AD: Zeyno, you are based in Istanbul, Turkey, but you are also a member of several international organisations that combine art and activism with political critique. Since the global financial crisis in 2008 we have witnessed waves of protests in many parts of the world, but also waves of repression that threaten to define our juncture as an ongoing counter-revolution. I want to ask, therefore, if the discussions that take place in the organisations and collectives you are engaged with have changed in the past few years vis-à-vis such political developments.

ZP: Yes, they have definitely changed. The political organisations and networks that I am part of in Turkey were born out of, or affiliated with, the Alternative Globalisation (alter-globalisation) movements of the second half of 2000s. That was when we had many international meetings, actions, summer camps, summits and informal gatherings – especially with comrade organisations from Europe. These groups witnessed their most active period between 2009 and 2014, when international networks expanded beyond Europe. During the tide of uprisings and the square occupations in particular, we acted as if we were totally part of the same world reality and as if the words and concepts that comprised our political vocabularies held the exact same meanings.
These movements shook extant political systems (and sometimes toppled them), yet they proved not to be powerful enough to subvert the political establishment as a whole. And when these movements lost their momentum, the military junta happened in Egypt, Greece surrendered to the European Troika, an authoritarian regime was established in Turkey, civil war and an imperialist intervention devastated Syria, and so on. Although we were aware of the fact that the different circumstances shaping each country were unequal and asymmetrical expressions of a shared world reality, we still found ourselves in conditions that made us unable to keep using the same political vocabulary in our conversations – or, we were unable to continue with familiar political forms such as ways of organising, the language of protest and repertoires of action.

Since 2015, the organic relationships between similar small organisations and networks across Europe that I was used to has started to dissolve. Since then, we are all swamped in our own political realities, and it is becoming harder to find a common language to discuss these realities. As you have also mentioned in your question, I am still participating in several international networks, but now these mostly emerge from my artistic or academic alliances and not from the political field itself. This is a salient difference between then and now.

**AD:** In our Introduction to the special ‘Anti-fascism/Art/Theory’ issue of Third Text (no 158, in 2019),¹ Harry Weeks and I addressed the widely asked question of how to name our current moment in history. While many on the left are troubled over the rise of authoritarianism, there is no consensus on whether to refer to fascism, or whether historian Enzo Traverso is right in speaking about ‘post-fascism’, or whether the emerging situation is about something else.² What is your own view on this lack of consensus?

**ZP:** Several weeks before the Gezi Park uprising in Istanbul in 2013,³ when police forces brutally attacked a peaceful protest against the demolition of a historic movie theatre, an old slogan that had almost disappeared after the 1980s suddenly spouted from the subconscious of the crowd – ‘Shoulder to Shoulder against Fascism’ – and became popular again. This was, arguably, a sign that people were drawing a connection between the distinct features of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regime and aspects of fascism, and it was pretty common to call him a dictator. On the other hand, and somehow ironically, in 2014 Erdoğan himself asked in one of his public speeches something along the lines of ‘if I were a dictator, would you be able to call

---

¹ Print copies of this special issue of Third Text can be ordered from Central Books: [https://www.centralbooks.com/third-text-158-2019-may-volume-33-issue-3.html](https://www.centralbooks.com/third-text-158-2019-may-volume-33-issue-3.html); individual articles are available from Taylor and Francis: [https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ctte20/33/3?nav=tocList](https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ctte20/33/3?nav=tocList)


me a dictator to my face?" Whether to call this regime ‘fascist’ had become, and continues to be, an internal discussion of the radical left in Turkey. Some claim that we don’t have to be very loyal to the narrow definition of the word ‘fascism’, but others insist that how we name the regime shapes our strategies.

Personally, I think that how we name the changes of a regime that deviates from our conventional idea of democratic governance affects deeply our strategic decisions. We should certainly be alert, vigilant, and organise against the new fascistic tools of the far right or authoritarian regimes and movements. But we cannot at the same time forget the perils of idealising capitalism’s liberal democracies. That is, we must keep in mind that the institutionalisation of violence and repression are inherent to liberal democracies as well. Letting fear and panic shape our strategies can lead us to seek alliances without carefully considering the consequences and reacting to political urgencies here-and-now without longer-term plans. Now, in hindsight, I believe that the fascism analogy often generated a perception of an omnipotent leader and political party, allowing their weaknesses to slip under our radar.

7 April 2013: police attack a protest against the demolition of the historic Emek Movie Theatre in Istanbul; minutes after this an old slogan that had almost disappeared after the 1980s suddenly rose up from the subconscious of the crowd: ’Shoulder to Shoulder against Fascism’, photo by Ilgin Erarslan Vilimaz

**AD:** One of the major issues dividing electorates in many countries in Europe, and in many other parts of the world, is migration, and the waves of refugees generated by conflict and economic violence – and climate destruction can soon be added to this (although climate migration is possibly already happening). Also, since February 2020, the outbreak of Covid-19 has worsened considerably the lives of migrants and refugees cramped in the notorious camps

---

4 The video link can be found on dailymotion.com at [https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2jezom](https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2jezom), accessed 3 March 2020
while the lockdowns in countries such as Greece have made solidarity near impossible. Suspicion towards refugees and migrants has intensified, and these social groups are becoming the pariahs of societies (to put it mildly). These attitudes were to be expected; they are hardly unrelated to formal policies. Indeed, Turkey and the EU signed a pact in 2016 with regard to the containment of migrant flows. This has been seen as a shameful pact by anti-fascists everywhere, while the right is pressing for further securitisation of borders. This is certainly the case in Greece, despite the horrific conditions of migrants and refugees in the so called ‘hotspots’ in the country, such as the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos island (incidentally, the island where I was born). Do cultural and art workers in Turkey discuss these matters? What is the perspective on the above? I ask because even in neighbouring Greece there is too little, if any, information on how colleagues and comrades in Turkey approach these urgent issues.

ZP: This has been a complicated issue in Turkey as well. It is hard to compare the situation with the Greek context as refugee numbers in Turkey are extremely high. A month ago, in February, when we started our discussion, there were nearly four million Syrian refugees in Turkey, and only a very small number of them lived in camps. Even though the legal status of the refugees has always been complicated, Syrian refugees in particular have had access to the (mostly informal) labour market and daily life.

In the past few years, AKP [the Justice and Development Party] and Erdoğan managed to launch and broadcast a narrative according to which Syrians are our ‘brothers and sisters in religion’ fleeing a horrible regime and a deadly war. (It is easy, at the same time, to guess that the Turkish state has not been treating equally each and every ethnicity and religion from Syria.) This public narrative has been holding society together in Turkey and has so far averted a mass hysteria over the influx of refugees – if compared to some European countries with, in fact, much lower numbers of refugees. Of course, there have been pogrom attempts and clashes in the cities with the highest number of refugees, but these were not organised by right-wing political movements as seen in Europe. Up until now, the tension was somehow contained. But with the economy going bad and with social and political pressures increasing, it would be unsurprising to see greater conflict in the near future. Furthermore, each and every political party in the opposition at present is using the refugee situation to criticise Erdoğan’s government: some use the economic burden the refugees supposedly cause, some use the fear of Islamic jihadists, some claim planned demographic changes are being introduced via the refugees. It is far from unthinkable that these discourses will find greater resonance in the public sphere sooner than we think.

For us, the major outcome of the 2016 EU–Turkey deal was that the EU appeared to give the green light to Erdoğan. After the deal, Erdoğan became more reckless and fearless when it came to violations of human rights, democratic rights, and rights to freedom of expression in

---

Turkey. After all, and thanks to the 2016 deal, he can always threaten the EU with ‘opening the borders’ whenever he is criticised or warned, or needs to engage in diplomacy that requires putting pressure on some countries – just as we have seen happening since 28 February 2020.\(^6\)

In the escalation of tension since the end of February, Turkish state TV has been tweeting the routes to Europe and some municipalities have been arranging for the free transport of refugees to the border. I think this situation will not only increase the tension at the border between Turkey and Greece (and therefore the EU) but also within Turkey. Even before the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic, I would have thought that those who might have opted to stay in Turkey would have likely become the targets of nationalist and xenophobic attacks as Erdoğan’s official discourse was changing, labelling the refugees as a ‘burden’. Since the pandemic hit Europe and Turkey, the border situation has lost its priority in the news. We hear from our comrades at the border that buses are silently transporting refugees back to Turkish cities. Yet there is still an unknown number of refugees in the buffer zone between Turkey and Greece and medical doctors do not have access to these people. As there are limited options to charge mobile phones in this zone, our friends do not have good internal communication so we do not have reliable information. There are weak online campaigns to take the necessary precautions in this zone, but, as far as I know, no solid steps are being taken apart from disinfecting the camp area every now and then. Of course, we are not in a position to make predictions, and the situation can change from one moment to the next.

Speaking about how things were before the outbreak of the pandemic, the art field took a politically correct position from the outset. And yet it did not manage to construct a convincing, concrete and sustainable public discourse and debate, or an agenda for action – apart from what could be called ‘charitable positions’. In art, we mostly saw instances of collaboration between Turkish and migrant artists, or works that aimed to give a voice to refugees, or NGO projects that brought artists and refugees together. NGO projects alone became a huge market and appeared as collaborations with almost every major cultural institution in the country. Some institutions or small associations tried to use culture to increase interaction between locals and refugees, yet most of these efforts remained goodwill gestures. On the other hand, a notable number of artists, as individuals, are part of, or support, solidarity organisations with refugees. How the pandemic will impact this remains to be seen.

**AD:** Overall, do you think that the art field has the capacities and the resources to mount resistance to these developments, and to respond to these concerns? I mean beyond the production of critical artworks that address whatever issue? Are there mechanisms in place that allow and encourage solidarity, or does the latter remain largely discursive?

---

\(^6\) In the last days of February 2020, Turkey’s decision to no longer ‘prevent refugees from going to Europe as fighting raged in Syria’s Idlib province’ shook the region. See ‘Europeans tighten borders as Turkey “opens the gates” to refugees’, *Al Jazeera*, 28 February 2020 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/europeans-tighten-borders-turkey-opens-gates-refugees-20022808548988.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/europeans-tighten-borders-turkey-opens-gates-refugees-20022808548988.html), accessed 2 March 2020. The right-wing Greek government responded with the most intense securitisation of the border seen to date in the refugee crisis that has been being witnessed for years now. As this interview was being conducted, the escalation continued and the situation remains critical, especially for the refugees and migrants who flocked to the Turkish–Greek border.
**ZP:** We can only reflect on how things have been so far. In Turkey, film, literature and music had to deal with oppression and censorship more than the contemporary art field for two reasons: firstly, state support of contemporary art and its institutions has always been null in Turkey. From the very beginning, private capital and ‘old money’ families were instrumental to the contemporary art field. In fact, this allowed the establishment of contemporary art production in a way that would allow the latter to be independent of the state. The art field shaped and developed in a way that kept it protected from the ideological and material dominance of the state, so to speak. Secondly, other fields of cultural production (film, literature and music, for instance) are seen by the state as more dangerous. These fields command larger audiences, thus having evident potential to reach the masses.

Even though since 2015, and in times of state repression, the contemporary art field has been dealt some blows (such as the self-censorship of artists and institutions, or the arrest of a prominent figure such as Osman Kavala), it seems to have survived. Arguably, some art institutions have even emerged stronger. Especially after the July 2016 coup attempt (against Erdoğan) and during the state of emergency that followed, many opposing institutions, and especially universities, were targeted directly or indirectly. But in a period where all our tools of political participation were taken away, arts and cultural institutions played a very important role as public spaces. When more than two thousand academics were criminalised and forced out of universities, these institutions intensified their public programmes, and many of them introduced education or research programmes. They generously provided premises for meetings and events, and overall they became ‘indoor’ public spaces where ‘outdoor’ spaces were criminalised. Some institutions’ intentions were symbolic and, to an extent, superficial. Yet other institutions actually created a meaningful togetherness and shared knowledge.

Of course, all this happened with a cost. The discussion on the structural relations of capital and culture and politics was suspended for a while during the state of emergency rule. Likewise, we saw a suspension of the critique of corporate sponsors of art events with regard to these companies’ affiliations with urban gentrification projects, the production of military vehicles and supplies, oil, mining, etc. As the times were tough and both institutions and individuals were under a lot of pressure, and as the feeling of solidarity against the common enemy was gaining ground, we postponed the key discussions for better days. Many previously unthinkable alliances started to be perceived as ‘natural’.

On the other hand, art in Turkey enjoys a relatively solid tradition of solidarity built around loose networks. For my generation, the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink’s assassination in 2007 by an ultra-nationalist individual, and the massive public reaction against this murder, were a milestone. Following the assassination, artists formed a group named after the date of Hrant

---

Dink’s assassination, 19 Ocak (January 19). The importance of this group was that its members were gathering specifically as artists/art workers to discuss matters besides art, and took action in this heated political atmosphere. I can assert that this was a major occasion for artists to experience collective political discussion, collective decision-making and anonymous work.

Preparations for Istanbul’s role as European Capital of Culture in 2010 included the opening of new institutions and private galleries, while a number of artist and activist initiatives formed. Artists began to discuss the need for an organisation that could focus on the specificities of their fields. Significantly, the first meetings were organised by the initiative of Siyah-Bant, a research platform that traces cases of censorship in the art world across Turkey, and advocates for freedom of the arts, following a case of censorship. In 2011, meetings took place to discuss the possibility of a new association, union, chamber, or a free organisational structure. Prominent issues brought up in the meetings included contracts, artist fees, relations with institutions, the invisible labour force, censorship and obstructions to freedom of expression. Even though a formal association couldn’t be established after a year of weekly meetings, this process generated extensive experience of organisational matters and procedures, helped forge new alliances among artists, and facilitated co-operation so as to defend rights and to act together on other political agendas.

---


9 See http://www.siyahbant.org, accessed 2 March 2020
Several years later, Turuncu Çadır (Orange Tent) was formed by artists during the Gezi Resistance. \(^\text{10}\) Initiated out of a real need to find each other physically in the park, this organisation rapidly transformed into a common platform for the discussion of actual politics for artists. And currently, many artists are very active in the Gezi trial and Osman Kavala’s case, trying to keep the public engaged with this injustice.

Maybe I am being unreasonably optimistic, but beyond the production of critical artworks we have a relatively active pool of artists who are engaged in solidarity structures and political organisations while also sustaining an informal network that has the potential to take action against censorship, labour exploitation and cases of injustice. This informal network does not always work as efficiently as we would wish, but I would say that living under constant pressure has brought artists together in ways that shows vigilance rather than defeatism.

---

**Zeyno Pekünlü** is an artist based in Istanbul. She holds a MA from the University of Barcelona and a doctorate from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul. She is currently running the Work and Research Program of the Istanbul Biennial (ÇAP) for young artists and researchers. Zeyno is also a member of several local and international political networks, including Müştereklerimiz (Our Commons), Dünyada Mekan (A Place on Earth), Solidarity Academies Network Turkey, IRI (Institute of Radical Imagination) as well as of the Red Thread Journal editorial collective. Her artwork focuses on public and private manifestations of various forms of subordination.

http://zeynopekunlu.blogspot.com

**Angela Dimitrakaki** is an editor of *Third Text*. She works at the University of Edinburgh.

---