Public Broadcasters as Creative Partners: German Film Financing Models Offer Inspiration for Hungary

- Commissioning Editors panel at SZEMREVALÓ (Sehenswert) German-language film festival Budapest

BUDAPEST, Oct. 16, 2026 — As Hungary reconsiders the future of its public broadcasting and film financing institutions, executives from Germany's ZDF and ARD have offered a glimpse into a system in which television networks serve not merely as distribution outlets, but as crucial creative and financial partners for independent filmmakers.

Speaking at the Goethe-Institut Budapest on Oct. 16, Burkhard Althoff, head of ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*, and Jan Berning, commissioning editor at ARD affiliate SWR, joined Dr. Csaba Tóth, president of the Association of Hungarian Electronic Broadcasters (MEME) and chairman of the Hungarian National Film Institute's interim film decision committee, for a discussion about the role of public service broadcasting in film production.

The event, moderated by Hungarian-German producer Márk Szilágyi, took place during the SZEMREVALÓ | Sehenswert Film Festival, jointly organized by the Goethe-Institut, the Austrian Cultural Forum and the Embassy of Switzerland. The panel marked an effort to expand its established cultural program with an industry-focused discussion on European film policy and financing.

For Hungary, the discussion arrived at a particularly consequential moment.

“My ideal landscape looks like a co-production structure where, by minimizing risks, the public broadcaster could be involved in productions where the film fund is also involved.”

— Dr. Csaba Tóth, President of MEME

Tóth, who took up his role on the film institute's decision-making body in July, described a domestic industry historically dependent on a narrow range of financing options, with limited participation from public television and relatively few commercial broadcasters investing substantially in original drama.

Rather than focusing solely on the shortcomings of Hungary's previous film financing structures, Tóth outlined a more coordinated system in which public broadcasting, commercial television and the national film fund could share investment risks while creating new opportunities for independent producers.

Drawing on his criticism of the fragmented and politically influenced financing environment of the past, he argued for a more strategic approach to commissioning and co-production.

He stressed that the proposals reflected his personal views rather than official government policy. MEME, he added, was preparing to discuss reform recommendations with the relevant ministry.

The discussions come amid a broader restructuring of Hungary's public broadcasting system, which briefly went off air in July before returning with an apology for having aired government propaganda in previous years.

The Czech Model: A Blueprint for Hungary?

“My favorite example is the Czech example, and not because the Czechs are better than the Germans. I use this example because of the size of the market.”

— Dr. Csaba Tóth, President of MEME

While the German financing system provided the central comparison, Tóth singled out neighboring Czechia as a particularly relevant example for Hungary.

According to figures presented by Tóth during the discussion, Czech public television operates with an annual budget of approximately €300 million, of which around €15 million is dedicated to drama production. He also cited an annual output of eight to 10 drama series and co-production participation in approximately 20 to 30 Czech feature films. These figures were presented as part of Tóth's comparison of the two national broadcasting systems and have been independently verified for this article.

Tóth argued that Hungary could potentially operate on a comparable scale, pointing to a similar budget figure anticipated for Hungarian public broadcasting.

“It's not impossible to find a way in smaller markets like the Hungarian market to put together a structure,” he said.

But financing alone would not guarantee success. Tóth stressed that a functioning commissioning system requires experienced professionals capable of assessing projects, supporting development and making informed editorial decisions.

“Because if there is no expertise, if there is no talent, if there are no professionals making these decisions, then we will end up with bad-quality shows,” he warned.

Tóth also pointed to the audience challenge facing Hungarian public television. Using audience-share estimates he cited during the panel, approximately 28% for Czech public television and 10% for its Hungarian counterpart, dropping to around 7% when sports programming is excluded, he argued that rebuilding public confidence would require compelling domestically produced stories.

Germany's Public Broadcasters as Talent Incubators

For Germany's public broadcasters, supporting emerging filmmakers is not simply a matter of financing individual productions. It is also a commitment to editorial

independence, artistic experimentation and the freedom to develop talent beyond immediate commercial expectations.

For the German participants, the conversation centered on a financing tradition that has long connected broadcasters, regional film funds and independent production companies.

Jan Berning outlined the work of SWR's *Debüt im Dritten*, a program that has supported emerging filmmakers for four decades and has been associated with approximately 200 films.

The broadcaster currently aims to support around five feature films and one series annually, Berning said, although its financing is generally only one component of a broader co-production package.

Commissioning, he explained, extends considerably beyond deciding which scripts receive funding. Editors work with writers, directors and producers throughout development, offering feedback and helping projects reach production.

Burkart Althoff described a similar creative mandate at ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*, whose longstanding commitment to emerging filmmakers has provided an alternative to the commercial demands of mainstream television.

For Althoff, artistic potential and the discovery of new directing talent remain central considerations, even as the competitive pressures on public broadcasters intensify.

That responsibility also involves accepting creative risks that might be difficult to justify within a purely commercially driven financing system.

"The nice thing about it is that we are allowed to make mistakes," Althoff said, explaining that the program's comparatively modest budgets give filmmakers room to experiment and gain experience before moving on to larger productions.

His remarks illustrated the value of a public broadcasting system in which editorial freedom allows commissioning editors to support unconventional projects and emerging voices without making immediate audience success the sole measure of their work.

The discussion also exposed a fundamental tension in public service broadcasting: the obligation to support culturally significant work while competing for viewers in an increasingly fragmented entertainment market.

Streaming Offers Arthouse Films a Second Life

"Hungary will most likely never be organized like this [Germany]. Still, it's a very good idea, I think, to take a look at how Germany does it."

- Márk Szilágyi, Moderator and Hungarian-German Producer

Both German executives described how streaming platforms operated by public broadcasters are changing the prospects for films that struggle to attract large audiences through traditional television broadcasts.

Berning noted that SWR's digital audience sometimes responds more strongly to artistically or politically challenging productions than its linear television audience does. Projects addressing subjects with particular relevance to smaller communities, including queer-themed productions, can find considerable visibility online.

Althoff offered a striking illustration of how dramatically viewing habits have changed.

“Our slot moved from primetime in the '60s to Monday after midnight now,” he said, describing the evolution of *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*. “So we're very happy to have the streaming possibility.”

- Burkhard Althoff, head of ZDF's Das kleine Fernsehspiel

But he acknowledged that public broadcasters face an increasingly difficult fight for attention against Netflix, YouTube and other digital competitors.

The shift also raises questions about distribution rights and release windows. Althoff pointed to the complications that arise when public broadcasters invest in theatrical co-productions that subsequently appear on competing commercial streaming platforms before becoming available through their own services.

Despite those pressures, neither German executive suggested that audience metrics alone should determine which films receive support.

The broader message was that public broadcasting's cultural mission depends on protecting space for risk-taking, unconventional storytelling and emerging filmmakers.

“They Give Notes, Not Orders”: Commissioning Editors as Creative Mentors

“I think the commissioning editor is a creative mentor. They give notes, not orders. They give guidelines, not instructions.”

- Dr. Csaba Tóth, President of MEME

The exchange also brought renewed attention to the commissioning editor's role, which remains less institutionalized in Hungary than in Germany.

For Tóth, establishing this kind of creative partnership between broadcasters, producers and filmmakers represents an important objective for Hungary's future audiovisual system. Rather than acting primarily as financial gatekeepers, commissioning editors could become professional partners who accompany projects from early development through production.

The distinction is fundamental: commissioning editors are not there to replace filmmakers' creative judgment, but to help strengthen projects through expertise, dialogue and sustained editorial involvement.

Berning offered a particularly personal description of that relationship.

“I also think of this role as a role of companion sometimes, like therapist, for example, like a therapist who very much cares for their clients,”

- Jan Berning, commissioning editor at ARD affiliate SWR

Tóth also described his involvement in a Hungarian-German-Serbian television miniseries project associated with director Ildikó Enyedi, using the international collaboration as an example of how editorial relationships and co-production partnerships can strengthen a project's development and financing prospects.

For Hungary, building such a commissioning culture would require more than introducing new funding mechanisms. It would mean developing professional expertise, establishing transparent editorial processes and creating an institutional environment in which commissioning editors can exercise independent creative judgment.

Rather than relying on a single source of public support, producers could seek complementary contributions from film funds, public broadcasters, commercial networks and international partners, with each institution participating according to the cultural and commercial character of a project.

Such an approach would also offer an opportunity to clarify the relationship between public investment, creative autonomy and professional decision-making.

A Wider European Debate

“The importance of public media and the importance of public service broadcasting, I think, cannot be underestimated in times like this.”

— Miriam Bruns, Director of Goethe-Institut Budapest

Opening the discussion, Goethe-Institut Budapest director Miriam Bruns highlighted the importance of public service media not only for audiovisual production but also for democratic life, describing public broadcasting as an institution whose significance “cannot be underestimated in times like this.”

The panel formed part of a wider effort to develop a continuing dialogue between Hungarian film professionals and European broadcasting and film financing institutions.

For Hungary's producers, the central question is no longer simply how much public money may be available for filmmaking, but how that investment could be organized to create a sustainable market for original films and series.

The German experience suggests that public broadcasters can help develop talent and share financial risks without taking over the creative responsibilities of independent producers. The Czech comparison, meanwhile, provides an example of how a smaller national market can sustain substantial domestic drama production through public television.

Together, the two models point towards a possible direction for Hungary: a more diversified financing system supported by professional commissioning structures, editorial independence and long-term collaboration between broadcasters, film funds and producers.

Whether Hungary translates those examples into institutional change remains an open question. But the Budapest discussion underscored that developing a sustainable audiovisual sector will depend not only on the availability of public funding, but also on the institutions and creative relationships through which that funding is administered.

The discussion will continue on November 27, 2026, at the Euro Film Policies Budapest Summit, held at the Goethe-Institut Budapest. Film industry experts, policymakers and industry representatives from Austria, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Slovakia and other European countries will discuss different approaches to European film policy and financing. The summit will focus on strengthening international co-productions and exploring how Hungary could reconnect more closely with European co-production networks. As part of the summit, five Hungarian film projects will also be presented at a **professional pitching forum**. Two of these will be selected to pitch their projects to an international industry audience at **PITCH_IT**, held at the Goethe-Institut Berlin alongside the Berlinale 2027.