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Congress of the United States
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Washington, DC 20515-4209

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IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

September 9, 2020

His Excellency Viktor Orbán
Prime Minister
1357 Budapest, Pf. 6
Budapest, Hungary

Dear Prime Minister Orbán,

At the 2017 Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, I supported the resolution's expression of concern about academic freedom in Hungary, including measures which have compelled Central European University to relocate to Vienna. I write to you with renewed concern regarding the state of academic freedom in Hungary.

Your most recent actions to impose a government appointed board on the University of Theatre and Film Arts will limit freedom of expression and autonomy at the University. Despite claims this will make the university more independent, your government effectively controlled all appointments to the supervisory board and the board of trustees and rejected members proposed by the university's senate.

The University of Theatre and Film Arts has taught many of Hungary's most famous directors and film makers. Stifling free expression will harm the arts in Hungary. Society is better when the arts flourish and that can only happen through freedom to express thoughts through the arts. As a Member of Congress representing Memphis, Tennessee — a city with a rich and storied musical and artistic heritage — I know this latest development has resonated among actors and artists in the United States as well as Europe.

It is deeply disappointing that your government has transferred several universities to private foundations ruled by boards of directors that are loyal to the government. Democracy and art flourish when ideas are expressed freely and openly. Any attempts to suffocate the expression of these ideas, suffocates democracy.

I've had the privilege of visiting Budapest in 2019 and I found it a beautiful city with a rich cultural history. While it is important that people have material goods, it is the aesthetic side of our lives that makes life beautiful and that expresses the soul of a people. Without artistic freedom of expression, the Hungarian soul will not be present in Budapest and remembered for years onward.

I hope you will listen to the students demonstrating and respect their demands for the restoration of the previous elected board. I urge you to commit to supporting academic freedom and artistic expression.

As always, I remain,

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Cohen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress