

## How to Talk about the Cultural Sector in Turkey

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### Introduction: A sector for culture

A meaningful study of culture in Turkey must take into account social processes such as globalisation, rapid urbanisation, democratisation and civil society development as well as historical and political structures and practices in which culture has been reproduced. A difficulty arises in the very definition of the 'sector' itself. What parameters define a 'sector', especially in a field such as culture? Defining the cultural sector as a business or industry – with reference to rational processes and structures of production, the dissemination and consumption of culture, and culture's relation to economic gain – would fail to acknowledge the particularities of cultural production and organisation within their socio-historical context. Such particularities resist any kind of rationalisation, since culture is permeable, hybrid, irregular and unpredictable.

In talking about the cultural 'sector' in Turkey or elsewhere, we need to make it clear what we actually mean by this word. Should it refer to public/independent organisations with salaried staff, management plans and secure finances, or can it be extended to include informal, non-institutional structures or formations? Does defining the cultural sector in Turkey as being 'in transition' mean viewing it through financial, institutional and managerial criteria borrowed from the West? As I will attempt to discuss, this process – even when we call it a transition – does not necessarily lead to the full adoption of Western ways of 'managing culture'. Such a transition, envisaged for instance as a result of the *rapprochement* between Turkey and the European Union, does not assume a movement of a 'from-to' kind. Rather, it predicts a space of multiple presences and absences, a space where similarities and differences open up possibilities for manifold combinations. My discussion of the cultural sector in Turkey, then, is based on the possibilities and diversity inherent in the 'sectorisation of culture'.

We can begin mapping the cultural sector in Turkey by identifying the major cultural operators there. These are:

1. Cultural bodies of the central administration, i.e. the Ministry of Culture and Tourism
2. Local representatives of the central administration in districts
3. Local administration, i.e. the municipalities and their cultural centres in cities
4. Political parties and their cultural initiatives
5. Privately owned cultural centres
6. Companies in the cultural industries, e.g. music, film
7. Non-profit, non-governmental organisations, i.e. foundations, associations, networks, platforms and forums
8. Non-profit cultural companies
9. Foreign cultural institutions (such as the British Council, the Goethe Institute)

In this discussion I will focus on the independent cultural sector, i.e. NGOs in the field of arts and culture. These include associations, foundations, initiatives (platforms or forums) and networks as well as non-profit cultural companies and private cultural centres operating in the field of culture.

### **Facts and Figures: A Brief History of Cultural NGOs in Turkey**

The history of civil society organisations in modern Turkey can be said to fall into two periods: before the 1980s and after. The period between 1946 and 1980 saw the emergence of associations, foundations and trade unions as new actors in Turkey's political life. This development resulted from the multi-party system introduced in 1946, following the single-party rule that had prevailed after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s (for a discussion of this transformation, see Ömer Çaha, 1997). An instance of this development is the growth in the number of associations from 733 in 1946 to 18,958 in 1960 (Kutlu and Usta, 2005: 201). However, this period also saw state and army interference in civil society organisations, as certain social and political movements were considered a threat to the modernisation project in Turkey. The reordering and reorganising of the public sphere resulting from legal interference was a serious setback to the development of civil society organisations in Turkey between 1946 and the 1980s.

The period starting with the 1980s seemed to promise an improvement in conditions for civil society organisations. Following the 1982 Constitution, a series of legal measures on associations, foundations, trade unions and political parties was passed, resulting in significant legal restrictions on the media and on the setting up of associations. In this sense, the relationship between civil society organisations and the 1982 Constitution can be viewed as problematic. On the other hand, from 1985 on there was a widening of the civil society and a larger number of initiatives due to the strengthening of the private sector, the effects of globalisation, the development of the market economy, the growth of the middle classes and the media's increasing influence over the state in Turkey. NGOs devoted to human rights, the environment and women's welfare were founded during this period. According to the Directorate of Associations at the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, there were 80,757 active associations in Turkey in 2005, 18.43% of these active in Istanbul, 9.81% in Ankara and 5.15% in Izmir (Kutlu and Usta, 2005: 201). However, one has to treat these figures with caution as some civil society organisations established under the title 'regional/local solidarity/support' are mere coffee houses. According to the 2005 NGO survey by the History Foundation, 1,147 associations were established after 1981.

As the EU process gathered pace in Turkey in the latter half of the 1990s, the number of civil society organisations increased. Projects and funds stimulating civil society development in Turkey played a special role here. There were also new NGOs established following the two major earthquakes in Marmara and Düzce in 1999. Statistical information about NGOs in Turkey is incomplete and discrepancies exist between the figures presented by public bodies and those presented by other organisations. There are, however, significant studies carried out in this field. Surveys by the History Foundation in 1996 and 2005 provide a general mapping of NGOs in Turkey. The 1996 survey covered 1,794 organisations, 39% of them based in Istanbul, 25% in Ankara and 11% in Izmir. 52% of these were associations, 30% foundations, 5% trade unions, 8% professional chambers, 2% cooperatives and 2% citizens' initiatives. It was reported that 1,436 NGOs employed 23,464 full-time and 2,666 part-time workers, and had 1,365 project assistants and 126,386 volunteers. Cooperatives employed the largest number of full-time staff, followed by associations and then foundations (History Foundation, 1996: 12-14).

The 2005 survey covers some 3,268 NGOs operating at local, regional and national levels. Of these, around 300-350 organisations can be identified as artistic and cultural, in the following categories: painting, sculpture, music, language and literature, fine arts, photography, folklore, culture, museology, music, arts, historical

buildings and conservation, history and archaeology, theatre, opera and ballet. This amounts to 9-10% of the NGOs surveyed by the History Foundation.

(For further information on NGOs provided by various organisations in Turkey, see the History Foundations's NGO Guide [www.stkrehberi.org](http://www.stkrehberi.org), the site of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs [www.dernekler.gov.tr](http://www.dernekler.gov.tr), the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV) <http://www.tusev.org.tr/indexeng.php>, the British Council's study on Human Rights NGOs [http://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/br\\_stk/default.asp](http://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/br_stk/default.asp), and Istanbul Bilgi University's site on NGOs <http://stk.bilgi.edu.tr/Default.asp?lid=en>.)

### **Perimeters of the Sector**

It is popularly accepted that Istanbul is the cultural capital of Turkey. The metropolis accommodates the Turkish film and music industries, media and broadcasting companies, a selection of museums, galleries and exhibition spaces, entertainment industry venues, and small, large and medium-sized cultural initiatives. The cultural organisations, activities and initiatives that take place in Istanbul do set the cultural agenda of the country as a whole. However, it is important to stress that when we talk about cultural production, or activities, events and initiatives taking place in the cultural sector in Istanbul or elsewhere in Turkey, we are not referring only to those organised by established, formal institutions (whether local municipalities or non-governmental non-profit cultural organisations). Such a classification would leave out a significant amount of local, organic, informal cultural and artistic events and activities. For instance, most of the institutionalised cultural production that addresses Istanbul's middle class and international audiences takes place in the centre rather than the peripheries. Sibel Yardimci argues in her book *Kentse/Değişim ve Festivalizm* (İletişim: 2005) that, as a result of globalisation and modernisation, these rather middle-class initiatives in Istanbul – the festivals and international cultural activities, but especially the Istanbul Biennials – aspire to reinvent the city as a cultural capital on a par with other global cultural capitals. The Biennials have acquired an economic and political role in creating an image of the city worldwide.

However, culture is produced on a daily basis in the peripheries, within the more informal quarters of the back neighbourhoods, local associations, music schools, mosque organisations, Alevite religious centres, local markets and public parks.

In the academic year 2005-2006, fourth year students at Istanbul Bilgi University's Management of Performing Arts Department conducted some research entitled 'The Culture Profile in the Peripheries of Istanbul'. According to the results of surveys, observations and conversations, participation in cultural events in the centre of the city by inhabitants of the neighbourhoods of Ümraniye, Sultanbeyli, Pendik, Gaziosmanpaşa and Eyüp was minimal, whereas these neighbourhoods had their own networks and informal, spontaneous ways of organising cultural activities which addressed the local communities. While those in the centre do get publicity throughout Turkey and sometimes abroad, the majority of cultural production in the peripheries remains out of sight, being considered a subject more fit for anthropological research.

This brings us to the realisation that arts and culture are defined and organised differently in the centre than the periphery. In a megalopolis like Istanbul, the distance between centre and periphery might be shorter than one would imagine. What I would like to stress here is not only the physical but also the social and cultural space, the space where different life-worlds are recreated and experienced, where we can talk of different forms of *habitus*, to use Bourdieu's concept. That which belongs to the cultural life of people in the periphery might not be considered

suitable for the cultural sector. The assumption that the cultural sector consists of contemporary urban culture flourishing in a global context with influences from the West and taking place in the centre is exactly the danger I would like to underline.

Istanbul's prominence as the country's cultural capital does not change the fact that cultural production takes place in other cities too. Ankara, Izmir and Antalya as well as the newly emerging centres of Diyarbakir and Kars house several cultural organisations and informal networks. However, one might argue that similar centre-periphery relations prevail within these cities too.

### **Challenges Experienced by NGOs in Turkey's Cultural Sector**

Culture as sector presumes also culture as market. To be able to distribute the products of this economy to several markets, one certainly needs standards, rules and routes. Seen from the perspective of the globalised economies, the delineation of the cultural sector in Turkey and elsewhere is not a mere selection of which organisations qualify for membership to the sector and which do not. Neither is it merely the circulation of international arts and culture for different audiences of festivals and fairs. Such an economy of cultural products is desirable not only for those coming from other markets but also for those who are in charge of the political and social systems (for national promotion, for tourism, for political and commercial gain) where the cultural sector is defined. Political and financial expectations are inherent within the global sectorisation of culture. Therefore, an evaluation of the cultural sector in Turkey or elsewhere should foremost take these forces into consideration.

Adapting tools of evaluation, mostly used to understand the performance of cultural institutions and operators in other socio-economic contexts, to the cultural sector in Turkey may not give a complete or rightful picture. However, keeping in mind the difficulty of translating contexts and paying attention to the particular dynamics of each "culture" and "sector", we might discuss certain challenges experienced by the NGOs in Turkey's cultural sector.

1. Fragmentation of the sector: Long-lasting strong cooperation between organisations is rather rare. This is visible among established organisations as well as small initiatives that have not yet become fully institutionalised. Cooperation with similar organisations is either thought to be irrelevant or to hinder one's own pursuit of resources and opportunities, and cooperation with public bodies is also seen as a difficult 'marriage', although there has recently been an increasing number of examples of such public-private cooperation. On the other hand, we have to mention the unusual attempt among certain NGOs to work together towards Istanbul's candidacy for European Capital of Culture in 2010. This cooperation which brought prominent organisations together around a common goal can be identified as a significant step in creating synergy among the NGOs.

2. Limited management capacities: Even among the most established cultural organisations, management capacities (such as could realise a well defined, communicated and implemented mission and prospects, planning, strategies, division of tasks, etc.) are sometimes unclear. Worldwide, the cultural sector in general has to be flexible and spontaneous and capable of improvising solutions; however, it also requires a certain division of labour and delegation of authority to qualified staff. The tendency to shy away from maintaining well-defined job descriptions and delegation of responsibilities to able staff seems to be one of the issues causing most resentment among workers in Turkey's cultural organisations. In this respect, the question of democracy within the organisations needs to be dealt with urgently.

3. Problems of sustainability: Most small-scale cultural organisations suffer from financial instability due to inadequate public funds, a lack of specialised staff for fundraising and insufficient experience and knowledge of international funding bodies. However, this does not mean that well-established cultural organisations do not experience any problems with funding. Some of them do have departments and staff that specialise in raising sponsorship, but even these organisations have to negotiate aggressively on a regular basis to guarantee funds.

The role of private firms in financing cultural organisations is also a challenging issue for cultural operators. Sponsorship is a significant source of income for cultural organisations in Turkey. The recent sponsorship law allows for tax deductions to sponsorship-giving companies. While sponsorship enables organisations to realise their programmes, it also brings its own difficulties. As Dragan Klaić rightly observes in his report, 'Private foundations confuse their grant-giving and operational roles and do not always respect the programmatic and artistic autonomy of their grantees'. On the other hand, some sponsors prefer to work with organisations which appear to have a structure that resembles a private company's.

Sustainability is an issue for many cultural organisations, but especially for young ones that cannot secure a fixed audience and that fail to develop institutional tools to deal with the challenges of survival.

#### 4. Professionalism of staff:

Another issue is the insufficient numbers of trained staff. Since this is a newly developing sector, most actors are trained on the job. On the other hand, the emergence of academic departments of arts management within several universities (all in Istanbul) does contribute to the formation of professionals who will contribute to the shaping of the cultural sector. In general we can argue that the cultural sector in Turkey is 'young', accommodating the younger generation.

5. Lack of cultural policies: The lack of a well-defined central or local cultural policy results in a lack of clarity about what and who receives support from public funds. Support to cultural activities from public bodies tends to follow an unpredictable path and is often a result of personal lobbying by cultural operators. One can also argue that the political tendencies of the municipalities are influential in choosing which activities to support.

Such means of negotiating funds may not always be possible, especially for emerging cultural organisations and young initiators. In fact, young cultural operators do not even consider forging relations with public bodies, since they believe that they will never be able to receive any support. However, such an approach also immediately kills the chances of receiving support without trying. Moreover, it hampers the public recognition of young private initiatives, with funds usually going to well-established cultural organisations. In the performing arts, for instance, limited public funds (from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) are available for theatres but tend to go to well established companies. The funds are usually not even sufficient to pay for annual running costs, but are still considered significant by private theatre companies. On the other hand, while cash contributions by the municipalities might be infrequent, in-kind contributions such as space allocations or public transportation do occur.

In addition to the general challenges listed above, we can add the problem of insufficient spaces for performing or exhibiting art. Cultural organisations, small and large, experience difficulties in finding and running spaces suitable for their activities.

Space usually constitutes their largest expense. Most young artists and cultural operators complain about the dominance of established cultural networks and relations in the cultural sector. They believe that this is an obstacle to the dissemination of new ideas and approaches and that it prevents change and dynamism in the sector. This is interesting to hear since, as I mentioned earlier, the cultural sector is relatively new and unorganised. However, the fact that there are young voices who suggest new perspectives for the sector also confirms the dynamism and potential for change and innovation.

## Conclusion

What possibilities exist in Turkey's cultural sector for international cultural cooperation? Would the capacities of organisations be sufficient to stimulate trust in foreign partners? How about financing possibilities? Would instances of cooperation culminate in meaningful productions? And would they be sustainable? These are some of the questions that potential international cultural operators might have in mind when searching for partners in Turkey. The answers are not readily to hand. However, there is great dynamism, energy and willpower among the cultural initiators and operators in Turkey. Cultural activities in Turkey cater to different tastes and interests, from traditional folk culture to contemporary urban culture, from the artistic expressions of local communities to international arts events. These activities are organised by well-established institutions with salaried staff and more or less thought-out strategies and plans as well as by local informal networks that seem to be able to attract audiences without PR or fundraising campaigns. Culture in all forms of expression is present in the lives of people from high-income urban centres to low-income peripheral neighbourhoods, from industrial centres to economically distressed areas in Anatolia. In that sense, one can argue that there is no limit to the cultural creativity, artistic activity and diverse means of producing and consuming culture in Turkey.

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