



## ICRN Report / June '25

*This month, we turn our attention to the escalating political pressures undermining cultural autonomy in Hungary – a context that directly affects ICRN member Lahmacun Radio, based in Budapest. For Lahmacun Radio (along with other independent cultural organizations), the proposed “Sovereignty Protection” Bill represents a direct and existential threat.*

### **Hungary’s “Sovereignty Protection” Bill: A Threat to Independent Culture and Civil Society by Bettina Bence (board member of Lahmacun Radio and ICRN)**

*As an independent, volunteer-run radio platform committed to showcasing niche, experimental, and underrepresented cultural voices, we have long relied on international collaborations and solidarity. In a media landscape already dominated by state-controlled narratives and shrinking space for dissent, there are no domestic funding mechanisms that support our work or ensure our sustainability. This bill would not only make our operations legally and financially impossible—it would also endanger the diversity of thought and expression that we stand for. By targeting foreign-funded initiatives, the government is dismantling the few remaining infrastructures that allow independent culture and community media to exist. It’s not only about us—it’s about the erasure of pluralism, the silencing of marginal voices, and the criminalization of independent cultural production in Hungary.*



*Lahmacun Radio New Year's Eve Special 2020 – live broadcast with the band Norms (photo by Gergely Ofner)*

On **May 13, 2025**, Hungary's Parliament was expected to debate a controversial new piece of legislation under the seemingly innocuous title: "*On the Transparency of Public Life.*" Instead, its real content and potential consequences have prompted many to refer to it as the "**Bill of Obstruction**"—a law aimed at systematically deconstructing the legal and financial frameworks that support **independent media, civil society organizations, and foreign-funded cultural initiatives.**

The bill, officially submitted by Fidesz MP **János Halász**, was then **postponed until the autumn parliamentary session**, reportedly due to internal disagreements even within the governing party. But this delay does not reduce the weight of the situation—it **increases uncertainty**, making it even harder for NGOs, community spaces, and independent cultural actors to plan their operations and survive. Now they must prepare for a future where the very legality of their existence may depend on opaque and politically motivated decisions made behind closed doors.

At the core of this bill is a vaguely defined concept of "**sovereignty.**" It empowers a newly created **Sovereignty Protection Office**—closely tied to the former National Security Agency—to designate organizations as 'threats' to Hungarian sovereignty simply because they receive any amount of funding from abroad. Once **listed**, these organizations would be subject to **punitive restrictions**, including:

- Losing their right to receive the **1% personal income tax donations** that many non-profits rely on;
- Being **banned from applying to EU or international grants**, even those transparently distributed through open calls;
- Having to obtain **notarized declarations from every donor** that the support is not from a foreign source—a bureaucratic impossibility for most grassroots organizations;
- Potentially paying **fines of 25 times the value** of any support deemed "foreign" by the authorities;

This proposed bill is nothing less than **an existential threat** to the country's independent cultural and civil ecosystem. It deliberately blurs the line between legitimate foreign cooperation and "interference," and it weaponizes transparency to **criminalize pluralism**. It seeks to criminalize or make impossible the existence of diversity—be it different opinions, independent organizations, or media outlets that do not align with government narratives.

Under this law, any organization—even one receiving 1,000 forints (-€2.5) from a dual citizen living abroad—could be labeled as "foreign-funded." There is no clear threshold, no distinction between large institutional grants and symbolic donations. Furthermore, the criteria for being seen as "endangering sovereignty" include such ideologically loaded notions as:

- "Portraying the democratic constitutional identity of Hungary in a negative light";
- "Undermining the primacy of marriage, family, and biological sex";
- "Questioning Hungary's Christian culture or national unity."

In other words, any critical expression of ideas that challenge the ruling party's worldview could be interpreted as subversive. This aligns with the logic seen in Russia's "foreign agent" laws and in Georgia's recent crackdown on civil society. Although the Hungarian government avoids imposing formal bans, the combined impact of these restrictive measures effectively undermines the ability of many organizations to continue operating.

## What Does the Delay Mean?

The postponement of the bill until autumn does not mean a retreat. Rather, it signals a strategic recalibration by the ruling party, as it assesses how far it can push its authoritarian agenda without provoking EU sanctions or domestic unrest. But just the chance that this law might pass has already made many independent groups afraid and unsure what to do. Organizations are left guessing:

- Will current or past foreign funds count against them?
- Will they lose income from the 2025 1% tax designations—**already pledged by May 20**, but potentially retroactively stripped if they appear on the government's blacklist by **August 1**?
- Is the Office going to act based on secret reports that lawmakers themselves admit they haven't seen?

## How can any organization operate under these conditions?



*Performance by Jun Suzuki at the Signals 2 Noise Budapest Event at Goethe Institute Budapest  
(photo: Gábor Nemerov)*

## **A Cultural and Democratic Crisis**

This proposed legislation is not merely a “transparency” law—it is a deliberate tool of intimidation. Its logic follows a broader strategy: discrediting, defunding, and disabling independent thought in Hungary. Independent cultural institutions—those fostering critical art, community-driven projects, free media, and marginalized voices—have always been reliant on international partnerships and EU grants, precisely because the Hungarian state does not support them.

This bill does not promote a more transparent public life; instead, it creates a “loyalty test” based on the source of funding and ideological alignment. If passed, it would eliminate diversity, suppress free speech, and generate a chilling effect that extends far beyond the explicitly targeted groups. Its impact would be especially devastating for investigative journalism outlets, human rights NGOs, arts collectives, festivals, and educational programs with international partners, as well as any self-organized initiatives that dare to think independently of the government’s agenda.

## **Closing Remarks**

The situation is part of a broader pattern: just days ago, Budapest saw one of the largest Pride marches in its history, held in defiance of a government ban and under the threat of surveillance and retaliation. What began as a celebration of LGBTQ+ rights became a wider protest for civil freedoms—proof that diversity in all its forms, whether cultural, social, or political, is increasingly under attack. From the streets to the airwaves, the government’s actions reveal a strategy of suppressing independent, plural voices. Lahmacun Radio stands precisely for this kind of diversity—and that is what’s now at risk.

The real threat to sovereignty is not foreign donors or cross-border collaboration, but the weakening of institutional checks and balances, the sidelining of civil society, and the loss of public discourse. The Sovereignty Protection Bill could formalize illiberal democracy in Hungary, making non-governmental existence dependent on loyalty rather than legality. Delay is not defeat, but a call for vigilance, solidarity, and urgent action. Independent culture is not a threat but a true expression of national identity. True sovereignty requires freedom of association, thought, and difference.

## Independent Community Radio Network (ICRN)

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If you're also a community radio (or a network) and would like to hear more, reach out to us and we'll make time to talk to you.

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