

Inkei: Cultural policies - [Kultúrpolitika]

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INTERNATION COMPARISON OF CULTURAL POLICIES¹ [KULTÚRPOLITIKA NEMZETKÖZI ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÁSBAN]

PÉTER INKEI

peter@budobs.org

Abstract. Analysis of EU statistics on cultural policies between 2004 and 2022 with 20 self-generated graphs. First, relational data such as the share of cultural expenditure in GDP and public budgets are discussed, then data expressed in absolute monetary terms. The perspective is at country level, distinguishing between central and local (municipal) policies. There is a particular focus on the systemic characteristics of the post-communist EU Member States. What these data reveal and how to deal with results that require explanation. Complementing and contrasting with the macro-statistical approach, a tool (the Cultural Policy Barometer) is presented for evaluating cultural policies, their strengths and weaknesses. The description of the WJLF lecture held online on 4 March 2025.

Keywords: cultural expenditure, use and limits of statistics, policy assessment

Many people have been repeatedly surprised by the fact that recently the Hungarian state has spent the highest proportion of its budget on culture among European countries. This is a fact, and it is a fact confirmed by Eurostat, the statistical agency of the European Union. The starting point of my presentation is Figure 1, which demonstrates the above fact. (At the time of the lecture, the latest publicly available data set was 2022. See the update at <https://www.budobs.org/papers.html>.)

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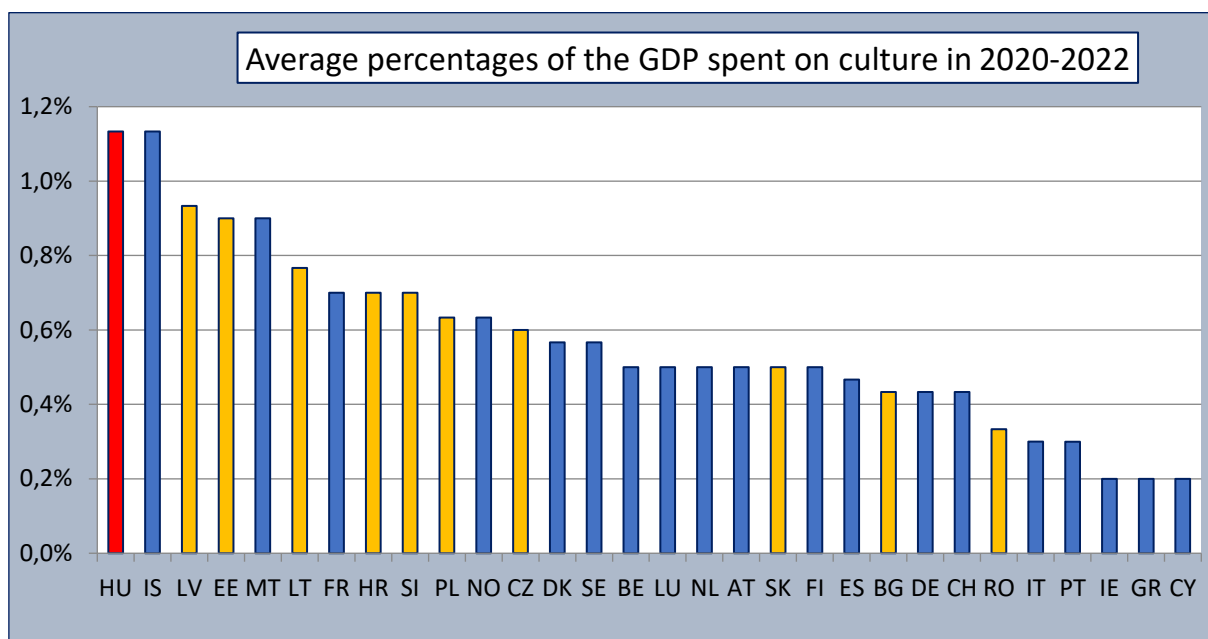


Figure 1. Total cultural expenditure as a percentage of national income, 2020, 2021 and 2022.
²(Eurostat. General government expenditure, Cofog 08.2 Cultural services.)

By choosing this as my starting point, I am actually reinforcing a doubly simplistic misconception of cultural policy. This conception identifies policy with financing, and within that with public funding. Even more narrowly, it identifies cultural policy with the budgetary support spent on culture by the central government. Therefore, I will later address the role of private spending (the market) and commercial or charitable support (sponsorship and donations), too. However, it is beyond the scope of this lecture to explain the relationships between these domains of cultural finances.

I choose the starting graph for its role to stimulate thinking and action. In Figure 1, the data collected, systematized and submitted by national statistical data providers – in our case, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – in accordance with EU standards confirm that, with the exception of Iceland, which is well known for its special situation, nowhere has a larger share of GDP been spent on culture in recent times than in Hungary.

My first comment concerns Eurostat's comparative data. One of the Union's key tasks is the intensive and continuous coordination (“harmonisation”) of the statistical concepts and methods used by the Member States. This has been implemented with great precision in the area of economic cooperation, which forms the backbone of the Union. The theory and practice of EU statistics are further developed through ongoing consultations at a high professional level - exposing oneself to ridicule over the definition of the curvature of cucumbers. (However, if it is justified to classify certain types of goods according to their shape, it is better to do so once than 27 times.) There

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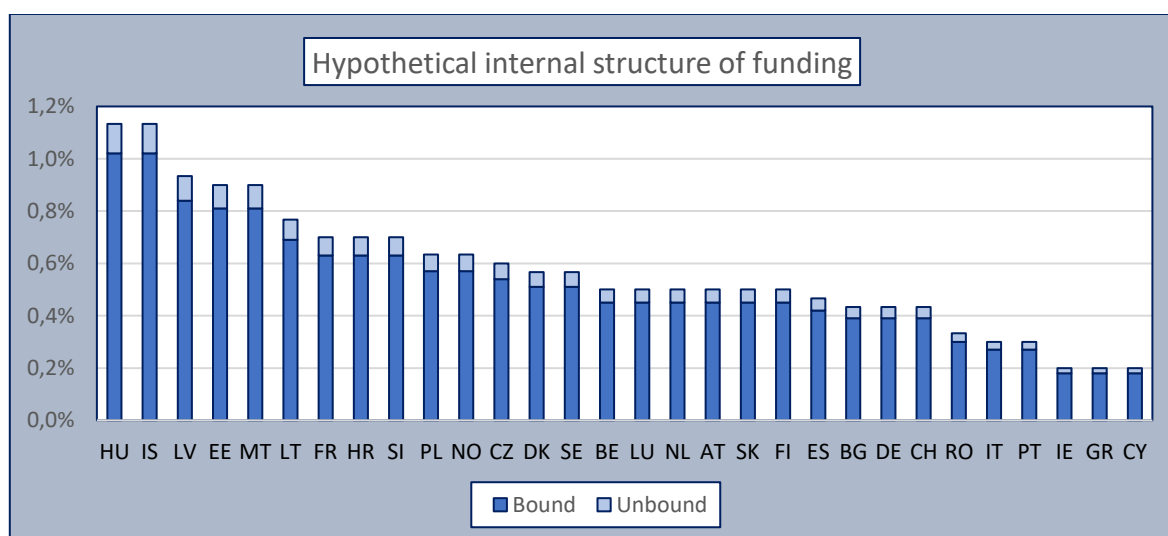
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are several other sectors where statistical reliability is of fundamental importance, such as transport or health care. Cultural statistics, on the other hand, despite ongoing cooperation between professionals, do not come close to achieving the precision in data provision and even less in monitoring that we see in inflation, export turnover or even disease data. There is still much room for technical debate on the seamless definition of “exhibition”, “concert” and “book”. Before “museum”, “cinema” or “festival” mean the same thing to a Finnish, Portuguese or Romanian statistician, the accumulations resulting from these uncertainties should be treated with appropriate caution.

Take the interpretation of ‘culture’. The subclass 08.2 of the Cofog (Classification of Functions of Government) classification system developed by Unesco, which serves as the basis for Figure 1, covers the sector ‘Cultural services’. In line with general practice, in my figures and in their interpretation, I consider culture to be what statisticians classify in this category.

My second general observation concerns the content behind the data. Even if the size of a given cultural expenditure is completely reliable and accurate, its content, composition, meaning and benefit remain open. It is relatively easy to break down the individual columns by sub-sector (performing arts, public collections, etc.), or by running costs and development investment. But such a comparative diagram would be truly telling if it were possible to highlight the proportion of funding that enables new initiatives or products in a given period, as opposed to the support that goes to institutional maintenance and ongoing activities. This requires more thorough checking. The proportion that can be spent on new productions and acquisitions after deducting overheads and salaries should be highlighted in each institution's budgetary support. In the case of open funds (like the Arts Council), commitments carried over from previous years and fake applications should be left out.



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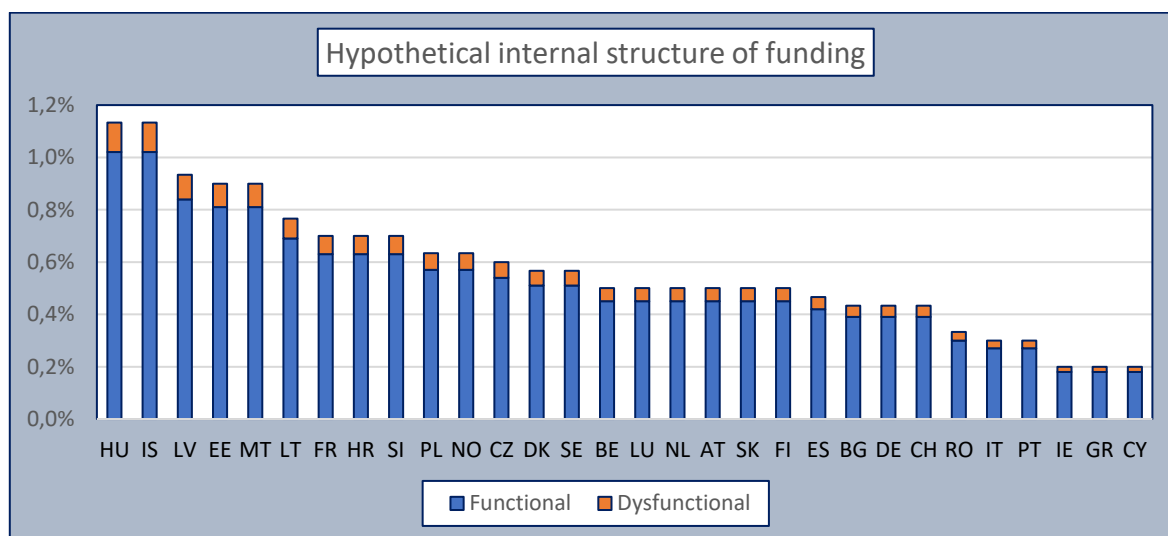


Figure 2. a-b. Hypothetical template for separating bound and unbound (free) resources, as well as justified and unjustified (dysfunctional) expenditures.

Anyone who wants to filter out the wasteful, unjustified and dysfunctional segment of the financing faces a particularly difficult challenge. In principle, this would only make sense in retrospect, but we know very well that professional judgement could also accomplish this task in real time. The ranking in Figure 1 would be fundamentally altered by such a reordering (filling in the hypothetical templates in Figure 2).

The next interpretative remark to Figure 1 concerns the historical division of the EU member states. The diagram shows that the post-communist countries marked in orange typically spend more public money on culture than the rest, which we will refer to as Western with a forgivable simplification. There are several explanations for this. One is historical in nature: most 'Eastern' countries still bear traces of the nation-building programme that began in the 18th and 19th centuries, in which cultural identity played a prominent role. This is a positive motive, as opposed to a compensatory motive that stems from similar ground. In order to compensate for economic failure and relative poverty, the cultural wealth of the nation in question is often emphasised through such a pooling of resources. Figure 3 reflects this phenomenon.

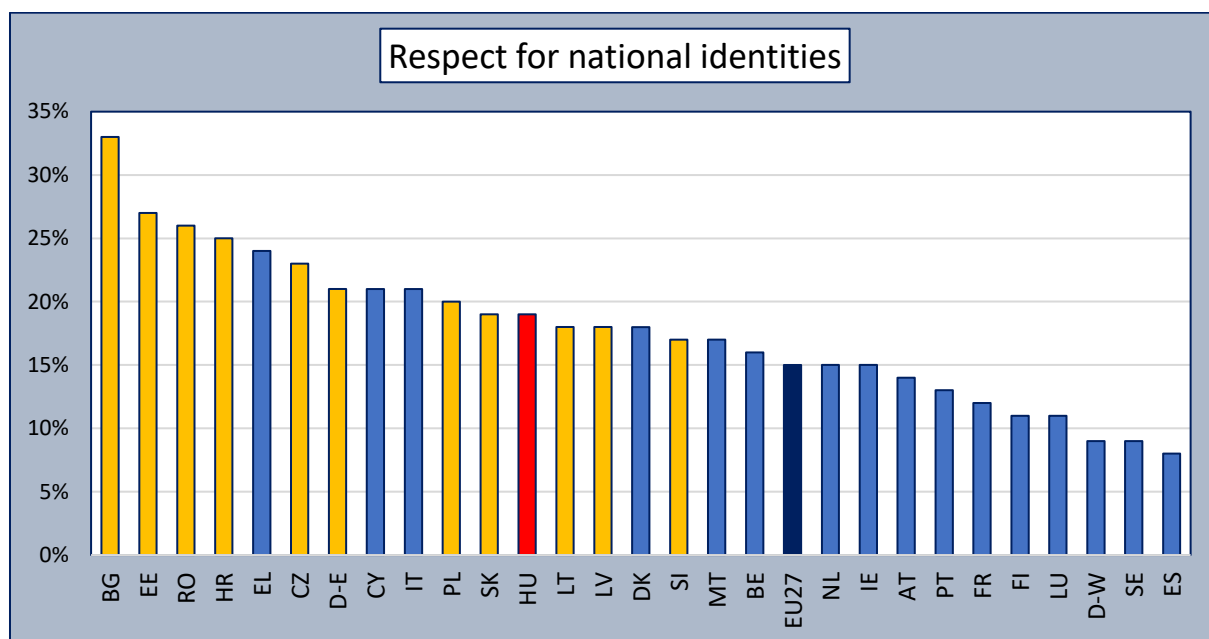


Figure 3. "In the next European elections, EU citizens will elect new members to the European Parliament. In your opinion, which values should the European Parliament defend in the next five years?" Percentage of respondents who selected the statement "Respect for national identities." (Eurobarometer, EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote - Countdown to the European elections.)

The high Eastern indicators in Figure 1 also reflect the mathematical regularity that where a country aspires to comparable quality (and internationally competitive) cultural offering from its lower level of national income, this inevitably results in a higher percentage within the total public expenditure.

The above reasoning also applies to the broader statistical sector '08 Leisure, culture and religion', which includes the sector '08.2 Cultural services', in addition to sports and media. Moreover, the distinctive financing practices of the post-communist countries are even more striking at that level: Figure 4a indicates that the East-West difference is even greater at the level of the broader thematic group than in the cultural area (Figure 4b).

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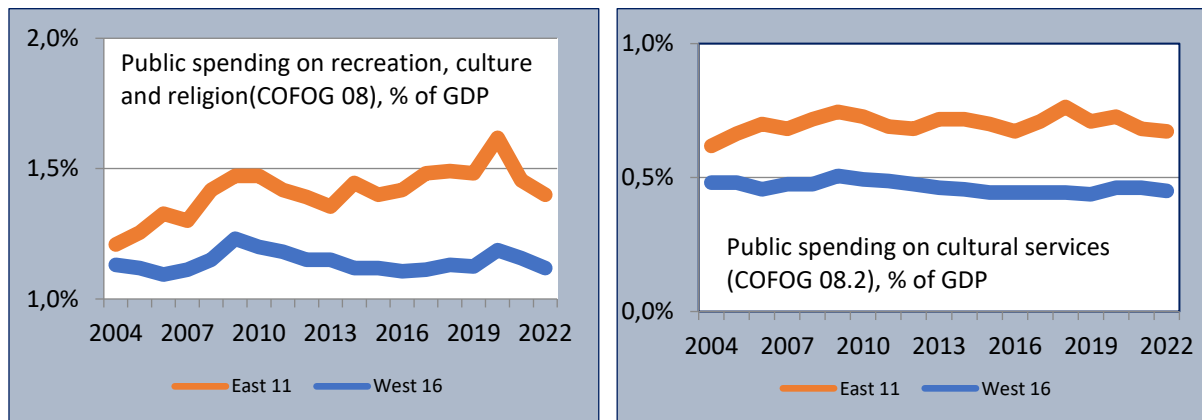


Figure 4. a-b. Shift in public expenditure on "recreation, culture and religion" and cultural expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 27 EU Member States.

The two graphs in Figure 4 show the evolution of the aggregated data series of the 27 Member States starting from 2004. That year is of special significance in the recent history of Europe. It was then that the largest wave of EU enlargement took place (including the accession of Hungary on May 1).

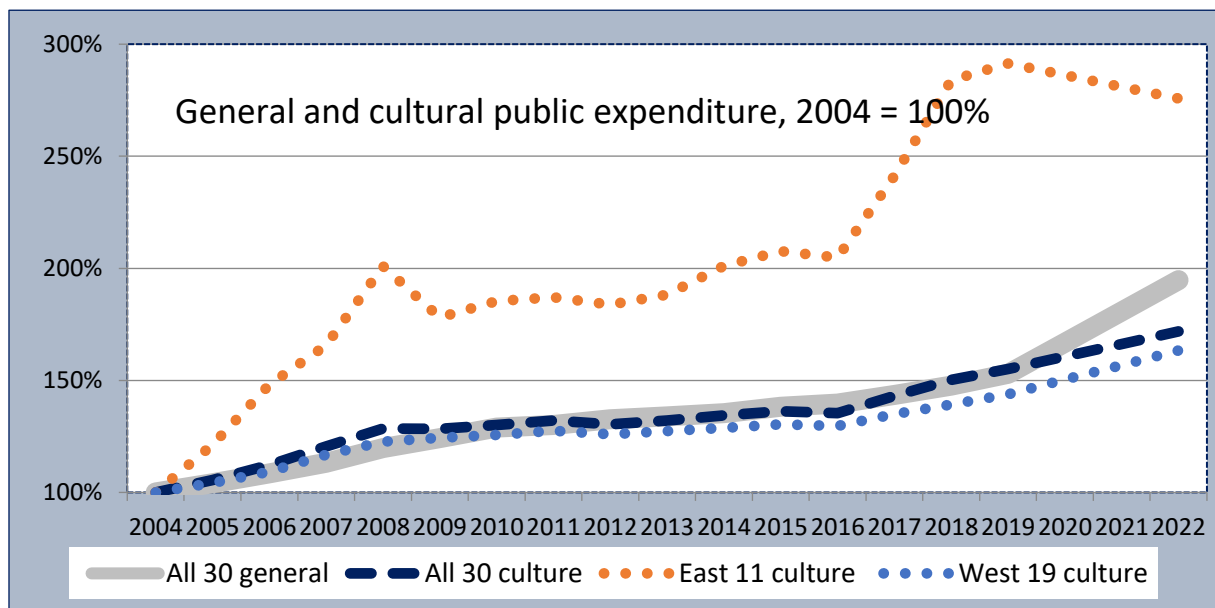


Figure 5. Shift in public total and cultural expenditure in 30 European countries since 2004.

The dynamics of cultural financing since 2004 are depicted in the diagram in Figure 5. In the four years following the enlargement wave, the combined cultural expenditure of the post-communist member states, which group had by then increased to 11, had doubled: in absolute terms, not as a percentage of budgets. The figure shows that a small part of the increase (a quarter to a fifth) can be attributed to the fact that

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public expenditure as a whole had increased across Europe due to the economic boom. In the case of the Western “old democracies”, however, cultural expenditure – unlike over here – did not increase by a rate exceeding public general expenditure; however, the 2008 global financial crisis did not lead to a decline as large as that which occurred in the Eastern countries.

The figure also shows that the years 2009-2016 were characterized by gradual consolidation in the East, while in the West there was a relative, although not dramatic, lag. Then, from 2017 onwards, there was another dynamic expansion in the East: by 2020, the level of public cultural expenditure was close to three times the initial value in 2004. Covid apparently affected cultural services in the post-communist region more sensitively, while in the West it perpetuated the noticeable lag of cultural expenditure compared to public general expenditure.

I return to my earlier comment about the neglect of sources of cultural financing beyond public expenditure. As can be seen in the graph in Figure 6, in post-communist countries, the smaller proportion of private financing is also an important explanatory factor for the higher relative share of public cultural expenditure.

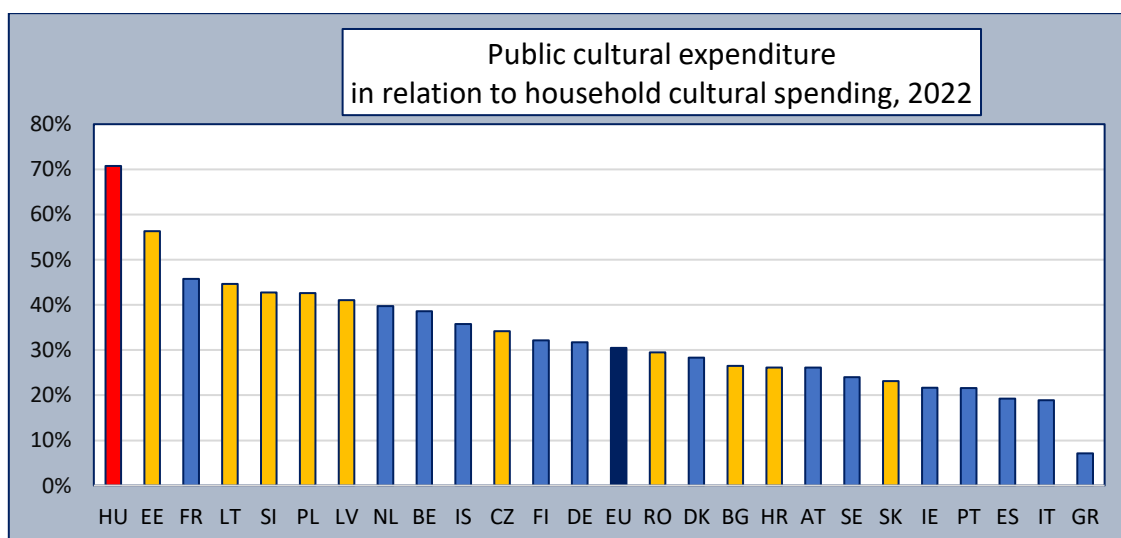


Figure 6. Comparison of public cultural expenditure with cultural spending of the population (Cofog 08.2 vs OECD – COICOP, final consumption expenditure of the population).

The phenomenon is particularly evident in Hungarian cultural financing. Looking at Table 1, we have to believe our eyes and the statistics assembled by Eurostat and the OECD.

Table 1. Comparison of public cultural expenditure with cultural spending by the population (as well as corporate and private support).

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2022	EU 27		Hungary	
Cultural spending of households (OECD-COICOP)	246 Md €	1	1 018 Md HUF	1
Public cultural expenditure (COFOG)	75 Md €	0,3	720 Md HUF	0,7
Sponsorship, donations	?	?	?	?

What we can see is that the level of public expenditure on culture is strikingly close to the modest total expenditure of Hungarian households. Here we must return to the comment we made when interpreting Figure 1 on the internal composition of cultural funding. The impressive volume of Hungarian expenditure includes a significant portion devoted to the massive restoration of the built heritage of Buda Castle and construction work in the City Park, cross-border renovations, certain subsidies for concerts and, presumably, attractions linked to international sporting events, world exhibitions and national holidays.

Here is another important observation regarding the data series in Figure 1. The Cofog 08.2 Cultural services category includes not only the cultural expenditures of the central government of the country in question, but also the cultural financing of all regions (provinces, counties, etc.) and municipalities. The two graphs in Figure 7 highlight two interesting differences between Eastern and Western, post-communist countries and more consolidated democracies respectively.

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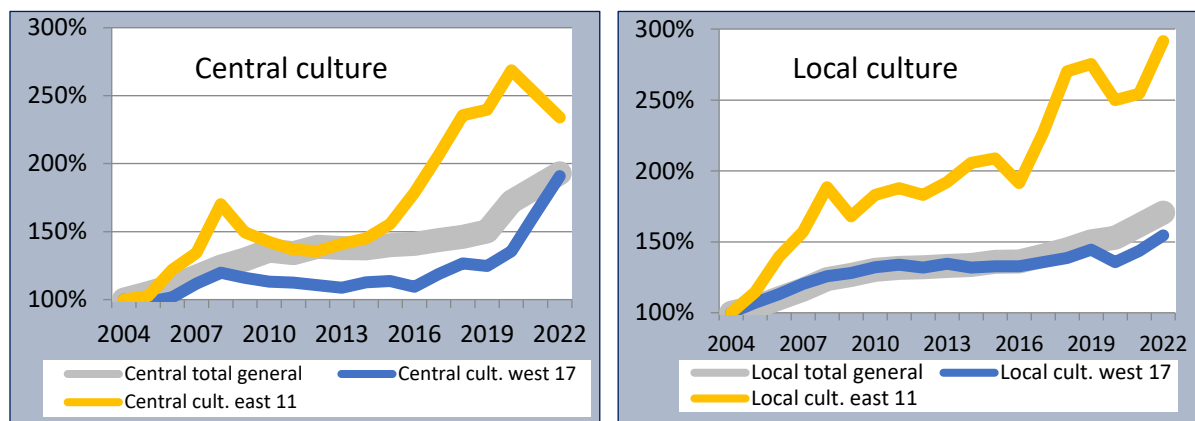


Figure 7. a-b. Shift in central and local public cultural expenditure between 2004-2022 in 28 European countries.

The central cultural financing curve of the Eastern countries roughly coincides with what we saw in Figure 5 for the total cultural support. However, the cultural expenditure of local governments diverts much sharper from the central cultural and general expenditure, a trend that continued until the end of the period shown. This suggests that in fact the increase in local expenditure was the main driver of the Eastern growth. We will see this in the specific examples of some countries.

Also, we can note that in Western states, local cultural spending kept pace with total public spending, which only falters in the year of Covid. However, the cultural component of the central budget was severely curtailed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which only worsened over the years, and only reached equilibrium with total spending at the very end of the period.

The data presented so far are relative figures. We have seen and interpreted the extent of cultural funding in relation to something else. It is time to see specifically how big funding is in itself. The data in the following figures 8-10 are to be understood in absolute value and in millions of euros. For the sake of proper comparison, I have contrasted pairs of countries of similar size on the same scale, first Hungary and Czechia.

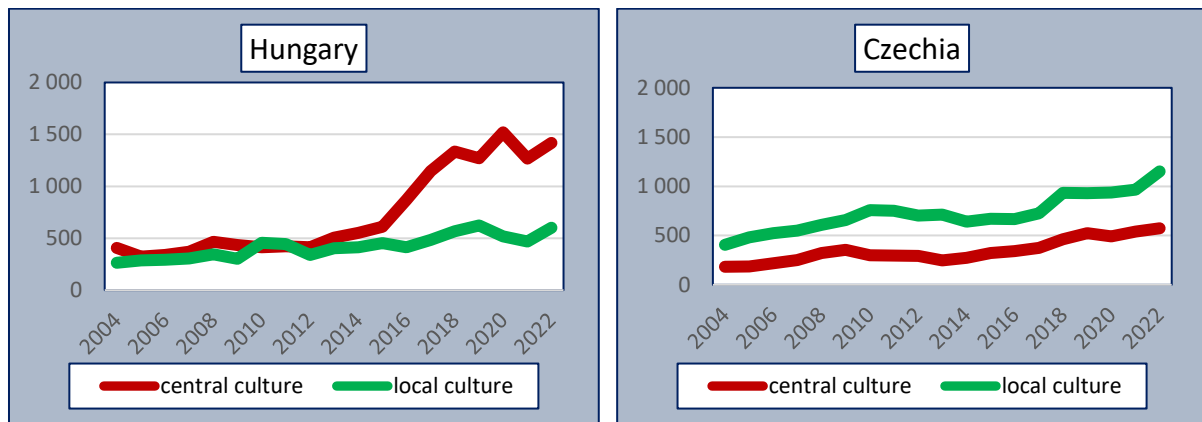


Figure 8. a-b. Shift of Hungarian and Czech central and local public cultural expenditure since 2004.

The Hungarian government spends nearly three times as much on culture as the Czech one. In contrast, Czech cities and counties spent twice as much on culture as Hungarian settlements combined in 2022, starting from roughly the same value.

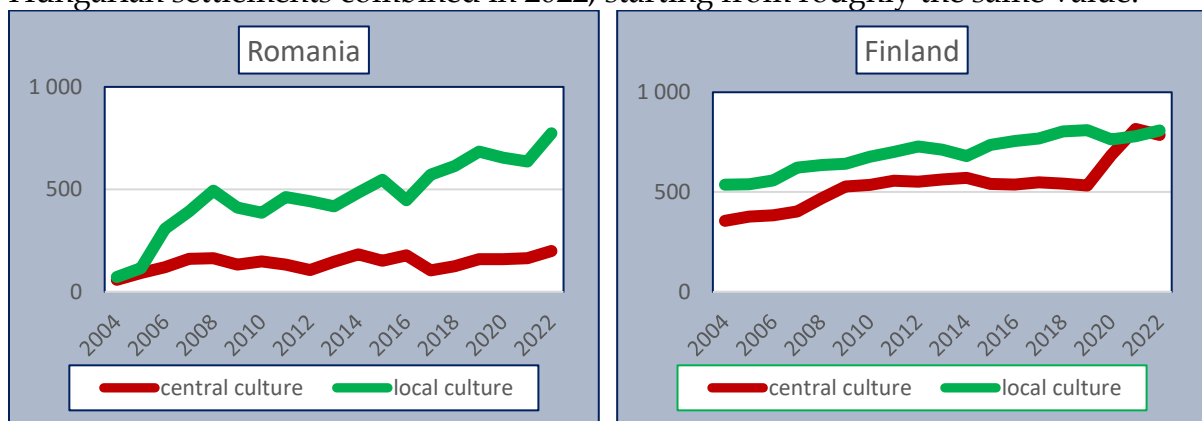


Figure 9. a-b. Shift of Romanian and Finnish central and local public cultural expenditure since 2004.

Unlike in Hungary, local cultural funding in Romania and Finland exceeds that of the central government. In Romania, this trend is growing rapidly, while at the end of the period the Finnish government's data recorded the level of local expenditure. In absolute terms, the almost identical level of local cultural funding in the two countries, at 19 million and 5.5 million inhabitants respectively, is dramatic.

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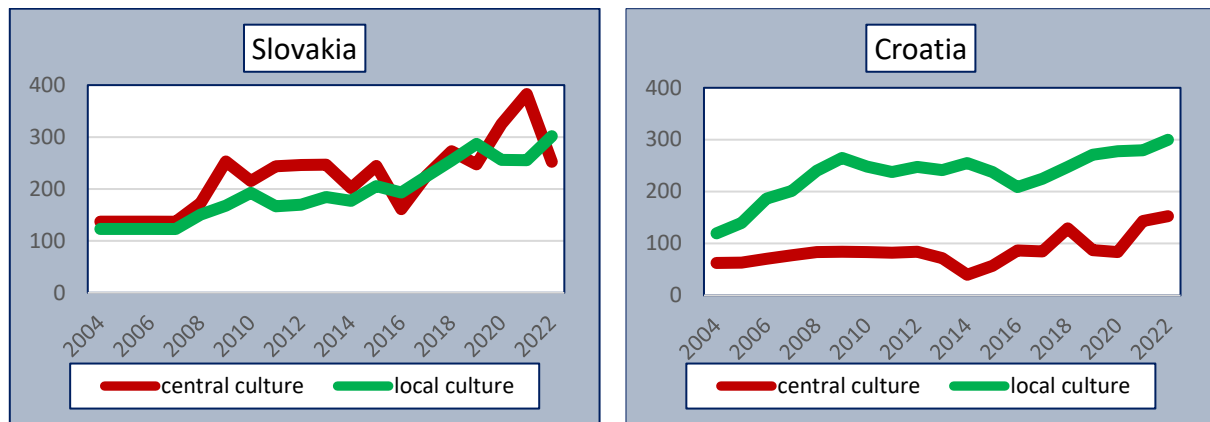


Figure 10. a-b. Shift of Slovak and Croatian central and local public cultural expenditure since 2004.

The dynamics of Slovak cultural funding are comparable to Finland's, although on a very different scale despite the similar population of the two countries. However, Slovakia has a great similarity with Croatia in terms of both the volume and trend at the local level, which cannot be said about central cultural funding.

The graph in Figure 1 compares public cultural expenditure to national income. Since central budgets typically account for less than half of national income, the total cultural expenditure included in them naturally represents a higher internal ratio. On the other hand, since central cultural expenditure also typically accounts for less than half of total cultural funding across Europe, a proportionality comparable to the previous one is restored. For example, in the Lithuanian central budget, culture accounts for around 1%; when supplemented with local cultural expenditure, total cultural funding also accounts for close to 1% of GDP.

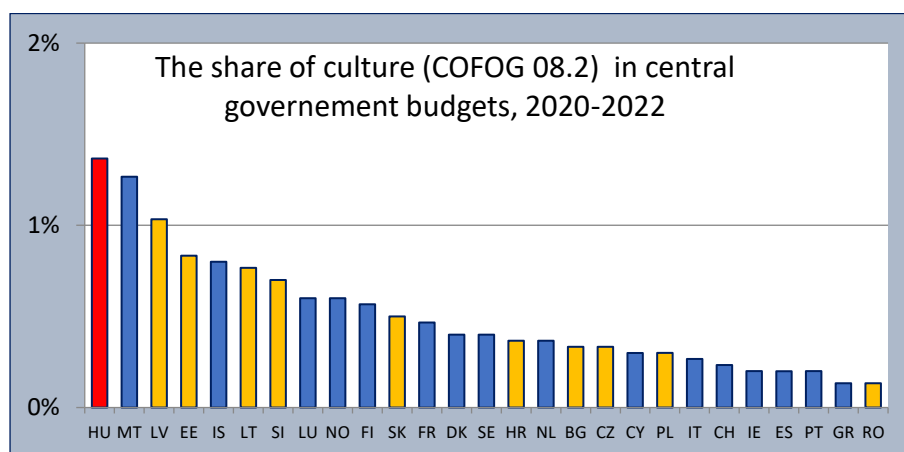


Figure 11. Culture as a percentage of central government budgets in European countries, 2020-2022.

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We encounter higher relative cultural percentages in the budgets of cities and counties. In the light of Figure 8a, which reveals increasing centralization in Hungary, the exceptionally high local culture financing ratio shown in Figure 12 is surprising. An obvious explanation is that the relative weight of culture appears higher in the municipal budgets that have been weakened precisely as a result of general centralization. In terms of content, socio-culture may be another explanatory factor. In Hungarian municipalities, the maintenance of socio-cultural centres (“houses of culture”) is often synonymous with cultural financing. Within this, a series of activities are recorded that in other countries – certainly in the West – are accounted for in other sub-sectors, primarily among educational and social expenditures.

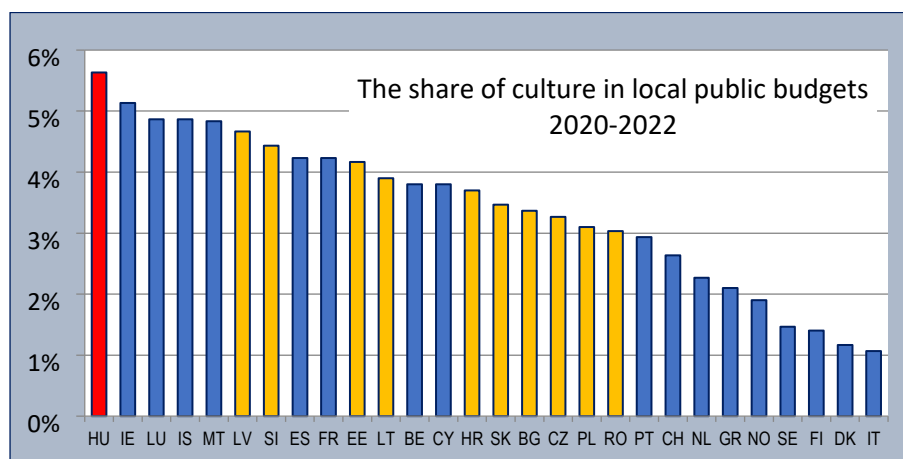


Figure 12. Culture as a percentage of local government budgets in European countries, 2020-2022.

Let's go back to the absolute numbers. The graph in Figure 13 shows the growth of cultural spending in the Eastern Member States between 2004 and 2022. In the starting year, the 11 countries together, from Poland to Slovenia and from Estonia to Bulgaria, subsidised cultural services with 3.5 billion euros. However, this was less than what Italy alone spent on the same! Or the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg combined. After 16 years, the world has changed a lot. We in the East have grown to eleven billion, far surpassing Italy, which is still stagnating, but also the Benelux region, which is showing decent growth.

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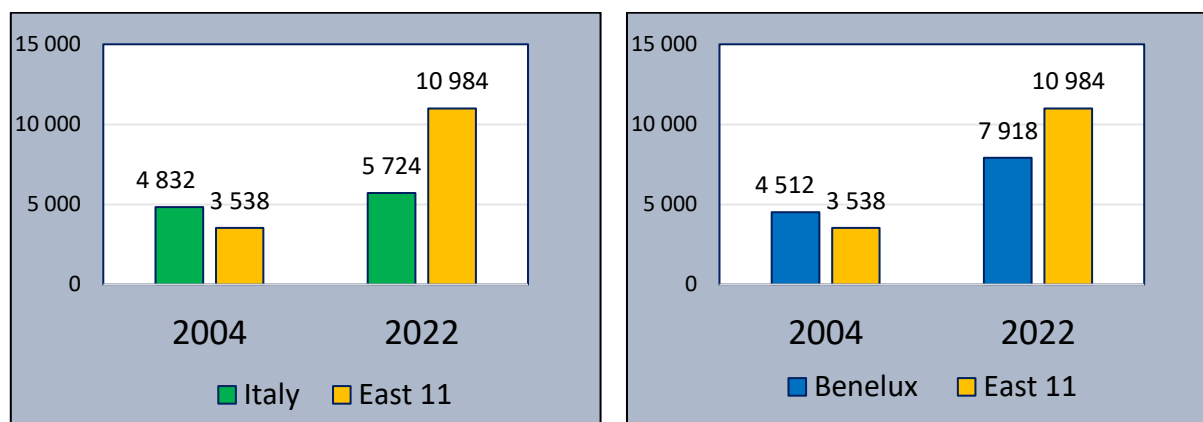


Figure 13. a-b. Growth of public cultural expenditure between 2004 and 2022 in Italy, the Benelux countries and the 11 post-communist EU member states, million euros.

How much, how much... This is a central element of cultural policy discourse. The question of quality is regularly overlooked. The main, and in most cases exclusive, criterion for evaluating cultural policies is the amount of expenditure.

At the Budapest Observatory, we developed an experimental instrument that makes it possible to assess a given cultural policy and “measure” its quality. We selected and tested positive and negative qualifying statements. Some of these worked well at the macro level, i.e. in relation to national cultural policy, while others worked well for assessing local, municipal cultural management. It soon became clear that positive, appreciative statements were of little use for this purpose, since mostly schematic certificates were obtained about cultural policies.

Figure 14 is based on the application of the tool – the Cultural Policy Barometer – to a relatively large sample. It offers an opportunity to talk about the quality of cultural policies.

The stakeholders involved in the survey selected from 26 critical statements. We received an overall ranking of what our respondents considered to be the most important shortcomings in cultural policy. By reversing the sign, the most important positive values emerge.

The differences and shifts in emphasis between the priorities set by different groups of respondents – for example, performing or visual artists, cultural managers and civil servants, residents of southern or northern countries – were interesting. The most noteworthy is the difference in the value choices of representatives of Western and Eastern, post-communist countries. This is elaborated and presented in a specific way in Figure 14. From the set of answers, we extracted the cases in which the divergence between the two groups was large. The numbers refer to the extent of the difference. We see the highest differential value in the statement lamenting the decrease in the amounts spent on local (municipal) culture: this was indicated by Westerners in a 20%

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higher proportion. Putting the proposition on its feet: in the eyes of those living in consolidated democracies, supporting local culture is the main virtue a cultural policy can claim.

In addition, Westerners have a greater affinity for social and ideological aspects. In their eyes, good cultural policy does not stress too much the economic utility of culture, gives the arts a central role in school curricula, strives to include those who are left out, and resists commercialism.

Jumping to the other end of the scale, we can read that in the eyes of respondents from Eastern countries, the main criterion for good cultural policy is freedom from political influence, which is also reflected in the impartiality exercised in the distribution of funds. They also care about artistic education, but interestingly in a more factual, goal-oriented manner: the school should prepare to embrace contemporary culture. In general, the organisational and technical aspects of cultural policy dominate the expectations: clear goals, transparent plans, modern organisations, effective cooperation with other sectors, prepared cultural managers, a strong ministry...

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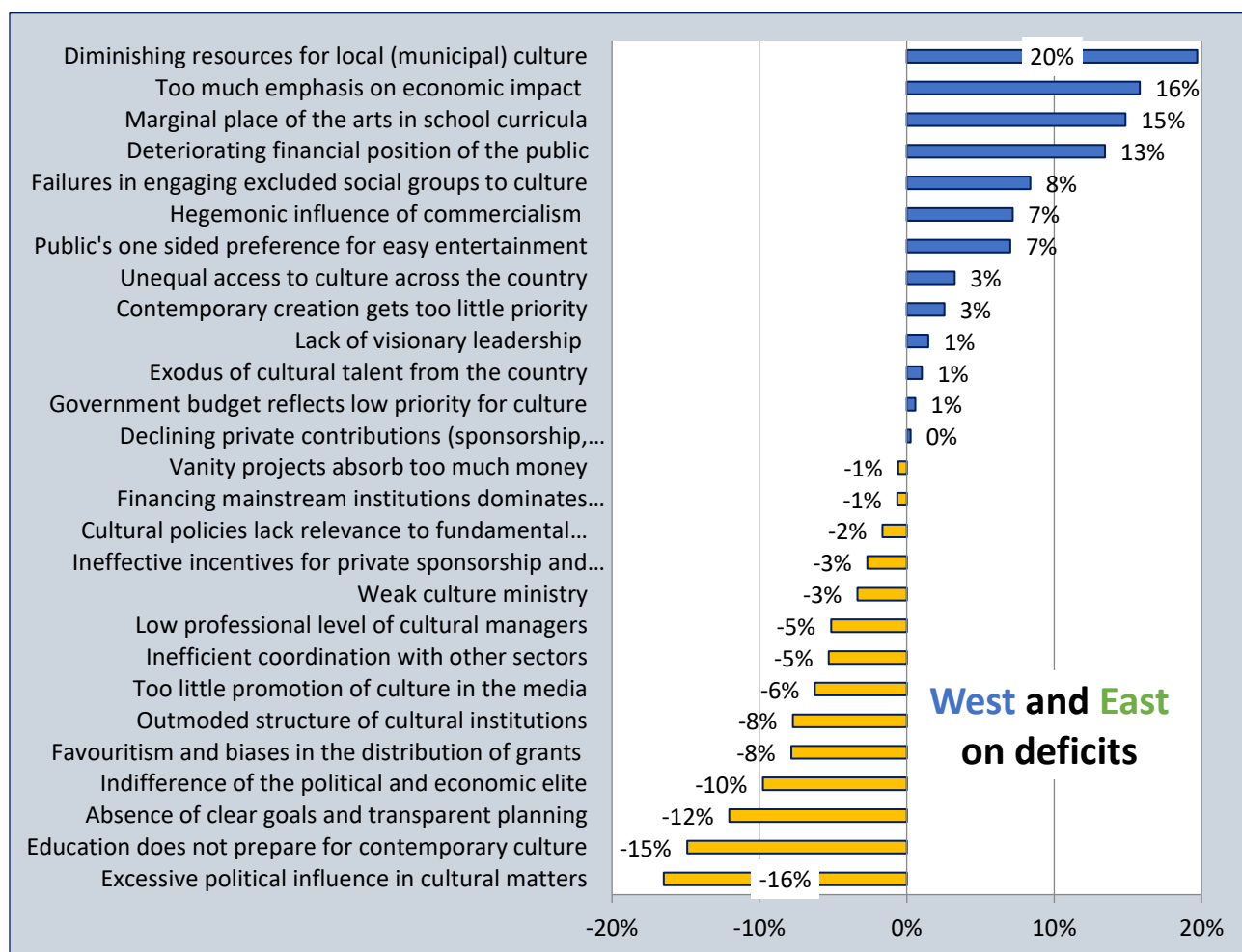


Figure 14. Opinions of cultural stakeholders on the main shortcomings of cultural policy. (Cultural Policy Barometer, The Budapest Observatory, 2016.)

Although I consider these few indications to be symptomatic, by recalling them, I did not intend to give a valid characterisation of the cultural political ideal of the East and the West. After all, this was not the focus of the instrument in question in the first place, the meaningful peculiarities came to light during the processing. My goal was to present an approach that can be used to evaluate cultural policy beyond the arsenal of statistical data.

It goes without saying that the most obvious method of evaluating a policy is to look at its impact, its results, i.e. its output. It makes sense to look at this from the perspective of top performances, which are easier to identify due to their small number by definition. At the same time, the uniqueness and exceptional nature that characterise most outstanding artistic achievements make it difficult to uncover the objective reasons and explanations behind them (and the effects of cultural policies).

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Exploring the impact of cultural policies on the population as a whole requires a great deal of effort. In the past, the cultural habits of Hungarians were detected in regular large-scale surveys. This is no longer practised today, and the European Union is also conducting such surveys less and less frequently.

I would like to conclude my presentation here. My aim was to show the many interesting and remarkable facts and correlations that can be uncovered on cultural policy with the help of statistics. At the same time, I have also tried to warn against mystifying numbers. Without data, there is no knowledge and no reliable opinion; but especially in the field of comparative statistics, everything should be treated with a certain degree of caution, 'cum grano salis', and as far as possible, the focus of research should be on quality rather than quantity.

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Absztrakt. Az EU kulturális politikákkal kapcsolatos statisztikáinak elemzése 2004 és 2022 között 20 saját készítésű grafikonnal. Először a relációs adatok kerülnek sorra, mint például a kulturális kiadások GDP-hez és az állami költségvetésekhez viszonyított aránya, majd az abszolút pénzértékben kifejezett adatok vizsgálata következik. Az elemzés szintje az egyes ország, különbséget téve a központi és a helyi (önkormányzati) politikák között. Különös hangsúlyt kapnak a posztkommunista EU-tagállamok rendszerszintű jellemzői. Mit árulnak el ezek az adatok, és hogyan kell kezelni a magyarázatot igénylő eredményeket. A makrostatisztikai megközelítést kiegészítve és azt ellensúlyozva egy eszközt (a Kultúrpolitikai Barométert) mutatunk be a kulturális politikák, azok erősségeinek és gyengeségeinek értékelésére. A 2025. március 4-én online tartott WJLF előadás leírása.

¹ Based on the online lecture given on March 4, 2025, as part of the WJLF lecture series. Hosted by Tibor Péter Nagy

² The figure is my own compilation, which also reflects my attitude and limitations regarding statistical data. On the one hand, statistics, especially international comparative statistics, are the mainstays of my thinking. On the other hand, I am averse to overestimating statistics. All my experience and knowledge related to the birth of data and the limitations of their comparison play a role in this. I regard numerical data primarily as important signals that encourage thinking and action, and serve only rarely as decisive proof. On this basis, I dare to commit such methodological absurdities as averaging annual averages, as in Figure 1.