

Music industry workers' autonomy and (un)changing relations of dependency in the wake of COVID-19 in Hungary: Conclusions of a sociodrama research project

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[barna.emilia@gtk.bme.hu] (Budapest University of Technology and Economics)
[blaskoagi@gmail.com] (Budapest University of Technology and Economics)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020 included the cancellation of live music events in large numbers, leaving a majority of music industry workers – not only musicians, but also sound and light technicians, roadies, managers, and promoters – at least temporarily out of work. The situation was characterised by general uncertainty, both with regard to future restrictions or their easing, and with regard to the willingness of the Hungarian government to lend a hand to the industry and its workers. The question of state support and reliance on it was thus brought into sharp focus – the fate of the music industry and industry actors taking a stance received significant media attention, and online discussions involving organisers and concert or festival promoters abounded, especially during the first two ‘lockdown’ months. Our paper explores the collective images, perceptions, and attitudes of cultural workers working in the Hungarian music industries related to their own work, their creative autonomy, and the relations of dependence in the industry through an analysis of six sociodrama groups undertaken with the participation of music industry workers before and during the pandemic. We explored, first, how workers view the role of the state and the market in their work, and the playing field in which they are situated, and whether and how the pandemic crisis has affected this. Second, what kinds of potential strategies of coping and surviving the workers identify in light of the crisis situation.

Keywords: music industry, autonomy, state, sociodrama, cultural labour, cultural policy

1. Introduction

As has already been widely reported and documented, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact on the music industries¹ and music-making both globally and locally (see e.g. Taylor et al., 2020 for the UK; the Hungarian Association of Independent Labels, 2020; Music Hungary Szövetség, 2020 for Hungary; and posts by various international scholars on

¹ We refer to ‘music industries’ in the plural following Williamson and Cloonan (2007) to indicate the diversity of the sector and acknowledge the power struggles within it.

the *Working in Music* blog²). Lockdown measures worldwide have temporarily put an end to live music shows, leaving musicians, technicians, promoters, managers, and further kinds of workers at least temporarily out of work. Rehearsing or doing studio work has also been made difficult, thus musical activities have mainly been relegated to the space of the home and to online channels.

Although live music was a growing sector of the music industry worldwide (Brennan & Webster, 2011), on the comparatively small and peripheral Hungarian music market the live sector had become an especially important source of income for music industry workers in the years leading up to the pandemic. This is partly because the recording sector was hit comparatively hard in the wake of the loss of income from record sales following digitisation. The 2018 *ProArt Music Industry Report* estimates the income of the recorded music sector at approximately 52 million euros (18.4 billion HUF), and the value of the live sector (dominated by festivals) at almost twice that, close to 100 million euros (35 billion HUF; Virágh & Főző, 2018, pp. 6–7). Moreover, live music had become crucial for musicians and music industry workers not only in terms of direct income, but also for their popularisation. This, combined with the general precarity of music industry workers due to the high proportion of freelance or self-employed workers and those working for micro-enterprises (Antal, 2015, p. 93), the prevailing project-based nature of their work, the seasonality of the industry (which contributes to the unevenness and also unpredictability of income), and strong economic inequality (Virágh & Főző, 2017, p. 17) left this segment of Hungarian workers highly vulnerable to measures related to the pandemic.

The past six years have seen growth in state funding of popular music in Hungary. The former Cseh Tamás, now Hangfoglaló Programme, organised under the scope of the National Cultural Fund (NKA), was introduced by the third Orbán government in 2014. Its main source of funding is a percentage (25 per cent) of the blank media levy collected by the Artisjus copyright collecting society. The fund supports writing, recording and video production for artists, national and international tours, support for live music venues, as well as popular music education and heritage. On the one hand, this is the first instance in which popular music has received significant and wide-ranging state-level recognition and support since the regime change. At the same time, the fund has also helped to establish dependency on the state that may be fragile due to its contingency upon political shifts. This increasing dependency on the state, on the one hand, and on the gatekeepers of the live music sector such as festival promoters, on the other, is accompanied by the very low level, almost non-existent, of union membership, and the ambivalent role and status of professional and lobby groups, such as the Music Hungary Association.

In our research,³ we explore the collective images, perceptions, and attitudes of cultural workers working in the Hungarian music industries related to their own work, their creative autonomy, and the relations of dependency in the industry. Specifically, we first ask how workers view the role of the state and the market in their work, and the playing field in which they are situated, and whether and how the COVID-19 crisis and restriction measures have affected this. Second, what kinds of potential strategies of coping and surviving do they identify in light of the crisis situation, and what do these tell us about the workers' perceptions of their own work and their autonomy. Our hypothesis was that the crisis situation could bring into sharp focus pre-existing dependencies in the industry, but perhaps also place them in

2 Working in Music is available at <https://wim.hypotheses.org/> Accessed 11-12-2020.

3 The sociodrama research analysed here is part of a larger research project supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office under Grant FK-128669.

a new light. This may also create impetus for change, since through their work such agents may not only reproduce but also challenge the system. To answer these questions, we rely on the analysis of six sociodrama events undertaken with the participation of music industry workers before and during the pandemic.

2. Theoretical approaches to creative autonomy: reinserting the missing state

References to creative autonomy have been central to discussions of labour in the cultural industries. Banks argues that cultural work is often assumed to be more 'inherently autonomous' than other types of work (Banks, 2010, p. 252). In Western economies, cultural or creative autonomy is generally interpreted as independence from the market (Banks, 2010, pp. 252–253), expressed in the distance that is maintained, or the lack thereof, from a market or corporate logic that characterises the cultural industries, and the demands and constraints of the commercial world. In other words, the core of the definition of autonomy involves countering the capitalistic, competition-based, profit-seeking principle of the industrial production of culture that is understood to constrain creative and cultural freedom. This is widely known and referred to as the *art versus commerce* dilemma, which concerns both cultural products and their consumption, and cultural labour – and thus the autonomy of workers.

In terms of the autonomy of labour in the music industries in particular, the negative ring of 'selling out' – of succumbing to the lure of profit to the detriment of creative freedom – has been widely documented to structure the careers of not only musicians, but also, for instance, record label owners and employees (e.g. Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Holt and Lapenta refer to autonomy as independence in terms of employment conditions in the cultural industries, but also as autonomous 'subjectivity in self-realisation' (Holt & Lapenta, 2010, pp. 225–226). With regard to the inner-self dimension of the worker, the critical theories of Foucault (2008 [1979]) and Bourdieu (1977), which draw attention to the internalisation and psychological reproduction of social structures and power hierarchies, are particularly valuable. Neo-Foucauldian approaches such as McRobbie's (2002), as Banks demonstrates, focus on the mechanisms of (self-)governance through which the logic of the cultural industries is internalised and readily reproduced by cultural workers through ideologies of (individual) creativity and techniques of self-management (Banks, 2010, pp. 256–7). Autonomy thus becomes a 'false freedom' insofar as the demands of neoliberal capitalism, such as the flexibilisation and freelancing of work and the 'de-differentiation' of work and non-working environments (p. 257) (wherein work is pleasure – this is also often referred to as the 'do what you love' doctrine) are welcomed as inherent to the thriving of creativity. The contemporary capitalist system, in other words, reproduces and reinforces its mechanisms through the constitution of neoliberal – creative – subjectivities.

Literature that focuses on cultural or creative labour is dominated by studies that focus on the countries of the global core – in particular, the United Kingdom and the United States. One limitation we may identify that arises from the very position of this work as knowledge produced within the core of the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein, 2004) is the lack of attention to the role of the state as an actor. It is research focused on the creative economies of non-Western countries such as China, where the role of the state is perceived much more directly, that has drawn attention to this theoretical bias. Wang, for instance, 'stresses [that] there is always "a state question" in China's cultural industries and popular cultural studies' (Wang, 2001, pp. 35–52, quoted in Lin, 2019, p. 54). While such a statement implies that the state is less relevant as an actor in relation to cultural autonomy in Western countries, we would like to argue that the capitalist state (Jessop, 1982) and the ways in (and extent to)

which it reproduces capitalistic relations or mitigates the logic of capital need to be rendered the subject of empirical analysis. Music certainly does not remain out of the reach of cultural policy (e.g. Homan et al., 2015). Second, it is also affected by the broader regulatory framework determined by state apparatus. Cloonan and Street (1997), in their exploration of the relationship between popular music and politics, helpfully summarise the areas where political actors, including the state – both the nation state and the local state – may impact, influence, control, as well as draw upon, popular music: they distinguish between means of ‘policing pop’, which include legislation, policy making, local regulation, and ‘moral crusades’; ‘exploiting pop’ for political purposes; ‘promoting pop’ through indirect promotion, such as through public service radio; direct support; the political economy of pop; and ‘cultural politics.’

According to accounts focused on Hungary, the Hungarian cultural world, including popular music, has a historical legacy of being particularly state-dependent under socialism, even though the extent and scope of state control was modified along with shifts in the economic and political system. Ideologues strictly prescribed aesthetic principles regarding composition in the early 1950s based on central Soviet directives (Ignácz, 2020). Yet the difficulty, and ultimately lack of success of implementing these into songwriting practice nevertheless still left songwriters with some room for creativity (*ibid.*). Such aesthetic control was combined with means of institutional and infrastructural control – ultimately increasing in weight in relation to aesthetic means in the Kádár era. This was realised through a state monopoly on the production – recording, record manufacturing, and publishing – of music as well as through its main channels of dissemination; namely, radio and television. The state also asserted power through the direct control of live music through means of a permitting system and the policing of events. Moreover, musicians also practiced self-censorship (Csatári, 2018), yet self-censorship arguably remains a reflective process whereby, on the surface, the creative worker attempts to adhere to state ideology, while simultaneously devising creative ways of subtle resistance. In other words, the mentioned forms of state control do leave some room for striving for creative autonomy. ‘Creativity’ in this sense refers to a kind of resourcefulness, as well as the mentioned reflexivity that helps one make use of the opportunities provided by the system – in a similar way to Brazilian television set assemblers in Mayer’s (2011) study, who devise new ways to help them survive on the factory floor. In Hungary, resourcefulness may also be observed in relation to the use of infrastructure, such as ‘off the grid’ underground spaces – private homes served as important locations for performances, practice, recording, as well as networking through house parties or the informal trading of tapes.

Szemere’s (2001) account of the underground music world of 1980s’ and 1990s’ Hungary focuses on the pre- and post-transition careers of musicians and offers insight into the intersection of state-level politics, subcultural logics and industry-level mechanisms following the regime change. She suggests that the particular counter-cultural discourse of autonomy characteristic of the socialist era (that is, autonomy from the political system in a cultural and artistic sense), effectively disappeared with the transition (Szemere, 2001, p. 109). What emerged in its stead was a particular and characteristic post-socialist set of attitudes, appearing partly in response to the tension of the new capitalist relations, competition, privatisation, quickly growing inequalities and job insecurity – and partly in response to the ideology that located this phenomenon within a moralised discourse of progress and involved (the difficulty of) ‘catching up’ with the West; in other words, Hungary’s – and Eastern Europe’s – ‘backwardness’:

The stories [of post-socialist independent record labels also] exemplify [...] a conspicuous trend in private and public discourses surrounding the business world in postsocialist Hungary, which is

typically cast in a moral framework. Complaints of 'ruthlessness', 'lawlessness', 'carelessness', and the 'Wild East' predictably recur. Today's entrepreneurs, according to [...] widespread belief, are desperate to make as much money as fast and with as little effort as possible. Business, from this perspective, had become indistinguishable from crime. (Szemere, 2001, p. 148)

This kind of moral and cultural framing, as the author herself observes (p. 149), was blind to the structural difficulties surrounding entrepreneurship and self-employment which quickly sprang up following the regime change, including intense competition and a lack of support services (Roberts & Tholen, 1998, p. 60), which ensured that enterprises mostly relied on informal support networks of friends and relatives (ibid.; Szemere observes the same in relation to the independent record labels she discusses). References to the 'Wild East', in addition, evoke the '*topos* of west European moral superiority' – an internalisation of what Stuart Hall calls 'the *longue-durée* tendency of treating eastern Europe as "barbaric" [that] has been part of the West's production of its "internal others"' (Hall, 1995, p. 189, in Böröcz, 2006, p. 127).

The 2010 political turn in Hungary and the government-titled 'System of National Cooperation' can be understood as a new regime of capital accumulation and hegemony building (Éber et al., 2019). State cultural policy during this regime, as Barna et al. (2019) argue, can be described through the two parallel processes of *incorporation* and *ideological control*. While incorporation refers to the inclusion of cultural producers through new or transformed institutions, through which they are able to obtain resources and prestige, ideological control refers to more direct conservative and ethno-nationalist cultural policy. The latter is typical in areas that traditionally involve high levels of state involvement and are imbued with high symbolic value, such as literature and the fine arts. Ideology production and the establishment of state hegemonic strategies are achieved through the transformation of ownership relations and financing, the operating and legitimising of new institutions by the government in cultural spheres, the 'occupation', transformation, or closing of pre-existing institutions, and the allocation or withdrawal of funding.⁴ The authors also emphasise that '[c]hanges taking place in the area of cultural production are multi-layered: a market-based–manager perspective and an ideology producing and maintaining function are simultaneously present both between and within subfields' (Barna et al., 2019, p. 147).

3. Research methodology and COVID-19 as research context

3.1 COVID-19 as a research context

Since our research on music industry workers started before the pandemic, COVID-19 and the associated crisis created an unexpected context. While our research questions did not change, we had to adjust our methodology to the lockdown situation and shift the sociodrama events into an online context. The focal points of the drama events, while still aligned with our research question, were also adjusted to the main concerns, questions, and needs of participants that arose in the crisis, directly affecting their work. In Table 1, we indicate the chronological progression of important political and industry events, along with the date and thematic focus of the six drama events that form part of this analysis.

4 New institutions include the National Film Fund, while the strategy of transforming pre-existing ones can be observed, for instance, in the cases of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, the Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society, and the Petőfi Literary Museum (Barna et al., 2019).

Table 1: *The rhythm of political and industry events related to COVID-19 and the date and focus of the drama groups*

Important political and music industry events related to COVID-19	Event dates	Drama dates	Drama focus points
		11 Dec 2019	dependencies between music industry actors
		19 Feb 2020	behind the scenes: known and unknown secrets – whom do they benefit?
lockdown announced, ban on events	11 March 2020		
Artisjus + EJI grants announced	24 March 2020		
Budapest Park open letter	15 April 2020		
		13 May 2020	“what do we need in order to survive? (looking for resources)”
wedding parties allowed outside of Budapest	1 June 2020		
music events below 500 allowed all over the country until 15 Aug	15 June 2020		
		16 June 2020	“when will it end? (crisis, no resources, no strategies)”
		18 June 2020	“will it return to what it used to be? (coping strategy: future projection)”
Popular Music Strategy of Szilárd Demeter	20 June 2020		
“Minister of Innovation and Technology: 15 August lifting of restrictions uncertain”	14 July 2020		
official: restrictions remain after 15 Aug	30 July 2020		
#coVideo ‘behind-the-scenes workers’ campaign	3 Aug 2020		
		4 Aug 2020	“how to help retain music workers (responsibility for others)”
Warehouse Gigs announced	5 Aug 2020		
symbolic date: until 30 July, expected date for restrictions to be entirely lifted	15 Aug 2020		

The 2020 spring lockdown period, announced on 11 March, included a total ban on live gigs. At the same time, there were no industry-wide support measures from the government – although self-employed workers received some tax support. The National Cultural Fund, Artisjus – the copyright collecting society – and the Performer’s Rights Protection Association Office (EJI) both supported artists on the basis of grants, but the ‘background workers’ of the industry – technicians, roadies, managers, and photographers – were not included among the potential recipients. The awarding of these grants and the circulation of the names of the supported artists generated substantial media attention, including social media posts and debates, which engaged with the issues of the deservingness of well-known musicians of government support and the responsibility of the state to support artists. Another debate involved the ticketing policy of live music venues and events during the crisis: while the future of live

events was uncertain, the venue Budapest Park issued a statement informing their customers of their difficult financial situation, requesting their understanding and patience regarding ticket refunds. The statement was signed by multiple other venues and events, but was followed by a social media backlash, which involved many music venues being accused of being 'profit-hungry' and showing a lack of solidarity with their customers. Our first online event was conducted during this period of enhanced media attention to the music industry and its workers, and some of the participants were themselves directly involved in the ongoing and heated debates.

The restrictions were partly lifted for the summer period, and musical events with up to 500 participants could be held all over the country from 1 June. The government named 15 August as a potential date for the lifting of the remaining restrictions, which meant that those festivals that had not entirely been cancelled at this point were potentially moved to the second half of August. On 30 July, the government announced that restrictions would remain in place. Within the music industries, there was widespread unrest and frustration over the course of July with regard to the uncertainty of the possibility of holding events in the remainder of the summer, and online campaigns were organised to show music industry workers' desire to work (e.g. the #zenélnénk [we would like to play music] social media campaign) and to emphasise the value of their work (e.g. the #coVideo campaign aimed at making visible the largely invisible labour of technicians). In addition to economic hardship, the mental health of artists also received some media publicity. Two of our online dramas were held in June, while there was still hope, although a lot of uncertainty, regarding the lifting of restrictions, and the final event was held four days after the 30 July announcement.

During the same period, Szilárd Demeter, the head of Petőfi Literary Museum, was awarded a new position as Ministerial Commissioner for the Renewal of Hungarian Popular Music from 20 June, and released a detailed five-year strategy for popular music in this role, which he had compiled with the help of music industry experts. While the appointment of Demeter himself was debated in the music industry for political reasons, the strategy itself was welcomed by many. Nevertheless, the government music industry support scheme that was announced on 5 August – namely, the 15 million euro (5.3 billion HUF) 'Warehouse Gigs' [Raktárkoncertek] programme – apparently sidestepped Demeter, the Hangfoglaló Programme, as well as Music Hungary and other industry groups in favour of the Hungarian Tourist Agency as organiser, along with a company argued to be closely associated with the government as the commissioned stage technology firm (Sajó, 2020). The programme enabled 300 acts, selected from three main genres, to perform at a 'warehouse' venue without an audience – the performance to be recorded and archived, and the musicians to receive an outsized performance fee. Again, the programme was highly divisive within as well as outside of the industry and sparked intense (social) media debate. While many participating artists openly embraced it as an opportunity, some bands publicly announced they would distribute the support they would be receiving among their broader team, or hand over the entire amount to a different band more in need of financial support, or to a fund set up to give succour to background workers.

3.2 Offline and online sociodrama as research method

In our research, sociodrama was used as a qualitative research method, whereby the researcher investigates the topic together with the group whose members are involved with the research topic (Gunz, 1996; Horváth & Oblath, 2016; Ius, 2020). The essence of the method is that the group, after formulating the issues that currently concern them, develop these issues through

Table 2: *Setup of drama events (pandemic-era events are in bold)*

Date of drama event	No. of participants	No. of new participants	Occupation of participants	Gender of participants: F/M	Place of residence: Budapest/ other town
11 Dec 2019	6	6	2 programme managers, musician/social media manager, PR manager at venue, artist manager, tour manager/communication manager	2/4	5/1
19 Feb 2020	7	2	2 musicians, musician/social media manager, PR manager at venue, programme manager, artist manager, tour manager/communication manager	2/5	6/1
13 May 2020	3	0 (all 3 participated for 3rd time)"	programme manager, tour manager/communication manager, PR manager at venue	2/1	2/1
16 June 2020	7	7	2 musicians, programme manager, venue owner, manager, DJ/promoter, sound technician	2/5	3/4
18 June 2020	3	3	musician, promoter, sound technician	1/2	0/3
4 Aug 2020	6	"3 (continuation of 16 June group)"	musician, DJ/promoter, sound technician, manager, promoter, DJ/social media manager	2/4	3/3

dramatic enactments. This process is facilitated and led by the drama leaders (in our case, one of the researchers acted as a drama leader, along with a partner). Dramatic enactment, as it reveals the various perspectives of the actors in the given situation, results in a deeper understanding of the investigated topic, and ultimately a differentiated, shared understanding that integrates multiple aspects, which are eventually expressed verbally by the group. The question-seeking phase in the drama (Browne, 2005; Minkin, 2016) takes place in verbal form when the participants share their thoughts. As these thoughts are formulated at the beginning of the group situation, we regard them as thoughts that are more controlled and information that can be used directly at that time. The enactment phase takes place through roleplaying, resulting in the emergence of more spontaneous and less controlled thoughts. At the same time, what is revealed in the enactment is not the expression of the speaker's views, but how the speaker experiences the given role and perspective. The last, integration phase of the events again takes place verbally, so this is again not an enactment situation. However, compared to the initial phase, these statements are often more honest and differentiated in light of the experiences of the enactment.

The method is suitable for an analysis of concrete situations, such as, in the present case, the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown restrictions. We are able to observe not only the situations or scenes created by the participants, but also their feelings, attitudes, and opinions regarding these – both are interpreted as data. Sociodrama events are less controlled and more spontaneous than focus groups, which suited our research situation involving predefined research questions but also a rapidly shifting context. The events made visible mechanisms and processes of the (re)production of power relations, hierarchies, and dependency in situ. Moreover, they helped us – as well as the participants – to deconstruct what is generally thought of as shared knowledge or consensus. This was of particular relevance for our research

focus, since the music industries, the work and situation of musicians is highly mediated and takes place in the public sphere in general. In addition, as mentioned, this was heightened during the pandemic period through (social) media debate about, for instance, the value of music, the industry, and the work of musicians. We purposefully aimed to use a method that would detach participants from usual or dominant music industry discourses and narratives – especially since some of the participants regularly speak and share their opinions at industry events, roundtable discussions, and/or on social media.

The limitations of the method, on the other hand, include the fact that it works best if focused on concrete questions or issues brought up by the group, making comparisons difficult. To offset this disadvantage, we applied a system of coding for the analysis, which is detailed below. Although sociodrama as action research is usually applied to vulnerable groups, the method is generally used in a wide variety of fields (including education and organisational development). This means that its pros and cons remain valid regardless of the participants' social background or communication skills.

Table 2 presents the setup of our sociodrama groups, including information on the number of participants, the number of new participants (to indicate the extent of continuity among groups), their occupations, gender, and place of residence. We recruited participants with the help of a research assistant who is also a music industry worker, initially utilising her contacts and then employing the snowballing technique. We made no restrictions regarding genres of popular music, and we aimed to cover a geographical range as well as a variety of industry jobs and roles. Nevertheless, there are many limitations associated with this relatively small sample; most importantly, the fact that participating in the dramas – especially several times – requires more commitment than, for instance, participating in a regular qualitative interview. This means that workers who are committed to sharing their opinions, and in some cases, even used to having representative roles (e.g. at music business events), were overrepresented. Some of the participants have important gatekeeping positions in the industry, and are partly integrated into institutions of the state support system through such positions. Nevertheless, the groups were heterogeneous in the sense that they also included musicians and managers who do not occupy any prominent representative positions.

The first two, pre-pandemic events were conducted offline. For these events, the topics were predetermined by the researchers, and membership of the two groups was consistent to the extent that it was practically possible – the researchers encouraged continuity, and the participants were also willing to further continue to explore the issues raised during the first occasion (membership was not entirely identical because some members dropped out, while we enabled others who were originally interested but unable to join for practical reasons during the first occasion to join later on). The first online, pandemic-era drama was also conducted with members who had participated in both preceding events. The second and fourth online groups also shared members. For the pandemic-time events, we asked group members to formulate the issues that were currently important to them. Then we looked for the most important common issue together, as worked out through collective enactment. Since the sociodrama groups were in the crisis situation described above during the pandemic, individual issues that were articulated were without exception related to the COVID-19 situation (we list the central issue of each drama in Table 1).

As 'teledrama', online sociodrama is a method that existed before the pandemic (Giacomucci, 2021, pp. 291–308), but the rapid international knowledge sharing during COVID-19 also helped previously inexperienced leaders to emplace the method on online platforms. The 'stage' needed for the drama can be created both by using a whiteboard interface and by

simultaneously showing, hiding, or renaming participants in a conference call – in our case, both techniques were utilized. For our participants, the online context was familiar, since a significant, in many cases dominant, part of the daily work of musicians, managers or promoters takes place through online platforms.

Both the offline and the online events were video-recorded and transcribed in a diary form specifically developed by the researchers for recording sociodrama events (which includes the recording of not only verbal data, but also visual and other aural cues, proximity, etc.). Based on the recordings and the diaries, the two researchers prepared a qualitative analysis of the events separately. As part of these analyses, we listed emerging topics and subtopics from the different phases of the sessions, and analysed them on the basis of the conceptualised research questions. During the listing of the emerging (sub)topics, we categorised the type of information that served as a source of data as 1) information from the participants' own perspective (specific action or communication); or 2) information emerging from a role, where the first type of information is regarded as more 'controlled' by participants. This enabled a comparison of explicit and implicit assumptions, interpretations, and attitudes. Finally, we compared and synthesised these two sets of written analyses with the help of Atlas.ti software: the final analysis is a product of this synthesis.

4. Constructions of the state and of autonomy in relation to the state

First, we look at the ways in which notions of the state, and its role in relation to the music industries and their actors were constructed in the drama events before and during the pandemic, and the ways in which the participants understood the relationship between autonomy and the state in this specific spatial and temporal context. This analysis is preceded by a contextual account of state involvement in the music industries during the pandemic.

4.1 State involvement in the music industries during COVID-19

The mentioned theorisation of the relationship between popular music and politics by Cloonan and Street (1997) is helpful for analysing state involvement in the music industries in Hungary. With regard to *policy making*, as in the UK, VAT is an important and contested area. As Cloonan observes, tax policy as applied to the music industries becoming an expectation of the government '[contradicts] the assumption that the music industry is entirely "free market" oriented' (Cloonan, 2007, p. 98). In Hungary, reducing the current VAT rate for live performances (27 per cent for indoor events and 19 per cent for festivals) to 5 per cent has in recent years become a measure desired by many – arguably supported by an industry-wide consensus – that the government could introduce to support the industry; this was also a frequent reference point in our dramas. During the pandemic, it was included in the aforementioned popular music strategy developed by Szilárd Demeter, while Music Hungary subsequently commissioned the company PwC to conduct an impact assessment of this (Music Hungary and PwC, 2020). Despite this, the government has not yet made any indication of their willingness to lower the VAT rate. Instead, the main channel of state support is the Hangfoglaló Programme, which, as we have seen, operates through grant applications. The Programme can be considered part of an incorporation strategy through which, while sub-programmes are not designed to correspond to a definable hegemonic cultural ideology, a system of dependency on political actors is created and maintained.

Support for popular music can be *direct* (Cloonan & Street, 1997, pp. 230–231), such as the sponsoring of selected artists or events – which is indeed something the government engaged in during the first ‘lockdown’ period, for instance, through the funding of the production of songs and videos aimed at reinforcing a feeling of togetherness as well as national pride and ‘traditional European values’ (e.g. ‘Europe 2020’⁵). Such examples can arguably be considered part of the ideological control strategy. Support can also take the form of *indirect promotion*, the primary channel of which is public service media (Cloonan & Street, 1997, p. 230). In Hungary, MR2 Petőfi went through a gradual but sharp transformation after the political turn of 2010 into an international-focused mainstream pop radio station, with much less exposure for Hungarian acts – especially ‘alternative’ ones – in general than before (Virágh & Főző, 2019, p. 47). Nation-wide radio exposure is provided through this channel to only a select few artists, some of whom are more politically aligned with the regime. This selective favouring of such artists can be a further strategy of ideological control. Finally, the most outstanding development during the period of our research – namely, the introduction of the mentioned Warehouse Gigs programme as the primary means of supporting the industry in the wake of the pandemic –, can be best interpreted within the *political economy* of popular music framework (Cloonan & Street 1997, pp. 231–232). While the regime appears to utilise the situation to gain further ground in terms of capital accumulation, it leaves the majority of artists and music industry workers without support and, in a neoliberal fashion, lets workers absorb the cost of the crisis. Workers instead relied on ‘day jobs’ – pre-existing or new ones –, their savings, and informal household support for survival. Acts of spontaneous and bottom-up solidarity among industry workers were also reported in our research.

4.2 *Autonomy and the state before and during COVID-19*

In the first drama conducted after the introduction of restrictions (13 May 2020), the response of the participants to the crisis situation was an attempt to map the playing field to answer the question of ‘how to survive.’ During the main drama phase, three routes of action were outlined by the participants as post-pandemic scenarios potentially available to them. These were drawn up on a whiteboard; the participants then ‘walked’ the routes through a *walk and talk* technique (Garcia & Sternberg, 2000, p. 67). During the walk, participants assumed a chosen role, explaining their action and enacting their thoughts and feelings along the way. All important factors that were mentioned were simultaneously displayed by the group on the whiteboard with a drawing or inscription.

The role and responsibility of the state and the government – the two were not differentiated – received significant emphasis as factors either enabling participants as music industry workers to complete a particular route, or as contributing to the destruction of the industry – an image projected in the (not necessarily distant) future. The state was predominantly specified as an agent that was potentially failing to act in a way that would protect the interests of the industry and its workers. Although direct references were made to the government’s action in relation to the pandemic (namely, the restrictions, their timing and communication, and the forms of support – mostly, the lack thereof), many of the statements were extended to cover the role and responsibility of the state in relation to the industry in general.

This strong attribution of agency that characterised the drama can be contrasted with its representation in the two pre-pandemic drama events (11 December 2019 and 19 February

5 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POcHC_EOgnk Accessed 11-12-2020.

2020), at which the same participants had similarly been involved. Here, both ‘the radio’ (a crucial channel for the direct promotion of popular music; Cloonan & Street, pp. 230–231) and ‘cultural policy’ were represented and enacted as being far removed from the actors of the industry and the audience. These were defined through their distance and lack of expertise pertaining to the functioning of the music industries and popularizing of music culture. ‘Cultural policy’, moreover, embodied a conservative cultural hierarchy through references to classical music. In the 11 December 2019 drama, the participants identified the important industry actors through themselves and with the help of objects in the room. Yet references to the support system entered the pre-pandemic drama events relatively late, and it was not embodied as a central factor. Finally, the shift in the attribution of agency can also be traced in the group’s reference to a symbolic object, which was continuous through the first three events, although the meaning changed: during the first two, pre-pandemic events, the object was meant to symbolise the ‘economy of Hungary’ and was accepted as a given, disadvantageous contextual feature. However, during the first pandemic-time event (13 May 2020), it was referred to as ‘the state’ and embodied the actor towards which participants voiced their expectations in line with their roles.

The relation to the state received the most attention in the first (13 May 2020) and fourth (4 August 2020) pandemic-era drama groups. The models of the state that were drawn upon in these events can be identified as a redistributive, welfare model versus a laissez-faire, free market model, which were, moreover, closely entwined with images of East versus West. It was from the perspective of a redistributive model that participants articulated their expectations about the state; namely, that if it has ‘taken’ at other times – i.e. from the industry in the form of taxes – and has been ‘pouring onto everything’ – that is, extending its incorporating strategy – then it has an obligation to give back now, at a time of crisis. There was, in other words, an acknowledgement of the active influence of the state on the sphere of popular music, dominantly as a beneficiary through its tax policy. The expectation of care – as a ‘nanny state’ – was expressed quite strongly, in metaphorical language, such as ‘everyone has let go of our hands’ and, from the perspective of the state, ‘come to my bosom.’ At the same time, it was made explicit on a number of occasions as an *emerged topic* – that is, through the advocacy of one person in the drama, which was then accepted as group consensus – that a laissez-faire state and a free market would be desirable. Market relations consistently appeared as ‘pure’, and as a form of ‘healthy’ competition, as exemplified by Western European countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, which were frequently cited as morally good – as opposed to the demoralising, dividing competition in Hungary. The latter echo constructions of the ‘wild East’ during the 1990s described by Szemere (2001, p. 148). There was no differentiation between the Western socio-democratic welfare state model and the post-socialist state; instead, the Hungarian model was located within an East–West opposition, where the West represented the free market model.

This opposition was already strongly present during the pre-pandemic occasions. For instance, in the sense that the (local and nation-)state, which enables the organising of free events such as town or village days, was identified as an obstacle to a ‘healthy’ market, which would be represented by the presence of a paying audience. Presently, in accordance with an ‘Eastern European tradition’, as the drama participants both before and during the pandemic phrased it, the same people always profit; ‘the game is rigged’, and industry players fight over small amounts of money – musicians are ‘dragged through the mud’ for amounts like 160 thousand forints (450 euros). The latter opinion was voiced during the 13 May 2020 drama and is a direct reference to the maximum amount paid out by the application-based COVID-19

support scheme of Artisjus and EJI, which, as mentioned above, was a topical issue much discussed and debated in the media at the time. During the drama, this inequality of opportunities, the implied corruption, the lack of fairness, coupled with the lack of sufficient resources, were thus framed within an internalised moral geopolitics (Böröcz, 2006), wherein Hungary is perceived to be 'lagging behind' in relation to the superior West in a perceived linear process of development.

In the second online drama (16 June 2020), the relation to the state was articulated through the representation of institutions associated with the industry – more precisely, advocacy and the collective representation of interests, and participants' relationship and attitudes to these. The National Cultural Fund and the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry were both characterised and enacted as 'very bureaucratic' and as embodying an impersonal power with whom communication is one-sided. The conversations enacted between industry workers and these organisations permit an insider view of a bureaucratic mode of business. In relation to the National Cultural Fund, the absence of direct communication was emphasised: 'Unfortunately it is impossible for you to speak to [the responsible person] right now – they are having coffee.' Yet the same representation was also transposed to Music Hungary, an industry association (this is when the term 'bureaucratic' was explicitly used in the drama), implying that the type of unequal communication pattern and bureaucracy is embedded into an organisational culture that is also reproduced outside of state institutions. This organisational culture, towards which the participants clearly assumed a negative attitude in this context, has historically been associated with the welfare state – especially by its neoliberal critics. Based on this, the drama participants seemed to tap into the 'new spirit of capitalism', which emphasises workplace autonomy and creativity as opposed to the old Fordist workplace structure, accurately described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) as the dominant ideology of the emerging neoliberal regime. At the same time, in the case of the drama participants, this was complicated by the expectations they communicated towards the state. Moreover, the representation of the impersonality of power – not knowing how to pose their questions, or express what they need – is also evidence of a lack of felt agency on their part as workers, which appeared together with uncertainty regarding what 'their task' in the crisis was; what they could do in the present situation. This lack of agency – and the implicit assignment of agency to the state – was suggested not only by explicit statements but also linguistic formulations such as passive questions like 'why has nothing happened?' Regarding the lack of bodies for collective representation that the workers could recognise as their own, as opposed to the organisations themselves which stood for the impersonal and distant power of the state, the dominant articulated feeling was one of power- and helplessness.

So far we have looked at implicit models of the state. We now turn to the articulated relation to the hegemonic ideology and its representatives, since references were also made to ideological control specifically in the pandemic context. There was one mention (in the 13 May drama) of a grant entitled '*Köszönjük, Magyarország!*' [Thank you, Hungary] launched by the Petőfi Literary Museum, headed by Szilárd Demeter, which offered grants to composers for works addressing the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon (*Pim.hu*, 2020) – an event of major symbolic significance to the Fidesz government. The figure of Demeter kept recurring in the dramas – he was even included in an imagined ideal scenario drawn up by participants in the fourth pandemic-time drama (4 August 2020) among the actors that could, according to the participants, find a solution to the crisis of the industry. While including him initially emerged as a joke, the justification participants ultimately made for his inclusion was that 'it was better to have him there so that we are able to consult him in the first round' –

and perhaps exert some influence on him. Notably, Demeter had only recently been awarded responsibility in the area of popular music, yet his perceived position in this sense appeared rock solid. However, except for the one reference to the Trianon Treaty-themed grant, he and his gatekeeping position were not criticised directly from an ideological control perspective, but rather as someone without specific music industry expertise. This seems to reiterate the preceding, pre-pandemic criticism of ‘radio’ and ‘cultural policy’ as removed from the world of the music industry and popular music.

Last, participants in the first pandemic-era drama (13 May 2020) expressed their frustration that the state does not provide them with a space to exist; does not ‘let them live.’ In one instance, this was posed as a question: the participants pondered whether cooperation – a desired goal – was missing entirely, or whether it was actively being broken down by the state. Grassroots organising, the group argued, would work fine if the state would only permit it – the 1980s’ US college radio indie movement (see Kruse, 2003), another Western example, was cited by one participant as a parallel. In this sense, the conditions of autonomy were imagined as room for manoeuvre in economic terms, similar to what Hodkinson (2002) terms relative autonomy in the context of subcultural production, generated by the state either by ‘taking less’, or ‘giving more’ resources in a time of crisis.

5. Strategies of ‘survival’ and the three dimensions of integrity

In the following, we outline the enacted and embodied strategies that emerged in the post-pandemic drama events, which also inform us about career strategies and principles in the Hungarian music industries in general. The web of actors and dimensions within which participants outline such strategies inform us about their perceptions of power, autonomy, and dependency.

As mentioned in the previous section, in the first pandemic-era drama (13 May 2020), the group defined ‘survival’ after the crisis as the central situation to explore. A three-way model was generated, with the participants as part of the game, which can also be used as a model in the analysis. The group differentiated three dimensions of integrity – namely *moral*, *physical*, and *professional* – and outlined three potential strategies, plus a fourth sub-route, for finding a way out of the crisis as a music industry worker through possible combinations of these three dimensions. The first scenario was a straight, but arduous journey, requiring perseverance – expressions used by the participants included ‘walking’ the route. The walk was slow, and mere survival in the industry was the goal. The values attached to this were honesty and a ‘straight backbone’ – representing moral stature. In this scenario, all three dimensions of integrity were maintained, but moral and professional integrity were emphasised. The second scenario ended in leaving the industry – and music – altogether, which equalled the loss of professional integrity. A sub-scenario of this entailed the joint loss of physical integrity, with illness or depression and even death at the end, represented by a downward turning line. The third scenario involved the maintaining of professional and physical integrity, but without moral integrity. This was represented as an upward route completed with the help of ‘clever solutions’: making the best possible use of the pandemic situation by following individual interests and remaining on one’s feet throughout. As opposed to the first route, this was drawn not as a straight line, but as a wavy, uneven route.

In terms of subjective evaluation, on the level of explicit, verbal expressions, this third route was condemned unequivocally: its representatives were constructed as enemies both within and outside of the game (i.e. when participants spoke on their own behalf, as opposed

to enacting a role). At the same time, ideas enacted as part of the third route (where 'moral integrity' was lacking) were pondered as 'viable ideas' previously and accepted as 'good' choices. These 'viable ideas' were aimed at 'gaining money' and 'a lot of fans in the long run.' When the participants in effect walked the winding third route, the enacted actions did not in fact seem extreme; rather, they were directed at making 'clever' use of the opportunities that presented themselves amidst the pandemic situation – including the interpretation of regulations in a 'flexible' manner. In some cases, the actions were characteristic of entrepreneurial behaviour, and can also be compared to creativity as resourcefulness in the sense of making use of the opportunities provided by the system as described by Mayer (2011). For instance, organising gigs in the form of 'garden parties' to circumvent restrictions in place, or accepting such a 'garden party' job if it were organised by 'friends'; successfully applying for an Artisjus grant with the help of a personal connection – a former classmate; asking for more money amidst decreasing fees in the wake of the economic crisis associated with the pandemic; making use of money they had previously 'taken out of' their company; working in a different field in parallel so that they remain on their feet – and gaining an advantage in the competition over others who were unable to similarly rely on other jobs; and selling personal property to make some money. Overall, these actions can be characterised as individualistic, lacking notions of solidarity with others also in trouble, and relying strongly on informal connections.

The separation of the market from the state – more precisely, the government and politics – was also an explicit element of the definition of moral integrity in the first pandemic-time drama. When discussing potential coping strategies for surviving the crisis, participants clearly drew a line between getting a job with a multinational corporation while remaining in the industry (for instance, a major record label or a live entertainment corporation), which was not problematic morally, and accepting a job with a 'National So-and-so' institution; the second reference is to the mushrooming of the aforementioned newly established institutions in cultural areas during the Orbán regime. This appears to reinforce the hypothesis that the threat of 'selling out' in a moral sense is articulated differently in this local context from the creativity-versus-commerce paradigm documented in accounts based in Western countries. As opposed to the logic of capital, it makes at least implicit reference to the threat of incorporation in the specific context of the 'System of National Cooperation', while leaving the capitalist logic of the industry uncontested.

Professional integrity was foregrounded in two senses, the first of which dominated in the pre-COVID drama events, while the second one emerged in the pandemic-time events only. Definitions of autonomy and dependency were a central concern in the first drama (11 December 2019), as predetermined by the researchers. Participants' definitions and associations predominantly revolved around the tension between the logic of profit and what they referred to as professional concerns, but what were in effect concerns regarding cultural taste and style. The participants primarily attributed such concerns to musicians on the basis that they are the ones whose work is directly creative, and thus exist in a cultural and aesthetic field, while it was up to managers or promoters – those working with musicians – to look out for the business interests of artists. One exception was a promoter who also mentioned that the question of taste was important: from his own perspective as an electronic music promoter, he expressed that he would deem his autonomy to be compromised if he were forced to 'book DJ BoBo.' In other words, the creativity-versus-commerce dilemma was recognised, but the non-musician workers at least partly – with the mentioned exception – relegated this dilemma to musicians, who were understood as *the* creative workers of the industry.

In the drama events during the pandemic, questions concerning taste and the audience were also present, this time mostly formulated from a 'demand' perspective: participants complained about the predominant 'mainstream' tastes and the lack of 'culture' and 'education' of the general public. Within the pondering about their own survival in the industry, the existence of a demand for 'interesting' music and music discovery, as opposed to going for the familiar, was regularly cited as a crucial factor. The participants thus positioned themselves as 'alternative' or catering to niche tastes, and identified a lack of musical culture and distinction in Hungarian society as a factor further curtailing their creative autonomy. It can be concluded that while there was an ostensible distancing from the creativity-versus-commerce dilemma during the pre-pandemic events on the part of non-musicians workers, creative autonomy in terms of alterity – as opposed to unrefined mainstream tastes – came to be emphasised during the time of the pandemic. This may be related to a crisis of their professional identity that the sudden stop created for workers, which may have led them to articulate their own creative identities – expressed through alterity and cultural capital – normally hidden in the background to the forefront.

At the online events, professional integrity was also foregrounded in emphasising music as a calling and as central to music industry workers' self-identity, which was very strongly felt amidst the crisis, when this basis – the possibility to maintain a career as a musician or industry worker – was being directly and seriously threatened for many. In the participants' accounts, it led to a questioning of who they were – as one participant phrased it, 'more than six months ago, we lost our calling, our profession, what makes us who we are.' This narrative was especially strongly present in the fourth online group (4 August 2020), which was held directly after the announcement on 30 July that the restrictions in place over summer were not to be lifted after 15 August, widely shattering the hopes of industry workers. The disappointment, frustration and depression felt in their close social and professional environments was clearly communicated by the group, and it was in this context that the threat to professional integrity, expressed most directly in the fear of the second route (having to leave the industry, and perhaps the world of music altogether), was at the forefront. The source of the expressed frustration, at the same time, was resentment directed towards the government, as the latter control restrictions, and 'the Hungarian state', which was, in this context as well, perceived as *the* force with agency. Notably, the reference to the government and the state was in many instances not made explicit; rather, participants seemed to speak to, or resent, an unclear power with control over their circumstances that rid them of their agency and their identities. Participants in the second online drama (16 June 2020) also spoke of their 'right to work' – introduced by one participant, but then also adopted by others over the course of the drama – which had been taken away by this power.

As the above indicates, professional integrity was closely linked to physical integrity – the maintaining of mental and physical health. Explicit references to depression and addiction in relation to the loss of work and identity were present in the first pandemic-era drama – at that stage attached to the imagined figure of the musician, and as the endpoint of one of the possible routes – as well as the fourth one: 'This has been really taxing for me in a psychological sense, I'm not somebody who is prone to depression, but I've been doing this for sixteen years and now I can't do it. And totally independent of the money, this affects me in a negative way, I feel as though I've lost part of my identity. And how does somebody who has been doing it for forty years [cope]?' he asked, referring to a particular senior sound technician, well-known and respected in the industry. 'With twenty beers a day', responds another participant. The danger of depression and other mental health problems, already significantly more prevalent

among musicians than in the general population (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Hangfoglaló, 2020), combined with alcohol and other substance use, were thus closely tied to the crisis situation, and to the close entanglement of working in music and the self.

6. Conclusions

The reliance of the Hungarian music industries and their workers on live music, together with the inequality and vulnerability that the pandemic situation heightened, created a space for the post-2010 regime of capital accumulation (Éber et al., 2019) to extend its hegemony and incorporation of the cultural field through the acquisition of positions and resources in the popular music field – for instance, through the Warehouse Gigs programme – and to strengthen its ideological control. In the paper, we looked at how workers – musicians, promoters, managers, and technicians – locate themselves in the music industry in relation to its main actors, and its broader social, economic, and political context, and how this changed, if at all, with the pandemic. We asked how workers viewed the role of the state and the market in their work and the playing field in which they are situated, and whether and how the COVID-19 crisis and restrictions affected this. We also looked at what kinds of strategies of coping and surviving they thought existed in light of the crisis situation.

We looked at the perceived role of the state in particular, since this is largely missing from scholarly accounts of creative autonomy – a bias not unrelated to the dominance of studies from Western countries. Our first result was that the state and the government received not only more emphasis, but were also attributed more agency in the drama events conducted during the pandemic in relation to the two previous occasions. In the dramas, negative attitudes towards the state emphasised bureaucracy, the impersonality of power, and the state 'taking but not giving' at a time of crisis. The positive scenario, involving accepting what we identified as a welfare state model included a role for the state protecting the industry and its workers – but without imposing selective principles that would (further) divide the industry, and only to an extent that workers and institutions could function with the help of such provision of resources in a relatively autonomous and independent manner. Nevertheless, the groups had a liberal, free-market state in mind as an ideal model, with a 'healthy' economy, which tended to be associated with Western countries and their music industries. Through this, they appeared to be reproducing the 'moral geopolitics' of an unequal capitalist world system. The greater attention to the role of the state and the government during the pandemic could theoretically open up potential paths towards politicisation and collective organising. At the same time, there was a clear lack of perceived agency on the part of the workers, which may hinder this. Moreover, we also encountered an apparent lack of concern for the wellbeing of the audience or society in general – even a reluctance on the part of the groups to perceive themselves as part of a society – solidarity was only imagined *within* the industry.

The three-way model of integrity – moral, professional, and physical – that emerged from the drama as part of the process of devising and modelling strategies for coping and surviving proved to be a good analytical tool for the study of (changing) notions of autonomy and dependency. Morality assumed three dimensions in the drama: first, a 'clean', straight strategy requiring perseverance versus dubious, corrupt practices; second, acting in solidarity and following the rules of fair play as opposed to merely individual interests; and third, distancing from the government and political influence and power – but not from a profit logic or pursuit of capital – versus being compromised politically. With regard to professional integrity, elements related to cultural logics, most importantly, taste, came to the forefront even in the

case of non-musician industry workers, as working in music as the source of identity gained new emphasis with the pandemic. ‘Professionality’ – understood as knowledge of the popular music industry, and as cultural capital – was notably also articulated as a desired basis for actors representing the state, and current actors were criticised for not possessing this. In this crisis situation, viewing music as inseparable from the self became ever more closely tied to physical integrity – it was made evident by the participants that the loss of access to music making (directly or indirectly, whether as musicians, managers, technicians, or promoters) could easily lead to mental and physical problems, which are typically dealt with individually.

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