

Anadolu Kültür: A Civil Society Initiative in Turkey

Fifteen years ago, in 2002, after a period of intense conflict and the accompanying years of emergency rule of the 1990s in the predominantly Kurdish south east region of Turkey, a group of artists, intellectuals, academicians and business people from İstanbul came together with an idea to establish an arts and culture center in the heart of the region, in Diyarbakır. The initiative, Anadolu Kültür, which started out as an arts and culture center has over the years expanded its activities to more than 30 cities and is now one of the very few organizations in the civil society sector in Turkey which aims in a nutshell, to facilitate arts and cultural activities for social change.

Throughout the last 15 years, the social and political context within which Anadolu Kültür works has gone through various different phases. Holding on to the original vision, Anadolu Kültür has adapted its programs which support freedom of expression by opening spaces for contemporary artists and filmmakers, promotes cultural rights by focusing on cultural diversity and cultural heritage, supports refugee children through creative methods in education, and works on building trust through arts between segregated communities within a polarized society. Centers, programs, projects and activities of Anadolu Kültür have been influential in creating an environment for critical debate on social issues through arts and culture. Anadolu Kültür had started working mainly in the Kurdish region with the aim to provide a breathing space for the youth in a region deteriorated by conflict and state of emergency. Today, Turkey is again under a state of emergency –this time not a regional but a national one– and going through a severe conflict situation, not only around the Kurdish issue, but also around other ethnic identities, religion, culture, class and life-styles.

The current social and political context in Turkey is a rather challenging one in terms of implementing any kind of civil society initiative. There is an atmosphere in which people are worried about human rights violations and limitations on freedom of expression. Especially in the last two years, international observers report often about journalists and writers in prison, the broader attack on media, mass firings of academics, attacks on digital rights, as well as on opposition and civil society. The situation in the country and its changing position within the international scene has affected the motivation of people in many fields, including the arts scene. We are witnessing attacks on culture in general either through direct restrictions to Kurdish artistic productions or through criminalization of activities that touch controversial issues. Many civil society organizations and Kurdish cultural centers have been shut down with state of emergency decrees. The municipalities of several Kurdish cities, which were especially supportive of Kurdish artistic productions, were taken over by state-appointed trustees. Not only the Kurdish but all artists are in an ambiguous situation, where censorship and self-censorship are becoming the norm in Turkey.

Just a few years ago, İstanbul was one of the world's creative capitals – a popular place for visual artists, writers and filmmakers. Restrictions on freedom of expression, rising social intolerance, a string of terror attacks and an attempted military coup created a sense of fear and increasing isolation in the culture and arts scene in İstanbul: the number of international exchanges and collaborations decreased due to security concerns and some contemporary art spaces and independent stages are closing down. İstanbul is rapidly evolving into a tough place to live in, especially for artistic practices that exercise free speech.

Although the civic space has been shrinking significantly, there are still many civil society organizations, activists and artists trying to survive and continue their work. Anadolu Kültür is one of those organizations, which welcomes new challenges to reach out to different groups in a polarized society, create impact and work on public engagement. Its 15 years of experience dealing with particularly diverse and at times conflictual groups has equipped it to adapt to the current challenging environment and continue seeking ways to engage culture, arts and artistic production in creating social change.

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