to consider their budget as well when choosing a festival. Free festivals are not rarities in Hungary but most of those are financed by local governments and in the case of smaller towns or villages they are rather village gatherings than high-quality artistic events. The multitude of genres within one single festival may bring visitors into contact with those they have never even heard about before – this is democracy of culture, isn’t it? The festivals’ social sensibility, new and unusual locations and broadening themes all indicate the level of cultural democracy.

Changes in the institutional frame

Nevertheless, the transformation of the institutional structure was necessary for the development of cultural democracy. With some 30 members the artistic festivals registered their association in 1990, soon after freedom of association was legally reinstated in the country, and today the Hungarian Festival Association is the most representative body of the sector. One important area of its activity has been to provide domestic and international exchange of experience by organizing study tours. Its online registration system and the accompanying monitoring and rating scheme aims at guarding and raising standards of festivals in aspects that range from artistic quality to professional level marketing and addressing safety regulations.

In a globalized world, festivals have rich networks of direct international contacts, which is reflected in their programming, and English-language pages on the websites of most festivals testify to their openness to the outside world too. First the Budapest Spring

Festival, later Sziget and other rock festivals gained international fame and recognition, which is now extended to a number of other events in the framework of EFFE.

With regard to the official cultural policy, the most important step was the establishment of the Nemzeti Kulturális Alap (National Cultural Fund) in 1993 as the state's arm's length policy. Nowadays it is maintained by income from the state lottery, and since 2005 there has been a special board to administer requests for festivals.

Opinion of some organizers on changes in festival life

However, according to the reminiscences of great Hungarian festival directors, one thing is certain. The interviewees² all emphasize the difference in quality before and after the regime change. Artistic value was the focus during the *ancien régime*, whereas nowadays business interests often outweigh artistic content, which eventually results in low-quality events. Take, for instance, the views of the rebellious former underground artist's point of view as he blames money and commercialization.

Nowadays, instead of the Party, one should think about God with fear. It is money which defines if we should be brave or weak. Anything may go – but this does not work in people's minds. After all, it is better today... but I don't know. Nothing is ever good, really.

A former theatre festival director, today a prominent theatre expert, talks about the general devaluation of culture:

Before the regime change, those in power were afraid of theatre, of the intelligentsia and the artists. The politicians tried to sustain a good relationship with them, therefore they did not really interfere with dissident theatres. After the regime change, the theatre lost this relatively good position. People did not wish or need to hear from the stage those things that could not be articulated elsewhere. Today we live in the world of democracy and free speech. And now that theatre has lost its significance, those in power may do anything they want with it. They do not care about professional aspects. The only thing that matters is the relationship the leader has with his appointees.

One of the prominent gastro-festival organizers is glad that today anyone may organize a festival on their own. At the same time, he is critical about the "political networking" one must do in order to arrange the financial backing for the event. According to his experience, one must have a good, politically neutral relationship with the representatives of different parties and the government as well. (Note: flattering several different politicians and remaining neutral may also be considered as the broadening of democracy.)

² The interviewees prefer to remain anonymous. They include organizers of art, folk, youth and gastronomy festivals.

As a former youth festival organizer remembered, there were fewer festivals in those days, which made organization easier. Given the smaller competition, it was no struggle to bring over artists and musicians for performances. True, an unwritten list of the “not suggested performers” did influence the cultural scene, and one seriously considered whether it was worth risking the unwanted consequences by inviting an artist from the list. According to this interviewee, there was no problem at that time in acquiring the financial resources for a festival. On the one hand, the local KISZ Committee (Hungarian Communist Youth Union, the Party’s youth organization from 1957 to 1989) ensured the resources needed. On the other hand, one could always find a few state firms or cooperatives that were ready to support cultural events.

Another festival expert, a classical music and all-art festival organizer who started his career in houses of culture in the countryside, told us that by “dealing with human relations well”, that is, finding and cooperating with the willing, educated “comrades” of good taste, it was entirely possible to initiate great events or recreate old, traditional ones. One struggled only if the matter was taken on by an “asshole”. She added that finding the right people remains crucial today. According to her recollections, in socialist times, she was free to organize the programmes she wanted and was always able to ensure the high quality of the event. She thinks that today there is more political intervention in the programme and the selection of the “right” artists, even though this is no longer based on political-ideological principles but on helping people’s friends and relatives. Competition has pushed many of the prominent actors of the artistic-cultural scene into worse conditions than they faced under communism. For people like her the 1980s was the best period in which to organize festivals. There was sufficient freedom and money, culture had higher prestige, and low standards and business did not dominate cultural life.

Based on these interviews we can conclude that there were fewer festivals before the regime change, which obviously attracted smaller audiences although communist cultural policy stressed the democratization of culture. The older and more experienced festival experts we interviewed think that festivals in general were realized at a higher artistic level pre-1989 in spite of the limited freedom and the existence of the Iron Curtain. The regime change brought about greater diversity, where high-quality programmes run side by side with commercially corrupted offers. Finally, let me summarize all those reasons which might make both old and new festival organizers think that the quality of festivals has worsened in general.

- In absolute terms, there have recently been more festivals on the market than there were in the old regime, and this growth goes hand in hand with worsening quality. Even though there are still many high-quality festivals, standards in general might be lower than before because of sheer volume.
- The concept of culture has been democratized. Under the old regime, culture meant primarily elite, high culture, but today the very term includes many more things and the older festival organizers have experienced these changes.

- With the growth of the capitalist economy and the business mindset, mass needs and expectations have become more important than artistic quality; and the broad public's taste tends to be unsophisticated.
- With the growth of the civil sector after the regime change, it is not necessarily the elite culture which has gained support. Usually, NGOs organize free or low budget festivals which do not support a significant number of artists from elite or high culture.
- Attempts at centralization (including the cultural field) are unusual in a market economy; thus performers are not selected according to strict criteria, which may lead to worse quality.
- Subjectivity and the nostalgia of the festival organizers may also play a role: often in our memories, the past is remembered more fondly.

Although it is difficult to prove my point, I am convinced that in absolute terms there are actually more festivals of high quality than in the era before 1989. I tend to agree with one of my festival veteran interviewees, who believes that expectations have grown thanks to good quality festivals, and with a broader festival offer people may choose the better ones. So let us trust that the growth of democracy – cultural and otherwise – favourably affects the market, doing away with low quality.

About the author

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