

Censorship and

Self-Censorship

in Turkey:

JANUARY 2023 — DECEMBER 2023



BAKIMSIZ GAZETECİLİK PLATFORMU



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January 2023

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Preface

This is the seventh of Susma (Speak Up) Platform's annual monitoring reports, providing findings of monitoring and data collection activities for the period between 1 January and 31 December 2023. We have been collecting data on censorship and self-censorship in Turkey since 2016, an undertaking which furnishes the grounds for all other activities of the Platform, such as monitoring, reporting, advocacy and network building.

Our reports unfortunately show that with each passing year, freedom of artistic expression in Turkey is declining, in line with the situation of all fundamental rights and freedoms in the country. Despite this bleak outlook and the conspicuous presence of collaboration between the capital and the government at every juncture, there has recently been renewed and livelier discussion on transparency, independence, merit, equity and fundamental rights in the field of arts and culture. We hope that these debates on mobilization, solidarity and progress yield their fruits.

In the meantime, stakeholders and the collected data indicate that the increasingly authoritarian government has, as it always had, a deeper impact on disadvantaged groups in society. Women, LGBTI+, Kurds and refugees have, as in previous years, are at the forefront of those who experience intersecting and multiple rights violations in 2023. Freedom of artistic expression is only one aspect. As always, we continued our activities in solidarity with the persisting struggle and offered support this year too.

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who supported the work of the Speak Up Platform in the past year; also extend our thanks to Aslı Tohumcu, Hayri Demir, Özkan Küçük, Ayşen Güven and Barın Gültekin for their contributions to this report's relevant sections.

Finally, we would like to thank our teammates Mehtap Gürbüz, Özgün Özçer, Tamer Karalar and Yasemin Gürkan for their assistance in preparing this report.

Data on Censorship in 2023

According to data obtained from our monitoring and data collection activities, there were at least 209 incidents of censorship in 2023. Undoubtedly, this figure only represents publicly available and/or accessible information and therefore is likely only the tip of the iceberg. Although we are aware that more cases of censorship have occurred for every year of reporting than our reports can show, this data still provides a significant insight into the state of freedom of artistic expression in Turkey.

The Speak Up Platform's activities from 2016 onwards and the findings of our annual reports unfortunately show a persistent deterioration for freedom of artistic. Of course, this situation is no different than the situation with all fundamental rights and freedoms in Turkey. So, how does the censorship mechanism sustain itself? To answer this question, we will examine some of the most prominent censorship examples of 2023.

Distribution of Cases by Field of Arts and Culture

The data shows that television broadcasts was the most censored field in 2023 with 51 documented incidents. The primary perpetrator here was the Radio and Television Supreme Council (*RTÜK hereinafter*). Other censorship practices documented in this field include investigations against and prosecution of actors, the cutting or pixelization of certain scenes and the termination of employment contracts of actors over their social media posts. RTÜK also imposed at least 58 administrative sanctions on television broadcasts and digital media. Some prominent examples of legal action against actors are the court cases filed against actresses Hazal Kaya and Farah Zeynep Abdullah for allegedly "insulting" Specialist Sergeant Musa Orhan, who sexually assaulted İpek Er in Batman and pushed her to suicide; and veteran actor İlyas Salman on the charge of "insulting the president." Another striking example of censorship in television in 2023 was actor Mehmet Aslantuğ having to leave the TV series broadcast on state-run TRT over his political views and at the request of the network's request. The cutting of scenes in which characters talk about alcohol and two characters kissing in the TV series *Yalı Çapkını*, and the cutting of the bathhouse scene and censoring of the word *adet* ("menstrual period") from the film *Bergen* are some other examples of censorship on television.

The music sector experienced the second most documented cases of censorship, with 50 incidents. Since the establishment of the Speak Up Platform, we have sadly reported on assaults and murders of street artists each year. In 2023, Kurdish street musician Cihan Aymaz was murdered in İstanbul. As in previous years, Kurdish artists continued to face investigations and prosecutions. These are mostly based on charges "terrorism propaganda," "membership in a terrorist organization" and "insulting the president." In 2023, Grup Yorum was the musical act that faced most censorship, as in previous years. The group's concerts continued to face bans by governorates. Group members were detained during a police raid on the İdil Cultural Center, where they pursue their artistic activities.

Publishing/literature (22 incidents) and online publishing/digital media (23 incidents) were the third most censored fields. Four books were declared "obscene publications," while orders for the confiscation of copies of various books were issued and Aram Publishers was once more raided by the police. Despite the confiscation of a significant number of materials during the raid in April, the police left a short note instead of a full report. The official decision to confiscate copies of five books which were taken by the police during the raid was issued afterwards. A recurring issue with increasing frequency is the prevention of the freedom of communication and availability of published materials in prisons. There have even been several cases of imprisoned authors being denied copies of their own work. Targeting people, artworks and events has also been a frequently employed method in the field of publishing/literature.

All bans on public events targeted mainly Pride Month activities. Governorates in at least six provinces and one district-governorate banned all Pride Month events. Our data here only includes bans specifically targeting the LGBTI+ throughout the year such as Pride Week. Governorates, who have been using their authority in an increasingly unforeseeable, arbitrary and censoriously manner, have banned all types of activities being carried out by or for the LGBTI+, especially during Pride Month, on grounds such as "protecting public morality" or "activities having the potential to cause public uproar, hurt national, conscientious and humanitarian values or threaten internal societal peace." The Governorates of Antalya, Aydın, Eskişehir, İzmir, Kocaeli and Mersin and the district governor's office of Datça have specifically banned Pride Week activities in their jurisdictions. The Governor's Office of

Aydın **banned** Pride Week activities, twice and back-to-back. In Mersin, the activities were held a month before the date publicly announced to avoid governorate bans. Mersin Governorate predictably banned the activities which had already taken place as part of the announced calendar. This not only violates freedom of artistic expression but also the freedom of peaceful assembly. These discriminatory practices directly contravene the safeguards established by the Constitution and international human rights conventions.

Distribution of cases by Censorship Method:

Bans were the most common method of censorship, affecting 86 of the 209 incidents according to our data. Most of these targeted the music sector. This category also includes forms of censorship such as restrictions on concerts, festivals and other events imposed by governorates or municipalities, book bans or access block orders by judgeships and the cancellation of activities at universities by the university administrations.

The second most frequent method of censorship is administrative sanctions, with 58 cases. Fifty-one of these are penalties issued by RTÜK on television and digital media. The most common grounds for penalties, which are used increasingly frequently over recent years, are "violating public morality," "being contrary to the Turkish family values," "being contrary to the religious sensitivities of society" or "criticizing the president, leaders of political parties or state officials." The statement which RTÜK issued on its website in July 2023, addressing the public and broadcasters, was a proclamation of its past actions and a warning for what was to come. The statement emphasized that broadcasts which "harm the institution of the family, attack spiritual or cultural values, include deviant relationships which threaten public health and insult religious values in comedy shows" were unacceptable. The public was also warned that the council would not "hesitate to impose the severest penalties." Given decisions recently issued by RTÜK, this statement indicates that the policy of censoring and punishing broadcasts with gender, sexual identity and politically critical content will continue.

There were 38 cases of censorship which included judicial investigations or prosecution. With 16 incidents, music was the most targeted sector followed by visual arts with six, and five concerning theaters. Charges in 11 of the 38 cases concerned anti-terror laws, five concerned "insulting the president" and three "inciting hatred and enmity and denigration" (Article 216 of

Turkish Penal Code). Terrorism-related charges are mostly used to target Kurdish artists. Racism and a punitive approach, which have also been prevalent, leave their tracks also in freedom of artistic expression, mirroring the state of Turkey's society, legal and political systems. At least six artists with foreign nationality were sent to repatriation centers with an immediate decision for their deportation in 2023. The rulings concerning Shailin Asadollahi, Ohash and Ali Pouransari were halted, while Asya Alizade, Menaf Osman and Reber Dosky were deported.

Online and offline targeting of people and/or artworks has over the recent years become a paving stone of the path to censorship. Our data shows at least 36 targeting incidents alongside censorship cases. The triad of targeting, slander and threats can be found in all fields of arts and culture. Targeting often furnishes the grounds for practices such as banning or cancelling activities. Two singers, Mabel Matiz and Melike Şahin, were targeted on social media following statements they made at an awards ceremony supporting gender equality and LGBTI+ rights. Denizli Metropolitan Municipality then cancelled the scheduled concerts by both artists in the town. Melike Şahin's scheduled concert in Bursa was similarly cancelled by another municipality. Targeting followed by cancellations and bans can also lead to unemployment and the diminishing, if not depleting, of economic resources for artists. Economic threats certainly carry the potential for triggering self-censorship. The case on the film *Kanun Hükmü* (The Decree), which was selected to compete in the 60th Antalya Film Festival, illustrates how targeting can lead to cancellation and here it was the eventual cancellation of the festival. While the ministries and the festival management displayed an adverse attitude, the withdrawal of other competing artists and the jury from the festival offered a rare glimmer of solidarity.

In some cases, organizers of activity or the artist that produced the artwork themselves cancelled or pulled back their works after experiencing targeting and threats. The effort to avoid being targeted and security concerns likely play a role in such cases. The exhibition *Yeniden Buluşacağız: İmroz'un 1964 Belleği* (We Will Meet Again: İmroz's Memory of 1964), which was to open in Gökçeada, had to be cancelled to protect all those involved as a result of being targeted. A seminar titled *Türkçe Edebiyatın Flanözleri, Evden Dışarı Çıkmak: Nezihe Muhiddin, Suat Derviş, Leyla Erbil* (Flankers of Literature, Leaving the House: Nezihe Muhiddin, Suat Derviş Leyla Erbil),

which was to be organized by the Metropolitan Municipality of İstanbul (İBB hereinafter) was targeted over the use of the expression “Türkçe edebiyat” (“Literature in Turkish”) over “Türk edebiyatı” (“Turkish Literature”). İBB removed the announcement with the expression in question from its social media accounts and cancelled the event.

Targeting is often followed by legal or administrative investigations. The Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism launched an investigation into the *Yas ve Haz* (Grief and Pleasure) exhibition at the Odunpazarı Modern Museum (OMM) in Eskişehir after it was targeted leading to its quiet closure. The exhibition titled *Ortadan Başlamak* (Starting from the Middle), which opened at the İBB arts space Artİstanbul Feshane was targeted, the exhibition was attacked, resulting in damage to works on display. Upon a [criminal complaint](#) filed by the Yesevi Alperenler Education, Culture and Aid Association, the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office [launched](#) an investigation into the exhibition.

Administrative sanctions are another consequence of targeting, either after a complaint or ex officio. RTÜK heads the list of institutions which impose administrative sanctions. The severe penalties issued by RTÜK for TV series *Kızılık Şerbeti* (Cornus Sherbet) and *Kızıl Goncalar* (Red Rosebuds), which were first broadcasted in 2023 and which explore the “secular-conservative conflict,” are some of the most prominent examples of this. In a relatively positive development, the Ankara 22nd Administrative Court overturned the penalty issued to the series *Kızılık Şerbeti* on grounds that it was excessively severe.

In 2023, there were 11 incidents of direct assault, threats or police harassment. The Kaos GL Association [withdrew](#) a public service announcement from broadcast due to the insults and death threats received by the company that produced the film and actors who were involved in it. The exhibition titled *Ortadan Başlamak* in Artİstanbul Feshane was targeted in June 2023 by a group accusing the artworks on display to be “deviant.” Following threats, a group which gathered in Artİstanbul Feshane on 9 July [attacked](#) the exhibition. A planned concert by Kurdish musician Kasım Taşdoğan in a cafe in Nusaybin, Mardin was cancelled after threats by law enforcement and municipality controlled by the appointed trustee. Officers who arrived at the cafe two hours before the concert stated no permit had been granted for the concert and that they would stop the concert and seal off the cafe where

it was to be held. With no breakthrough in negotiations, the concert was [cancelled](#).

Monitoring findings show that in recent years, targeting often leads to loss of work, economic sanctions, investigations and penal or administrative sanctions for artists and organizations. The practice of targeting, frequently used by public officials, results in the rapid deployment of such mechanisms of censorship. The issues which are subject to targeting are malleable and follow the political climate or the national agenda. Under such conditions, both the artists and works of art that are targeted and the sanctions they face can vary.

Censorship mechanisms delineate the boundaries of expression in arts and culture not just for their immediate targets, but for all actors in the field. The aim is to intimidate by illustrating what could happen to them should their work overstep these boundaries. This fosters a climate for self-censorship, which is not as visible as censorship. It might be that once enough time has passed, in a worst-case scenario, there will be no more artists or artistic works left to censor. Therefore, a decline in the number of reported or recorded incidents is not always a clearly positive development. Increased authoritarianism strengthens the self-censorship mechanism more than imposing direct censorship. Self-censorship is therefore a pressing matter that requires a lot of thought and debate to be put into it.

Publishing

Aslı Tohumcu

Democracies, such as ours, require “acceptable” citizens. Therefore, literature is never just literature, cannot be just literature in the eyes of the government. It can only be a means for manufacturing “acceptable citizens,” and especially children’s and young adult literature can only be allowed to exist as a means of raising that specific type of citizen. Authors and publishers must also serve this end, otherwise “off with their heads quickly,” they will face. So, who is this much desired, intended acceptable citizen? The answer can be found in the undertakings of the Board for Protecting Minors from Obscene Publications of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, the members of which, and their qualifications, remain unknown to us. The acceptable citizen is white, Turkish, heterosexual and male. He adheres to all national and domestic values. Intimidate him, take what is his and he will not even grumble.

Why else would a children’s book, available for purchase since 2018 *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, get the ban? So that boys, God forbid, should not even think about wearing tangerine dresses or high heeled shoes, and child readers should not develop empathy for boys who might do so. Why else would a graphic novel, *Heartstopper* get the ban so that boys will not fall in love with each other? It must be banned, of course, to ensure that Turkish family is kept safe from all harm.

Why would not Kathy Acker’s book *Blood and Guts in High School*, which has been available for purchase for 11 years, be suddenly considered an obscene publication? For, unlike what Acker claims, sex is shameful, it must be. We will teach you to not to speak of the experience of womanhood in anger, trying to raise the voice of silenced subject, Ms. Acker, especially not in a book with “high school” in its title!

Why would not the printing, distribution and sale of Yavuz Ekinci’s novel *Rüyası Bölünenler (Dream Divided)*, which has been available for purchase since 2014, be banned and copies of it confiscated on charge of “terrorism propaganda?” Would that have anything to do with the image which the author shared on social media and the statement he delivered along with other authors in support of Kobane? Is it because the author is Kurdish and not ashamed of it? Most certainly not, cannot be, where do you even get these ideas from?

Luckily, not all Kurdish authors are out of prison and free, or else, how would remanded author Rizgar Turhan’s own works, the two books *Dilopek Ji Ava Jîné and Cangoriyên Mişarê* be denied him in prison? And luckily still, there are other reasons books in Kurdish do not get distributed in prisons, such as the fact that they are in Kurdish, even if they are ministry approved books. But, enough with the joking.

Speaking of Kurds... The detention of the owner of Aram Publishers in a Diyarbakır-based operation on 25 April 2023 and the confiscation of many published books as well as electronic devices containing the digital books archive of published books and those being prepared for publication at Aram Publishers’ premises, which the police broke down the door to get into, could also be considered an example in action of the principles of creating “acceptable citizens.”

It was not for nothing that the Turkish Statistics Institution did not include any languages other than Turkish in its question, “In which languages do you publish?” in the survey it prepared for its “Printed Media Statistics Newspapers and Magazines Questionnaire 2022.” Remember, the acceptable citizen is Turkish. The acceptable language is Turkish. Similarly, the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) should not have presumed to hold a seminar titled *Türkçe Edebiyatın Flanözleri, Evden Dışarı Çıkmak: Nezihe Muhiddin, Suat Derviş, Leyla Erbil*. What could be more natural and right than marking participants as targets and cancelling the seminar because of the expression “Literature in Turkish” instead of “Turkish Literature?” Forums, of course, received their share of cancellations, those with women talking about trans studies and all.

It seems that these bans, which are too numerous to list here, call to mind stories by Aziz Nesin. They will continue until the last publisher, the last author and even the last reader is destroyed. After all, nothing can be more natural than the government resorting to censorship and censoring books that could lead people to ask questions; to place obstacles in the way of every section of society which they do not like and deem as the “other,” and to prevent the questioning of any issue that is considered opposed to creation. This approach, which limits the right to read of readers of all ages, forces publishers to keep quiet about censored books out of economic concerns and authors to practice self-censorship for fear of bans and penalties, has undoubtedly harmed and will continue to harm our

intellectual and cultural life. But who cares about intellectual and cultural life in an age when ignorance and animosity are so cherished?

One cannot help but wonder whether Ray Bradbury, the author of some of the scariest stories on how creating peoples who hate the arts is more effective than bans, took a time machine to today's Turkey to look at the bans, to the Board of Obscene Publications and to acceptable individuals, who, *plus royaliste que le roi*, file complaints against all sorts of books and authors. Whether life imitates literature or literature imitates art is a complicated question. What is simple and clear is that we must defend our literature(s) and our right to read as publishers, authors and readers, for it seems the current course will continue until the last author is silenced.

Cases

Author Gökhan Yavuzel, who returned to Turkey for the first time in five years due to health issues, was detained at İstanbul Airport on suspicion of "insulting the president" over the 2016 Peace Declaration (January).

Tekin Publishers and Sancı Publishers objected to the decision to confiscate copies of the books *Bitmeyen Veda (Endless Farewell)* and *Çığlık (The Scream)* stating "We request the immediate reversal of the decision to 'ban the sale and distribution and confiscate copies,' which was taken by trampling over constitutional rights." (January)¹

The Board for Protecting Minors from Obscene Publications declared the first edition of British author Jeanette Winterson's 1989 book *Sexing the Cherry* in Turkish, which was published by Kafka Kitap in March 2021, to be an "obscene publication" after an ex officio investigation. (February)

An order for banning the printing and distribution and for the confiscation of the copies of theologian and author İhsan Eliaçık's translation and commentary of the Qoran, *Yaşayan Kur'an Türkçe Meal-Tefsir (The Living Qoran and Its Turkish Interpretation)* was issued. (February) Following an objection to the ruling, the order for the confiscation of copies was rescinded in March.

The İstanbul 7th Criminal Court of Peace issued an order banning the printing and publication and for the confiscation of the copies of Yavuz Ekinci's book *Rüyası Bölünenler*. (March)

The survey included the Turkish Statistical Institute's "Printed Media Statistics Magazines and Newspapers Questionnaire - 2022," applied to managers of the Kurdish *Xwebûn* newspaper did not include any languages other than Turkish as a possible response. (March)

Following an examination, the Board for Protecting Minors from Obscene Publications declared Ahmet Ümit's book Başkomser Nevzat Tapınak *Fahişeleri (Chief Inspector Nevzat Prostitutes Templar)*, the second

edition of which was published by Yapı Kredi Yayınları in July 2022, to be an "obscene publication." (March)

Police raided Aram Publishers' office in Diyarbakır. The police left a short note and not an official report, despite confiscating many materials. (April)

An investigation was launched into the book by author Ayten Öztürk, who was sentenced to two counts of aggravated life imprisonment, in which she recounted her experiences. It was claimed that Mahir Çayan was the "founder of a terrorist organization" and that the poem titled "Adalı" (Island Resident) in the book constituted "terrorism propaganda." (May)

Poet Ataol Behramoğlu, who was targeted by Kırmızı Bülten Editor-in-Chief Mustafa Yüzer, announced the cancellation of his talks in Bitlis on social media. (June)

Author Ozan Alpkaya, who was sentenced to 29 years in prison following his arrest in Diyarbakır in 2008 and has been held at the Sincan No. 1 High Security Prison for approximately three years said that a total of 17 books in Kurdish that had been sent to him had been confiscated so far. (July)

Poet İlhan Sami Çomak's request for being placed on probation was denied after 29 years of imprisonment and with one year until his release on parole. (August)

Author Menaf Osman was released on 3 September 2023 following 30 years of imprisonment, after which he was detained and taken first to a gendarmerie station and then to the Edirne Deportation Center. (September)

Author Rizgar Turhan, who has been imprisoned since 1995, is not allowed copies of his own books in prison. (September)

Author Christine Baldacchino's book *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, recipient of the Stonewall Children's and Young Adults Literature Award, which was published in Turkey by Güldünya Publishers, was declared an obscene publication. (September)

The book written by remanded author İsa Kaya in prison has not been given back to him for three months on grounds of "being at the examination stage." (September)

Kathy Acker's book *Blood and Guts in High School*, which has been available for purchase for 11 years was declared to be "obscene" by the Board for Protecting Minors from Obscene Publications. (October)

Dimitr Dimov's book *Tobacco*, translated into Turkish by Burhan Arpad and published by Kor Kitap in August 2022, was removed from online sales by an algorithm due to the word "tobacco" in the title. The publisher's objection is still under examination. (October)

Remanded author Sadık Aslan's release was postponed for the second time. Aslan's lawyer Özge Akyüz said the decision "lacked tangible basis and includes arbitrary and subjective assessments." (November)

The seminar titled *Türkçe Edebiyatın Flanözleri, Evden Dışarı Çıkmak: Nezihe Muhiddin, Suat Derviş, Leyla Erbil* to be organized by the İBB was marked as a target for using the expression "Literature in Turkish" instead of "Turkish Literature" in its title. The İBB removed the announcement with the expression in question from its social media accounts and cancelled the event. (November)

D&R stopped the sales of the day planner called *2024 Karga Kafası Ajandası*, produced by Ayrıntı Publishers, over a "customer complaint" concerning a cartoon included in the day planner. (December)

Television

Hayri Demir

2023 was a year of intense crackdown on and obstacles to the freedom of the press and expression in general, and in television it was marked by the many sanctions imposed by the RTÜK especially on opposition media outlets.

Sanctions on opposition networks intensified both in the aftermath of the earthquakes of 6 February and during elections in May.

While most sanctions issued by RTÜK throughout the year were for “misleading advertising” and “content violating the spiritual values of society and public morality,” sanctions issued especially for news content did not target pro-government media, with almost all sanctions being imposed on media organizations which are known for their opposition broadcasting. For example, according to figures [shared](#) by İlhan Taşçı, the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) member of RTÜK with Expression Interrupted, pro-government networks received almost no fines in the first half of 2023. However, opposition broadcasters Halk TV, KRT, TELE1, FOX TV and Flash Haber were issued a total of TL 20,649,194 worth of administrative fines over the same period. Of pro-government networks, only Beyaz TV was fined TL 342,526 in a single instance of sanctions in the first half of 2023.

Given that the total amount of fines issued by RTÜK amounted to TL 71 million for 2022, it becomes clear how high the fines issued to opposition broadcasting was in just the first six months of 2023.

Halk TV and TELE1 were fined a total of 5 percent of their income and their programming was suspended five times due to their broadcasts on the earthquakes in February. FOX TV and Halk TV were issued administrative fines of 3 percent of their network income over the contents of two programs on grounds of “preventing the free formation of opinions.”

The same networks were issued similar fines for their broadcasts during the election period. FOX TV was fined due to guest Çiğdem Toker saying, “Democracy is not just elections,” an opinion previously voiced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, during an elections broadcast. Halk TV was fined for Ümit Özdağ’s comment “I will respect the outcome of the elections legally, but not politically” while speaking about “Syrian voters” on the *İsmail Küçükkaya ile Yeni Bir Sabah* (A New Morning with İsmail Küçükkaya)

program. Both networks were fined on grounds of “inciting the people to hatred an enmity” for 5 percent of their network income. TELE1 was fined for 3 percent of network income due to the claims voiced by Emre Kongar and Merdan Yanardağ on the *18 Dakika* (18 Minutes) program concerning ballot papers. Three reports were filed on the broadcasts of TELE1 during the same advertising segment and a fine of 3 percent of network income was issued for each. This means that three fines were issued instead of one. Also, during the elections period, Flash Haber was fined 3 percent of network income over expressions used by Democrat Party MP for İstanbul Cemal Enginyurt to criticize first round presidential candidate Sinan Oğan joining the governing Cumhur Alliance.

RTÜK’s decision to suspend TELE1’s broadcast for seven days drew a lot of public reaction. In its decision, RTÜK argued that Editor-in-Chief Merdan Yanardağ had “incited the people to hatred and enmity” with the expressions he used in a program in July. This decision was the longest period of broadcast suspension ordered by RTÜK in its 27-year long history.

While the general conditions for news networks in 2023 were as described above, digital platforms also got their share of RTÜK penalties.

Maximum administrative fines were issued to many programs on Netflix, Disney+, Prime Video, MUBI, beIN and BluTV for “violating societal and cultural values and the Turkish family structure.” At its meeting in July, RTÜK fined Netflix for depicting homosexual relationships in its *Anne+* and *Élite* shows, Disney for the *fourth* episode of the show *Love, Victor* containing “behavior disturbing to the public and opposed to morality” and Amazon Prime Video for the show *Modern Love* “violating the spiritual values of society and the principle of the protection of the family.”

MUBI was fined for its shows *Liseli* and *Ateşli Oda* (*High School Student and Hot Room*) “violating the principles of broadcasting by including deviating relationships and obscenity,” while BluTV was fined over the show *The Book of Queer* for including “LGBTI+ elements.” beIN Movies Stars was sanctioned for the movie *Lost Highway* on grounds that it “violated the principles of broadcasting listed in Law No. 6112.”

Another controversial decision by RTÜK concerned the TV series *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* broadcast on Show TV. The broadcast of the TV series was suspended for five weeks, and the network was issued a fine of TL 1.5 million on grounds that the series violated the principle that a show “should not violate the

principle of gender equality nor encourage repression of women and abuse women."

In another controversial act of censorship, RTÜK applied to the court to ensure a new access block decision against VOA Türkçe and DW Türkçe's new domains, after the broadcasters were placed under denial of access in June 2022 for not filing their license applications on time.

Cases

A case against actress Hazal Kaya was filed after she spoke out in support of Ezgi Mola, who is standing trial for "insulting" Specialist Sergeant Musa Orhan, who sexually assaulted İpek Er in Batman and pushed her to suicide (January).

RTÜK issued the maximum fine to TELE1 and suspended the broadcast of the program five times on grounds that the *18 Dakika* program had violated principles of broadcasting. (February)

RTÜK issued the maximum fine to TELE1 for "presenting unverified hearsay as fact" on the *Forum* program. (February)

RTÜK issued Halk TV the maximum penalty of five program broadcast suspensions over the *Büyük Felaket Özel Yayın (Great Disaster Special Broadcast)* program which hosted the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) MP for İstanbul Ahmet Şık. RTÜK justified the penalty with the legal provision that reads "Broadcasting services cannot contravene the existence and independence of the state of the Republic of Turkey, the inseparable unity of the state with the country and the nation and the principles and revolutions of Atatürk." RTÜK also issued the maximum fine to Halk TV over "claims of systematic looting and theft" in the earthquake region. (February)

RTÜK issued the maximum fine to FOX TV over the moderator of the program *Orta Sayfa (Centerfold)* where a statement was made that the Presidency of Disasters and Emergencies (AFAD) was preventing aid being sent to the earthquake struck region. (February)

Flash TV was issued a fine of 3 percent of network income and three suspensions of broadcast for theologist Cemil Kılıç criticizing administrators who avoid responsibility in the earthquake by calling it an "act of God" and the Presidency of Religious Affairs for "deviating from its true identity." The decision was taken by a majority voting for. (March)

Habertürk network was issued a penalty over Fatih Altaylı saying that the TV broadcast to raise aid for earthquake victims they planned had been

prevented by an order from RTÜK. RTÜK issued an administrative fine of 3 percent of network income over these expressions. (March)

Actor Mehmet Aslantuğ announced his departure from the TV series *Yürek Çıkmazı* (Heart Deadend), broadcast on public station TRT 1, in a social media post. Aslantuğ said that it was the network that wanted him to leave the series and implied that the reason for his departure was his "political views." (March)

Actress Farah Zeynep Abdullah announced that Specialist Sergeant Musa Orhan, who sexually assaulted İpek Er in Turkey's southeastern province of Batman and pushed her to suicide, had once more filed a case against her, on grounds that she "insulted" him. (March)

RTÜK issued a fine of 5 percent of network income and five suspensions of program broadcast to Halk TV for "praising offenders" over Serhan Asker's program showing former Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtaş's book *DAD (Justice)*. (March)

RTÜK fined Halk TV 3 percent of network income for "broadcasts in violation of the principle of impartiality" over Turhan Çömez stating that people on respiratory support had died in İskenderun due to power generators not working on the *Kayda Geçsin (Put on the Record)* program. (March)

RTÜK fined TELE1 for 3 percent of network income for Merdan Yanardağ and Emre Kongar stating that the "Justice and Development Party (AKP) is a 'fascistic party'" and criticizing the ban on the women's march. (March)

RTÜK considered the criticism of Şanlıurfa Metropolitan Municipality for the expansion of the built-up area around a floodplain and its failure to carry out improvements despite collecting payments from citizens voiced on the *Orta Sayfa* program to be denigration and fined FOX TV 3 percent of network income. (March).

RTÜK fined Show TV 5 percent of network income and ordered five suspensions of broadcast over scenes depicting violence against women in the TV series *Kızılıcak Şerbeti*. (March)

RTÜK ordered FOX TV to pay an administrative fine over remarks by main news program presenter Gülbin Tosun about women's rights and her criticism of the government on grounds that she had violated principles of broadcasting by "casting aside her role as a member of the press and acting as though she was a representative of an opposition political party." (April)

RTÜK fined Halk TV 3 percent of network income for "preventing the free formation of opinions" over program host Ayşenur Arslan and guest Turgut Kazan talking about a news item titled "trade in cranes at scene of disaster" and criticizing different numbers of people killed in the earthquake being made public. The remarks on the program were deemed "untrue allegations in contrary to official statements." (April)

RTÜK considered remarks by a guest on Flash Haber that "the government had left the people in the earthquake zone to fend for themselves and started clearing the debris before taking people out of the wreckage" to be an "unfounded allegation." The network was ordered to pay an administrative fine for violating the principles of broadcasting. (April)

RTÜK fined FOX TV the maximum of 3 percent of network income over remarks made by journalist Çiğdem Toker at the election night special program. (June)

RTÜK issued the maximum administrative fine to Halk TV over İsmail Küçükkaya's *Yeni Bir Sabah* program guest Victory Party Chair Ümit Özdağ's remarks "... I will not politically respect the outcome of the election and never will because it was a wrong choice." (June).

RTÜK issued an administrative fine to TELE1 over claims voiced by Merdan Yanardağ regarding ballot slips on the *18 Dakika* program. RTÜK also decided to issue sanctions over Yanardağ's remark "Now, I think the legitimacy of these results is very debatable," and irregular tele-marketing broadcasts. (June)

RTÜK issued an administrative fine to Flash Haber over remarks made by Democrat Party MP for İstanbul Cemal Enginyurt's remarks concerning presidential candidate Sinan Oğan. Flash TV was also sanctioned for hosting

Erk Acarer, who lives abroad and is under a detention order, and over the claims he made on the program. (June)

RTÜK issued the maximum administrative fine and seven days of suspension of broadcast to TELE1 over Merdan Yanardağ's remarks on the *4 Soru 4 Yanıt (4 Questions 4 Answers)* program. The justification for the sanctions was given as "inciting the people to hatred and enmity" and "praising terrorism." Following the filing of an objection, the Ankara 4th Administrative Court ruled to suspend the execution of the seven days of broadcasting ban. The objection to the decision of the court resulted in the court of appeals annulling the suspension of execution ruled by the Ankara 4th Administrative Court. (July)

RTÜK issued KRT and TELE1 a fine worth 3 percent of the networks' income and three suspensions of program broadcasting. (August)

RTÜK fined Power Türk for broadcasting the music video *Derin Mevzular (Deep Subjects)* by Murat Boz. RTÜK justified its decision by referring to "negative messaging elements" and images in the music video. (August)

RTÜK issued NR 1 Türk and Power TV administrative fines for the music videos they broadcast. (August)

RTÜK issued an administrative fine to Beyaz TV for some expressions used on the football commentary program *Derin Futbol (Deep Football)*. (September)

ATV, which broadcasted the film *Bergen* for the first time on television, cut the bathhouse scene and censored the word *adet* (menstrual period). (September)

RTÜK issued a fine and a program broadcast suspension to Halk TV over remarks by journalist Ayşenur Arslan and director Ezel Akay. (September)

There was public reaction at the sound being cut from a scene in which characters talked about drinking and a kissing scene being only broadcast online with the tag "only online" in the TV series *Yalı Çapkını (Mansion Dangler)* broadcast on Star TV. (September)

A case against veteran actor İlyas Salman on the charge of "insulting the president" was filed over Salman calling President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan "ucuz adam" (base guy). (October)

RTÜK issued sanctions against 11 pieces of content broadcasted on TELE1, Halk TV, Flash Haber, KRT, FOX TV, Star TV and Show TV. TELE1 was ordered to pay 3 percent of network income in two instances and 5 percent of network income in one instance over Merdan Yanardağ's remarks on the *18 Dakika* program; Halk TV was ordered to pay 3 percent of network income in two instances over journalist Timur Soykan's remarks about the murder of Sinan Ateş on the *Kayda Geçsin* program and journalist Bahadır Özgür's remarks concerning ISIS on the *Nasıl Olacak (How Will It Be)* program; KRT was ordered to pay 3 percent of network income in two instances over commentary about "highway and bridge tolls" and "the Fidan-Blinken handshake" on the *Medya Terapi (Media Therapy)* program for "overstepping the boundaries of criticism;" and Flash Haber was ordered to pay 3 percent of network income for remarks by Fatih Ertürk on "pensioner's salary bonus of TL 5,000" on the *Başkentte Gündem (Capital's Agenda)* program for "overstepping the boundaries of criticism of decision-makers." At the same meeting, RTÜK fined FOX TV, Star TV and Show TV 3 percent of network income over "scenes which promote violence and are contrary to the healthy mental and moral development of children and youth" in the *Hudutsuz Sevda (Unbounded Love)*, *Sakla Beni (Hide Me)* and *Didem Arslan Yılmaz'la Vazgeçme (Do not Give Up with Didem Arslan)* series and programs respectively. (November)

Minister of Justice Yılmaz Tunç said "No one should be in any doubt that the required legal examination and investigation will be carried out" regarding the characterization of prison guards on an episode of the TV series *Arka Sokaklar (Back Streets)*. (December)

The Ministry of Family and Social Services filed a complaint with RTÜK over the *Yargı* TV series' subject matter of abuse at childcare institutions. (December)

RTÜK started an inquiry into the *Kızıl Goncalar* TV series, which was targeted since the broadcast of its publicity segment and the posters for which were

defaced. The İstanbul Directorate of Foundations for Region 1 as well as the Darülaceze Institution cancelled the shooting permits for the series on their property and affiliated venues. (December)

At its final meeting of the year, RTÜK issued administrative fines to FOX TV, which broadcasts the Kızıl Goncalar TV series, as well as Halk TV, TELE1, TGRT Haber, KRT TV, SZC TV, Beyaz TV, Flash Haber TV, Cadde TV, İlke TV, Netflix and Show Radyo. (December)

Internet Broadcasting and the Digital Field

With censorship gaining a permanent foothold in the mainstream media, internet broadcasting and the digital field have become the media for those escaping censorship. However, grounds for censorship are rife in this field with legislative amendments aimed at “limiting” the field, various regulators such as RTÜK being given supervisory powers and the changing internal policies of many firms active in these media, most of which are global players. Censorship not only happens through the state or the government but also through private companies blocking various content through their homophobic, transphobic, or racist policies. The data we have collected show that as in many other fields, the digital field is not free from targeting that amounts to actual threats and hate speech, triggering censorship and self-censorship when it comes to the freedom of artistic expression. There were at least 23 incidents of censorship in this field in 2023. Eleven of these were bans, nine were administrative sanctions such as administrative fines, two were threats and one was pushing into unemployment.

Seven of the nine cases of administrative sanctions were fines issued by RTÜK to Amazon Prime Video, beIN MOVIES Stars, BluTV, Disney+, MUBI and Netflix. Frequently provided grounds for penalties are “violation of the national and spiritual values of society, public morality and the principle of the protection of the family,” “behavior disturbing to society and in breach of morality” and “obscenity.” As with television broadcasting, RTÜK deliberately targets issues such as gender and the LGBTI+.

The 11 cases in the bans category mainly consists of decisions to block access to websites or suspend social media accounts. Throughout 2023, access to four different domains used by Turkey’s one of biggest social media platforms Ekşi Sözlük was blocked and at each instance the decision was justified by “protection of national security and public order.” Five of the bans targeted sites in Kurdish, such as Jinha, Rudaw, Hurbini, Xwebûn and Botan International. The prevention, banning or prosecution of any media outlet or publication in Kurdish on various grounds and pretexts is a systematic, structural, and racist practice which we encounter in every field, and which leads to multiple rights violations.

Private platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter) can reproduce censorship through their own internal policies or by becoming a means

of state policy in the jurisdictions where they are active. A ramification of internal policies is the blocking of content due to “violating community rules,” which users frequently encounter. In our [interview](#), Meltem Şahin said that her work, which does not contain any call to violence or discrimination but focuses on themes such as gender and queer expression were removed and shut off to advertising by Instagram on grounds of “violating community rules.” Şahin also said that their applications to the Oversight Board, which was established to inspect such sanctions, did not yield any results. Similarly, in their [article](#) for the Susma Platform, members of the SES Equality, Justice and Women’s Platform said that their content on Jîna Mahsa Amini, Palestine and even content that details with algorithmic censorship and shadow banning was subjected to censorship.

In the case we categorized as “pushing into unemployment,” transwoman actress Meli Bendeli has stated that despite receiving a positive response from the audition for the *Şahmaran* TV series and being offered a contract, she was later removed from the cast for “wearing a skirt.” This case of censorship based on transphobia is just one of the probably quite numerous cases which show that private firms reproduce censorship at the horizontal plane with their discriminatory practices. It bears repeating that cases of censorship do not only happen “vertically,” with interference by the state or the government, but are also constantly reproduced through various means in the internal functioning of non-state actors in arts and culture.

Monitoring results have shown that over the years, digital media has become a field that is heavily interfered with, both by states and private firms. New mechanisms of censorship, such as algorithms and internal policy regulations have joined conventional methods such as penalties and fines. Despite all this interference, the digital fields continue to be a place for escaping censorship, given the opportunities they present.

Cases

Transwoman actress Meli Bendeli said that she was excluded from the cast of the *Şahmaran* TV series for “wearing a skirt,” despite getting a positive response after the audition and being e-mailed a draft contract. (January)

The Ankara 4th Criminal Court of Peace blocked access to Ekşi Sözlük and Avesta Publishers’ websites, the podcast channels of Rudaw, Botan International and Hûrbînî and the X accounts of JinNews Agency (JINHA) and the Xwebûn newspaper. (February)

On 2 March 2023, it was announced that the access block decision had been lifted upon the acceptance of the objection filed by Ekşi Sözlük. However, access to the site was blocked once more on the same day following an objection to the decision to lift the denial of access. (March)

It was claimed that the Disney+ Türkiye digital platform had removed episode six of the *Only Murders in the Building* from its broadcast selection. The reason for the removal of the episode was given as a character on the TV series speaking about “genocide of Greeks and Armenians” by Turks. (March)

Access was blocked to the EngelliWeb project website of the Freedom of Expression Association (İFÖD). The decision to deny access was shared on the EngelliWeb website. (March)

Visual communication designer Mahir Akkoyun who placed stickers reading “Do you think this product is expensive? Thank Erdoğan” on supermarket shelves and shared photographs of them on social media was held in custody for a period on suspicion of “insulting the president” before being released (April). Akkoyun was acquitted in the case filed against him at the hearing held on 24 July 2023.

Following the access block on Ekşi Sözlük’s domain in February 2023, access to domain names eksisozluk2023.com and eksisozluk42.com were also blocked on grounds of “protecting national security and public order.” (May)

Firat University announced that they would file a lawsuit against Hasan Can Kaya over a joke he made concerning the Computer Engineering Department of the university. (May)

On 17 May 2023, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) issued an access block decision on the <http://jiangzaitoon.biz> website used by Jiangzaitoon, which produces content on manga culture and publishes graphic novels in Turkish. Access to the domain name <http://jiangzaitoon.io> was blocked with a decision dated 29 May 2023.

RTÜK ordered Netflix, Disney +, Amazon Prime Video, MUBI, beIN and Blu TV to pay the maximum administrative fine over content “violating societal and cultural values and the family structure” available on these platforms (July).

The Kaos GL Association announced that it was withdrawing its public service announcement from broadcast due to the insults and death threats received by the company that produced the video and actors who were involved in it. (September)

Access to the domain name eksisozluk1923.com used by Ekşi Sözlük was blocked on grounds of “protecting national security and public order.” (December)

The domain name <http://eksisozluk1999.com>, which was used after the previous access block decision was also placed under an access block decision. (December)

Cinema

Özkan Küçük

“We are up against a pact established between the state and the arts and culture capital.”

I wanted to begin the 2023 cinema report with a quote from Firat Yücel. For a few years now, cinema festivals have been driven to collapse by cases of censorship. Many still remember the 10th Malatya Film Festival self-suspending in 2020 due to the statement on “genderless awards.” The series of statements at Turkey’s most important film industry event, the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival, which resembled a “return to the stage” of a desperate dance leads me to begin this year’s report with talk of festivals which self-destruct.

The above quote from Firat Yücel comes from an [interview](#) about the “covert censorship” Yücel’s documentary *Translating Ulysses (Ulysses Çevirmek)* encountered at the İstanbul International Film Festival, which is organized by the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSİV). The documentary is about respected Kurdish translator Kawa Nemir translating James Joyce’s *Ulysses* into Kurdish. Yes, Kurdish...

Kurdish and the LGBTI+ seem to be tied for top place in cases of censorship which the Speak Up Platform monitors.

If one can talk about a zeitgeist, we may say that avoiding these two is it. The administrators of festivals, which are part of the culture industry, have found themselves in the position of high school students who are baffled by questions they had not studied for, despite thinking they were on safe ground by practicing this “covert” censorship. This is what Ahmet Boyacıoğlu, who has been the long-standing director of the Antalya Film Festival, experienced.

Just as he thought he had designed the festival according to the zeitgeist, ministry officials questioned him about a film that was not about Kurds or the LGBTI+ and that could be considered “reasonable” under normal circumstances.

This way, we got to be surprised at the fragility of those who have set the course of cinema in Turkey for many years.

The removal of Nejla Demirci’s documentary *Kanun Hükmü* from the National Documentary Competition selection of the 60th Antalya Golden Orange Film

Festival and what happened afterwards was the main event to be highlighted concerning censorship in cinema in 2023. This will probably ensure that the industry stays away from the issue of decree laws from now on.

To cut a long story short, the series of events consisting of the festival being made to backpedal by the joint resistance of filmmakers and members of the jury, in response to which the ministry and various sponsors of the festival putting even greater pressure, Boyacıoğlu refusing to resign and finally being made to leave office with the intervention of the mayor of Antalya and the suspension of the festival will be remembered for a long time to come. Given that this major film event was last suspended during the 1980 military coup, its significance becomes all the clearer.

Another significant aspect of this event is that state officials clearly displayed their desire for censorship and instead of backing down upon reactions, they raised the stakes. In this sense, what took place was a case of multi-layered censorship that is worthy of serious research.

As for other cases, most of them were concentrated in June, around Pride month. This is another situation that is worth discussing. The LGBTI+ movement, which has maintained its vibrancy and visibility at a time in which resistance to censorship has diminished or become invisible through various mechanisms, now finds itself facing overt bans.

Ramifications of this can be seen in street demonstrations. The flag of resistance against bans has passed over to the feminist and LGBTI+ movements in recent years.

A case of censorship enforced by Disney+ is distinct from others in that it concerns genocide.

It was claimed that the Disney+ Türkiye digital platform had removed episode six of the Hulu production *Only Murders in the Building* from its broadcast selection. The reason for the removal of the episode was given as a character on the TV series speaking about "genocide of Greeks and Armenians" by Turks.

Have cases seen a decrease?

When I was asked to write the report on cinema by the Speak Up team, I expected to find a long list of cases as in previous years. I was therefore surprised by the low number of cases. In our discussions, we decided that this had more to do with some of the people experiencing censorship choosing to remain

invisible. I bring up this point in the report because it indicates a new break in the field of censorship and self-censorship. Given both that the sector may be practicing greater self-censorship, and therefore some cases may be kept hidden, we may say that we are now in a new phase.

As we arrived at this conclusion and just as the year was ending, a series of new censorship cases occurred. One of them concerned the infamous *Bakur* court case, one of the main talking points of recent years.

The Batman 2nd High Criminal Court sentenced Ertuğrul Maviöğlü and Çayan Demirel to 4 years and 6 months of imprisonment each at the end of the initial trial on 18 July 2019. After their lawyers objected, the 4th Criminal Chamber of the Gaziantep Regional Court of Justice overturned the local court's verdict on merits. At the 14 December 2023 hearing of the retrial, the Batman 2nd High Criminal Court sentenced the two directors to 2 years and 1 month of imprisonment each.

In another verdict, the imprisonment sentence for director Özey Şahin was upheld by the appellate court. Filmmaker Özey Şahin had been arrested in 2012 along with director Mizgin Müjde Arslan while acting as the director of photography for the film *Ez Firîyam Tu Ma Li Cih* (I Flew You Stayed / Ben Uçtum Sen Kaldın) and was tried without remand. The trial took approximately nine years and Şahin was sentenced to 2 years and 1 month of imprisonment for the crime of "aiding a terrorist organization."

Our last case of censorship in 2023 was the prevention of a viewing of Can Candan's documentary *Benim Çocuğum* (My Child) by the Boğaziçi University administration.

Thus, before the year was up, the state had reminded everyone of its heavy-set walls with prison sentences for directors addressing the Kurdish question and the obstruction and censoring of films on LGBTI+.

Since we ended the year with the *Bakur* court case, it is well worth remembering the censorship this film encountered at the 34th İstanbul International Film Festival. That year, boycotts led to the closing ceremony of the İKSV's festival not taking place. In the following years, the festival continued, but the film was put on trial and the imprisonment sentences of its directors were finalized.

Although festivals may seem to continue, they regress every year. As we most recently saw at the Antalya Film Festival, they are now facing pressure over unforeseen issues.

Trials of filmmakers who continue to make movies against all pressure have now become commonplace.

In the interview we mentioned at the beginning of this piece, Aylin Kuryel, the other director of the film, says that festivals are constantly narrowing their political horizons and adds:

"This is no longer an issue for a given film or two, but something that determines the limits of our political imagination, that brings artists directly in contact with threats from the government apparatus. It is not just the state we face, today it is also more clearly the arts and culture capital. For this reason, we need to wage our struggle against censorship at the collective level."

Cases

Documentary filmmaker Kazım Kızıl wrote that riot police had verbally and physically prevented him from obtaining footage in Kahramanmaraş, despite him displaying his red press card, and marked him as a target to passers-by. (February)

Director Orhan Eskiköy was detained while shooting footage in the Samandağ district of Hatay on 11 March 2023 and was released after giving his statement. (March)

In their interview with 1+1 Express, Aylin Kuryel and Fırat Yücel talked about the covert censorship imposed by the İKSV concerning their documentary *Ulysses'i Çevirmek*. Kuryel said: "When we submitted the film with the İKSV, they said 'We cannot show it now, perhaps next year.' This is because the elections of 14 May were approaching. Elections can become a pretext of censorship by film festivals." (April)

Journalist and documentary filmmaker Kazım Kızıl was sprayed with pepper gas, point blank on the eyes, while shooting footage during an intervention by the gendarmerie against protestors demonstrating for the protection of the Akbelen Forest in İkizköy, Muğla. The gendarmerie used disproportionate force, police sticks, armored vehicles, water cannon and pepper spray were used against the demonstrators. Kızıl shared the images on his social media account. (July)

The police intervened against a viewing of the film *Pardon* by the Kocaeli Neighborhood Freedom House of the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) and detained 13 people. (September)

Ahmet Boyacıoğlu, festival director of the 60th Antalya Film Festival announced that the *Kanun Hükmü* documentary would be removed from the competition selection for featuring testimony by a person who is "still subject to a judicial process." Director Nejla Demirci said that academics Yasemin Demirci and Engin Karataş, whose positions were terminated by a statutory decree and whose story is told in the documentary were not the subject of any "finalized judicial ruling." (September)

Upon public reaction to the censoring of the documentary *Kanun Hükümü*, festival director Ahmet Boyacıoğlu first announced that the film had been reinstated on 28 September 2023. However, he released another statement on the evening of the same day, saying that he and his team had received threats following the reinstatement of the film. Boyacıoğlu said that they had decided to remove the film from the selection once more.

The Ankara Film Festival delivered a statement against claims of censorship after the documentary *Kanun Hükümü* was not placed in the festival selection. The statement read, "The jury could not watch the documentary as the viewing link was blocked." However, director Nejla Demirci said she was not satisfied with the statement and called it an "excuse." (October)

Dutch-Kurdish journalist, producer and director Reber Dosky was detained in Turkey while working on a new production and was taken to the Şanlıurfa Deportation Center. (November)

Iranian actress and activist Sahilin Asadollahi, who was detained on 23 November 2023 and placed in the Silivri Deportation Center was released the next day. The actress posted statements about the process on her social media account. (November)

A viewing of director Can Candan's *Benim Çocuğum* documentary at Boğaziçi University was prevented through an administrative decision. Regarding the prevention of the activity by the Boğaziçi University Cinema Club, the university administration said in a statement that "permission was not granted for the showing of this documentary previously and it will not be granted now." (December)

Theater

The Theater in 2023: Aesthetics of Silence Ayşen Güven

In this article, we will take a look at the theater in Turkey in 2023 beyond "best of" lists. In keeping with the subject matter of the work of the Spek Up Platform, this article will touch on cases of censorship in the past year, and especially trace marks of self-censorship.

First of all, we may say that the effects of the pandemic finally passed this year, in terms of both productions and participation. 2023 was a year in which the wells of creativity that filled up during the pandemic started to be drawn from, production opportunities rebounded, stage programs, though not necessarily seats, were filled to the brim and on-site festivals made a return.

We may be leaving behind a long period in which artistic and cultural life was separated from its local dynamics over the years, access to art became almost impossible in the provinces and that local administrations took investment in this field "lightly." The artistic and cultural environment being bottled up in İstanbul had become a limiting factor on sources of creativity. This deficiency is being "discovered" now both by state institutions and civilian or private arts circles. The anticipated earthquake in İstanbul and the increasingly severe economic crisis also undoubtedly play a role in this. What needs will propel the rising artistic activity in Anatolia is to be determined by its outputs. In any case, cultural interaction going beyond İstanbul can bring in a breath of fresh air.

In this context, considering the theater festivals outside of İstanbul in the past year will serve to place an emphasis against censorship and self-censorship. From this perspective, work undertaken in Kurdish cities readily becomes apparent. This region, which faces the most pointed end of political pressure, should not be overlooked in terms of the efforts devoted and the persistence maintained in the field of theater. The Dîwan International Theater Academy established by the Şermola Performans team in Turkey's southeastern province of Batman has started its activities as a very significant venue for stage training in Kurdish. The Batman Yeni Sahne (Batman New Stage) company has continued to put on work and took some of its plays to İstanbul. At the end of the year, Yeni Sahne announced that their landlord wanted to put up their rent by 350 percent, something they have in common with many citizens. The prevailing financial

ensorship period of the times has been the topping on the regime's social, political, and physical pressure in Kurdish cities. In April 2023, Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu (Amed City Theater) company actors Yavuz Akkuzu, Özcan Ateş, Elvan Koçer Yıldırım and Şahperi Alphan were detained in a Diyarbakır-based operation. Although the actors were later released, we once more witnessed efforts to intimidate the theater in Kurdish. However, the Şehir Tiyatrosu team consists of people who were fired from their positions at the municipality and founded their own company after much effort and solidarity. I am sure that the activities of many such theater companies continue. We can mention some of the more prominent examples here.

Beyond İstanbul, another venue which attracted attention for its productivity was the Nilüfer Kent Tiyatrosu (NKT) ((Nilüfer City Theater) in Bursa. It was significant to travel to Nilüfer just to watch plays and view very mature productions, as well as seeing the development of strong actors. The NKT continues to stage its plays in various cities, drawing on the resources available to it as a municipal theater. It also does not refrain from touching on any issues in terms of what it stages. We should mention a few stages and companies in İstanbul for addressing the "issues the country is facing" and somewhat escaping self-censorship. Moda Sahnesi (Moda Stage), Post Pandemi Cemiyet (Post Pandemic Association), Boa Sahne (Boa Stage), Cihangir Sanat Atölyesi (CAS) (Cihangir Art Studio), Kadıköy Emek Sahnesi (Kadıköy Emek Stage) and Kumbaracı50 have managed to maintain a certain stance. CAS and Kumbaracı50 continue to shine in terms of raising new actors. There are undoubtedly companies and stages are yet to become acquainted with.

In addition to all these, new theater festivals in towns such as Bergama, İzmir, and Bodrum is another significant development. The grave wounds inflicted by the earthquakes of 6 February 2023 are still to be treated after 11 months have passed. In the earthquake struck region, it is not possible to access healthy nutrition, safe shelter, hygiene or education. However, we must mention that many theater teams have put on various activities in the region, especially for children, following the earthquake. I hope that in 2024 we can discuss what can be done in terms of artistic activities accessible to the peoples of the region and artists who suffered from the earthquakes.

The state of the theater in 2023 does not present such an "optimistic" picture. Having spoken of rising productivity in the theater and significant activities

outside of İstanbul, we should turn to the questions "What is being told" and "How is it being told." We could also consider the unity among all constituents of the theater. Are there plays being written on the current political and social climate? What proportion of the total do they make up? That plays are being written does not mean that they tell us about our times of course. In this sense, it may be said that theater scripts generally take a "measured" approach. Period pieces, myths and couples' relationships are prominent in texts, while only indirect references to the events of our times are to be found. Plots concerning the pressing issues of the day, such as discrimination, homophobia, migration, racism, poverty, or broader class conflict in translated, adapted and original texts are mostly "cautious." Stories arising from the women's movement generally limit themselves to dealing with issues of urban, middle-class women. There are not many examples of more inclusive stories. It is becoming increasingly difficult to see the stage bearing testimony to the era we are living in. Could this be taken as an indicator of self-censorship? While thinking about the texts, we should also consider the style in which these works somehow touch on the issues the country is facing. Sometimes, political work can itself get swept up in the style of populism. Indulging in such pleasure may be another risk of the current period.

It should be said that plays in 2023 were formally deeper and stylistically more diverse. Catching on to this visual diversity has been exciting for viewers and everyone who spends time thinking about the theater. However, whether this stylistic magic was filling up the vacuum created by the "measured" approach of the scripts is something worth pondering. Famous actors from TV series and the cinema preferring single acts over group plays was necessitated by staging circumstances during the pandemic. However, such solo plays increasing in number and becoming the dominant form takes away from the communal nature of the theater and its collective spirit. It is debatable whether single person plays have become more common because they allow recognized actors to show their chops or because they are safer and require less effort. It is interesting that the current generation is not as interested in establishing stages, playhouses, and companies as the older generations. Could the constituents of the theater be limiting themselves in their comfort zones while avoiding the hefty financial difficulties of maintaining their own space? If so, should we not talk about the uncanny connection that leads from comfort to self-censorship?

Meanwhile, the measures taken by actors and all other stage workers during the pandemic to protect public health and their own wellbeing were abused through some decisions reminiscent of state of emergency periods. Bans on stage performances were extended, some festivals were cancelled, and the pandemic became an opportunity for the government to tame cultural life rather than a scientific reason for some measures. This process led to significant debate and hefty consequences, although they were quickly forgotten. Some independent theater companies dispersed, some private/independent playhouses shut down and there were people who gave up on the theater. However, the debate during this process subsequently being covered up was one of the most important signs of self-censorship in 2023. That the Ministry of Culture and Tourism does not use the taxpayer's money for theaters not affiliated with the state; the unfair use of the cultural budget by pro-government and newly established circles; the debate over the "law on the theater;" the need for local administrations to support the stages and halls in their jurisdiction, and most importantly, the need to reclassify artistic institutions and spaces as non-commercial entities remain as the cutting issues.

2023 was a year in which much was said about self-censorship and the loss of collectivism. The artistic public **debated** the appointment of Iwona Blazwick over Defne Ayas, who was proposed by the consultation board, to the curatorship of the İKSV's 18th İstanbul Biennale on grounds of "discrimination" and the biennale was recently cancelled for 2024. Then the 27th İstanbul Theater Festival began, But the theater-going public was not involved in the debate process concerning the institution over claims of "censorship" and "discrimination," before, during or after the festival. On the other hand, filmmakers did display a reflex over a similar issue to question the festival process and create grounds for solidarity. Nowadays, "fair" reasons are being put forward for such silence, such as "This is the only venue left," and "Should we not do our jobs." Care should be taken that such justifications do not bear the sinister marks of self-censorship. Furthermore, the fact remains that when their actions are met with understanding, the hegemonic structures in the field of arts and culture are given the opportunity to entrench their position. Actors in the field of arts and culture should consider the potential consequences of their silence. Could not discrimination and censorship at festivals be brought up as an issue, as was done previously? We should perhaps start thinking about what

deficiency will be the most damaging to the creative field in the long term. This is because of the risk that the damage all this does to the creative side of things may eventually become apparent.

Otherwise, we all "get" one another, of course. Events such as the Gezi Protests, the coup attempt on 15 July 2016 and the pandemic, which harmed social movements have left seemingly lasting damage on the field of arts and culture. It seems that the operation for silencing continues full steam ahead. The consolidation of the cultural field by the political rise of populism continues apace. Competition, isolation, the desire to be at the forefront at all times and popular pleasures can eat away even the most basic demands and forms of communication. As time passes, the destruction of cultural life over the past 20 years, with its ups and downs, will become more apparent.

However, the current lack of solidarity and unity makes one turn to what one remembers of the recent past. Has the theater circle, which acted so quickly, supported each other, communicated creatively and engaged in joint designs during the Soma workers' massacre, to prevent Şermola Performans from shutting down and in solidarity with the 10 October Peace Association rally become so dispersed?

This article is about rediscovering some of our more daring sides. It is true that we have all suffered, been oppressed, lost faith, been threatened with losing our jobs and tired of uncertainty... It would also not be right to question the need for or the significance of aesthetic exploration among fields, modern stage direction experiences and formal diversity in the choice of texts (choices such as translated, period piece, love story, existential questioning texts). The concerns and criticism in this article arise from a fear that whether these productions err too much on the side of caution. They are about self-censorship having an undue influence over our dreams and about the erasure of memories of collective behavior in the field of culture.

Continuing to produce theater takes incredible effort. In countries such as Turkey, this art is practiced under far more maddening conditions. However, shutting ourselves up in our own ghettos with our own challenges could in time erode the desire to produce theater. The antidote to fear and anxiety is undoubtedly to walk together as agents of all disciplines in solidarity, to engage in arts and to continue to produce theater by voicing our objections and criticism. We know that art is not a pearl in an oyster shell, it needs to be one with water and life. It should get "dirty."

Finally, can we overcome this period of “de-collectivization?” I do not know.

Will the stage of sound and “noise” make a comeback against the stage of silence? This, I also do not know. Of course, we should “get” the dilemmas people face, but we should also think about these other questions.

Cases

It was claimed that the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality Municipal Theater’s Artistic Direction was embargoing the play *Mem û Zîn*, which is based on a Kurdish folktale. (January)

Television producer Metin Uca was detained at İstanbul Airport, while travelling to Ankara, on the basis of an order for his detention. (February)

After being detained on 2 February 2023 and released the same day, Metin Uca announced that his show in Osmaniye had been cancelled by the Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism. (February)

Approximately 150 people were detained in a Diyarbakır-based operation. Among those detained on suspicion of “membership in a terrorist organization” were Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu actors Yavuz Akkuzu, Özcan Ateş, Elvan Koçer Yıldırım and Şahperi Alphan. (April)

The play *Yıldızlar Altında Yaz Eğlencesi* (Summer Entertainment Under the Stars), staged at the Tarsus Theater Days was initially targeted, after which a criminal complaint against the play was filed by AKP municipal councilor Abdurahman Altınsucu for “obscenity” and “insulting religious values.” (August)

Iranian actor Ali Pouransari, who arrived in Turkey en route to Canada after spending a year in prison in Iran for participating in Mahsa Jîna Emînî demonstrations was arrested on 31 September 2023 and placed in a deportation center. Pouransari was released on 8 September 2023.

Music

It may be said that music was the field which experienced the most censorship in 2023, which was marked by investigations against and prosecution of musicians, bans on festivals, and accompanying concert bans. The ramifications of the political climate in Turkey can be seen in interventions against the freedom of artistic expression. The increasingly polarized society and the slander, threats and targeting of marginalized groups that accompany it have, in instances, led to attacks which violate the right to life. A shocking example of this situation was the murder of street musician Cihan Aymaz. Cihan Aymaz, who played at Kadıköy pier in İstanbul and sang in Kurdish was stabbed in a racist attack by Mehmet Caymaz for “not playing a requested song” and later died in hospital.

Judicial investigations against and prosecution of Kurdish musicians is also prevalent. The basis of such investigations and prosecution is usually “terrorism propaganda,” “membership in a terrorist organization” and “insulting the president.” We have come across examples of listening to music in Kurdish, let alone making music in Kurdish, being criminalized, and subjected to interventions. Some examples are a group of young people singing in Kurdish and dancing the *halay* in Moda, İstanbul being pepper sprayed and detained with handcuffs behind their backs and being made to listen to janissary music in the police car; a group of people singing in Kurdish in Antalya being prevented by the police who told them it was forbidden to sing in Kurdish, and the administrative penalties issued to convicts in Patnos Type L Closed Prison and Sincan High Security Closed Prison for singing in Kurdish and dancing the *halay*. The most ridiculous incident occurred in Mersin. In an indictment on the charge of “membership in a terrorist organization,” the songs defendants listened to in their car were considered evidence of crime.

Grup Yorum encountered most censorship in music field in 2023. The concert the band planned to play in July in solidarity with the victims of the earthquake and their concert at the Evvel Temmuz Festival in Samandağ, Hatay were banned by the relevant district governors’ offices. Grup Yorum was scheduled to play at the 21st Munzur Arts and Culture Festival but

was removed from the festival billing by the governor’s office, along with Grup İsyân Ateşi and Veradardz Folk Grubu. Not just their planned concerts, but even the mere “possibility of them taking the stage at the event” was enough to have the whole activity banned. The program for the commemoration of the Madımak Massacre planned by Alevi groups for 24 June 2023 was cancelled by the district governor’s office of Sultangazi on the grounds that “Grup Yorum might play a concert.” Along with the said program, all demonstrations and activities in the district over the weekend were cancelled. The İdil Cultural Center, where Grup Yorum is based, was raided twice by the police in September and November.

Music is also one of the fields in which people or activities are targeted the most. The policy of discrimination and criminalization against LGBTI+ forms the basis of slander and threats and therefore any statement by musicians concerning LGBTI+ rights results in them being marked as targets. This in turn leads to musicians being pushed into unemployment. In 2023, musicians who were targeted for defending LGBTI+ rights have faced concert cancellations. Planned concerts by Mabel Matiz and Melike Şahin in Denizli were cancelled by the governor’s office over some remarks they made at an awards ceremony. Melike Şahin’s concert in Bursa was also cancelled by the municipality on the same grounds. In some cases, the social media accounts of musicians who will play concerts are inspected retroactively and the cancellation of concerts due to the “suspicious” content is announced with great “pride.” Gökçe was scheduled to play a concert at the Sandıklı Thermal Tourism festival on 11 August 2023, but her concert was cancelled as a result of her support for the LGBTI+ and “posts with content insulting the president,” which, the mayor of Sandıklı boasted on his social media account, had been uncovered through an examination carried out by him “personally.” Censorship has grounded its legitimacy on marginalizing LGBTI+ and functions directly, with no intent of covering up or presenting itself as something else. It is not just speaking about the rights of LGBTI+ that leads to the cancelling of events, but also speech that is generally opposed to the government. For example, a planned concert by Hüseyin Turan as part of the 61st Bursa Festival was cancelled by the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality over the musician’s “social media posts.”

In 2023, musicians who are foreign citizens were faced with deportation decisions following investigations. On 27 May 2023, Azerbaijani rapper Asya

Alizade, who is of Iranian origin, was detained for “encouraging the use of narcotic substances in her music videos” and was released on 29 May under judicial control measures. Alizade was detained again in July 2023 for not complying with judicial control measures and deported. Rappers have been facing the same allegations as Alizade for years.

Investigations against and the prosecution of artists due to their statements, social media posts and lyrics and musicians being targeted for similar reasons only to be followed by concert bans were some of the more prominent methods of censoring music in 2023. Another facet of bans on music consists of the bans on festivals issued by provincial branches of the central administration.

Cases

The music and podcast streaming platform Spotify blocked access to rapper Uzi’s 2022 album “El Chavo.” The platform did not release a statement concerning the reason. (January)

A concert by Kurdish musician Kasım Taşdoğan in a cafe in the Nusaybin district of Mardin was cancelled following threats from the district directorate of security and the municipal police serving under trustee-run municipality. (January)

Koma Hevra musicians were detained on suspicion of “terrorism propaganda” for singing in Kurdish at the Sere Salê event in Darıca, Kocaeli. The musicians were held in custody for a day and released after providing statements. (January)

A case was filed against musician Melek Mosso, calling for her to be sentenced to 2 years and 4 months of imprisonment over “insulting” Specialist Sergeant Musa Orhan, who is serving a 10-year sentence for raping İpek Er and leading her to suicide. (January)

Kurdish musician Ali Baran, who lives in Germany, was detained in İstanbul where he had been working on an album and was released with a ban on travelling abroad. (March)

Ali Baran was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of imprisonment at the end of the trial on the charge of “terrorism propaganda” over his social media posts held at the İstanbul 26th High Criminal Court. (April)

Iranian rapper Ohash was investigated due to his social media posts. Ohash was detained after being called in for an interview at the Ankara Directorate of Migration Management and a decision was issued for his deportation. The administrative surveillance decision was lifted on 6 May 2023 following Ohash’s lawyer’s objection.

Street musician Cihan Aymaz was stabbed in a racist attack by Mehmet

Caymaz for “not playing a requested song” in Kadıköy, İstanbul, and later died in hospital (May).

Ma Music coordinator Şêrko Kanîwar was detained at Diyarbakır Airport on his return from Germany as part of an investigation being run by the Diyarbakır Chief Prosecutor’s Office, and he was released the next day after providing his statement (May).

Twelve musicians who attended the elections communication office opening ceremony of the Party of Greens and Left Future (YSP) in İzmir before the May 2023 elections were detained in police raids on their homes early in the morning on suspicion of “terrorism propaganda.” (May)

Singer Asya Alizade was detained on 27 May 2023 for “encouraging the use of narcotic substances” in her music videos. After her release on 29 May under judicial control measures, Alizade was detained for a second time on 5 July 2023. The reason for her detention was stated to be non-compliance with judicial control measures and Alizade was deported after being handed over to the provincial directorate of migration management.

Melike Şahin, who dedicated the “Most Stylish Musician of the Year” award she won at the Elle Style Awards to the LGBTI+ community was targeted on social media and later, her planned concert was cancelled by the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality. (June)

Musician Melek Mosso, who was targeted over a speech she delivered at an awards ceremony, announced that she would be cancelling her concert on 8 June 2023 on social media. (June)

After a Melek Mosso concert, billboards in Süleymanpaşa, İstanbul, were hacked. Writing that appeared on the hacked billboards read, “If you ever hold an anti-Islamic concert again, we will pay you another call.” Journalists were sent e-mails saying, “It is time you rectified [your mistakes].” (June)

Denizli Metropolitan Municipality cancelled concerts by Melike Şahin and Mabel Matiz on 19 and 30 June without explanation.

The planned concert by Hüseyin Turan as part of the 61st Bursa Festival was cancelled by the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality over the musician’s “social media posts.” (June)

Planned concerts by Eypio, who was targeted on social media, were cancelled by Çarşamba District Municipality in Samsun and Çankırı Municipality. (June)

The Earthquake Solidarity Concert to be held by Grup Yorum in Sultangazi, İstanbul was cancelled by the district governor’s office without explanation. (July)

Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality cancelled Hande Yener’s concert after the singer was targeted on social media. In a statement on her social media account, Yener said that the concert was cancelled following negative reactions. (July)

Police and municipal police attempted to prevent a planned concert by Kasım Taşdoğan in a cafe in Yenişehir, Diyarbakır due to “lack of permission” and “noise complaints.” The cafe owner was threatened with fines should the concert go ahead. Despite the attempts to prevent it, the concert went ahead without using the sound system and with the audience accompanying Taşdoğan. (July)

The planned concert by Apolas Lermi at the Kadırga festival was cancelled by Özkürtün Municipality after it was targeted on social media. (July)

Sarkıkaya Municipality in Yozgat cancelled a planned concert by Cem Adrian over “a dispute with the organization company” after the singer was marked as a target by former Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek. (July)

A previously announced concert by singer Gökçe at the Sandıklı Thermal

Tourism festival was cancelled. The mayor of Sandıklı stated on social media that the concert had been cancelled after the investigations he “personally carried out” revealed that the musician had supported LGBTI+ and “shared posts defaming the president.” (August)

The planned concert by Gökçe at the 31st Sunflower Festival in the Hayrabolu district of Tekirdağ was cancelled by the municipality. (August)

Musician Emel Çiftçi, who was detained at the hospital she went to in Diyarbakır, was arrested on charges of “membership in a terrorist organization” and “administrating a terrorist organization.” (August)

Rappers Heijan, BIG and CAC, who featured in the “Aynen” music video were detained on suspicions of “inciting the people to hatred and enmity” “terrorism propaganda,” “praising an offense or an offender” and “inciting the people to commit crimes.” The rappers were released the following day. (August)

Musician Kadir Çat was detained for singing a song by Kemal Pir at a concert in Şanlıurfa. Çat was released the following day. (September)

The police raided the İdil Cultural Center, where Grup Yorum runs its activities. Ten people were detained. (September)

Fazıl Say announced that his concerts in Switzerland had been cancelled by Turkey's one of biggest shopping mall chains Migros due to his social media posts about Palestine. (October)

Police raided the İdil Cultural Center in Okmeydanı, İstanbul and detained eight members of Grup Yorum and a visitor at the building at the time. (November)

Kurdish soprano Pervin Chakar was targeted on social media after the recital titled *Bir Opera Gecesi (A Night of Opera)* at the Süreyya Opera in Kadıköy, where she performed with pianist Paolo Villa. Regarding the

incident Chakar said, “Our door is open to everyone to every opinion. I prefer to respond to racist speech and insults with my art. Because everything comes and goes but art is permanent.” (November)

Melike Şahin, who was not called to the stage during the concert held by the İBB for teachers due to “strong wind” was removed from the *Atatürk'e Saygı Albümü (Album of Respect to Atatürk)* album project. (December)

Rapper Şehinşah was detained on suspicion of “insulting the president” over his song “Sayın Türk,” (Mr. Turkish) which was released seven years ago. (December)

A case on the charge of “insulting the president” was filed against musician Ali Baran, who commented on a cartoon which appeared in a newspaper on social media. (December)

Bans on Festivals and Events

The broad powers granted to provincial branches of the central administration and the unfettered use of these rights results in violations of various aspects of the freedom of expression, especially the right to peaceful assembly and demonstration. The freedom of artistic expression is another right the enjoyment of which is prevented and banned by the provincial branches of the central administration. Bans by province and district governors' officers can target a specific event, or they can get more comprehensive including all demonstrations and activities within a given duration of time, such as a week or 15 days. In 2023, there were 43 comprehensive bans over a given time period that specifically focused on fairs, concerts, entertainment activities, plays, shows, drama, cinema and pantomime events. The province of Siirt was the top of the list with 16 comprehensive bans of 15 days duration each in 2016, followed by Hakkari with 10 such bans.

Of the total of 39 bans on events and festivals in 2023, 32 were issued by province or district governors' offices. The decisions for bans are generally based on grounds such as "violating public morality," "maintaining public order," "preventing crime," "public health" and "protecting the security of life and property of citizens." A viewing of the *Diren Ayol* documentary film which the University Feminist Collective planned a part of the activities for Pride Month was **banned** on the grounds that "should the event be held, it would lead to public outcry, harm national, conscientious and humane values and threaten internal societal peace" by the district governor's office of Şişli, İstanbul. Police intervened at a viewing of the viewing of the film *Pride* held by the Science Aesthetics Culture and Arts Studies Foundation (BEKSAV), detaining members of the audience and filing a case against eight people on the charge of "violating the Law no. 2911." In some cases, the justification given can be "maintaining public order, preventing crime and the presence of strong evidence and information of risk to the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

Monitoring findings indicate that interventions against arts and cultural activities by the branches of the central administration have become harsher with events gaining more mass appeal. Bans on events can take the form of overt censorship of planned activities, as well as "covert" obstacles to holding some events. The clearest example of the latter are

bans on camping, alcohol, venues or specific performers at festivals. The ineffectiveness of objection and compensation mechanisms against the bans severely limits the ability to deal with obstacles to events speedily and effectively. Through this train of causes, which also expands to include self-censorship, the number of public events has decreased over the years, with those remaining held in a way "that they will not be banned" or losing their mass quality.

Cases

- The concert planned by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Youth Assembly in Çanakkale on 27 January 2023 was banned by the province governor's office of Çanakkale. (January)
- A planned concert by musician Azad Bedran in the Nusaybin district of Mardin on 14 February 2023 was banned on grounds of the district-wide cover ban on demonstrations and events issued by the province governor's office. (February)
- The appointed public administrator president Verşan Kök of the Middle East Technical University (METU) banned the 35th International Spring Festival due to the earthquakes. METU students protested the decision outside the president's office. (May)
- A viewing of the *Diren Ayol* documentary film which the University Feminist Collective planned a part of the activities for Pride Month was banned on the grounds that "should the event be held, it would lead to public outcry, harm national, conscientious and humane values and threaten internal societal peace." (June)
- A viewing of the film *Pride* planned by the BEKSAV Cinema Collective for the Pride Month was banned by the district governor's office of Kadıköy for "violating public morality," "maintaining public order" and "preventing crime." Audience members were detained. The collective announced that those detained were facing a court case on the charge of "violating the Law no. 2911 on Meetings and Demonstrations." (June)
- In Eskişehir, all demonstrations, press statements, marches and demonstrations to be held as part of or in support of Pride Week activities were banned for 30 days on grounds of "maintaining continued public wellbeing and general security, preventing crime and protecting public health, public morality and the security of citizens and their property." (June)

- The district governor's office of Kadıköy prevented a tea party event held by the Lambdaistanbul LGBTI+ Solidarity Association by presenting notice that all demonstrations and events in the district had been banned for a day. (June)
- The district governor's office of Datça banned all LGBTI+ demonstrations and events in the district for 10 days on grounds of "ensuring peace and safety, the inviolability of persons, security of rights and public welfare." (June)
- The district governor's office of Kadıköy banned the stand-up show *Mor Mikrofon Falan (Purple Microphone Etc.)* to be held by Mor Dayanışma (Purple Solidarity) in Kadıköy on 17 June 2023 on grounds of "maintaining public order, preventing crime and the presence of strong evidence and information of risk to the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." (June)
- The province governor's office of Aydın banned "activities by LGBTI+ or similar associations and groups" for three days on grounds of "maintaining continued public wellbeing and general security, preventing crime and protecting public health, public morality and the security of citizens and their property." (June)
- The play *Haylo Dîsa Tevlihev bû* by ŞanoWan to be held by the Tatvan Municipality Cultural Center in a viewing organized by the Serhed Culture and Arts Association was banned by the district governor's office of Tatvan with no explanation. (June)
- The district governor's office of Fatih banned the *Horasan Öyküleri (Çîrokên Xorasanê / The Horasan Stories)* event to be held at the Mezopotamya Cultural Center with no explanation. (June)
- The Kazdağı Ecofestival was prevented from being held at the Daridere Natural Park on grounds of a "fire risk." The festival was moved to Bayramiç, where it was banned by the district governor's office. An investigation was launched against members of the organization committee who read out a statement outside the district governor's office. (June)

An event by the Yoğurtçu Women's Forum to discuss the book *Transgender Studies: Sex and Science* which was translated into Turkish for the first time was prevented on grounds of "public order." (June).

The program for the commemoration of the Madımak Massacre planned by Alevi groups was cancelled by the district governor's office of Sultangazi on the grounds that "Grup Yorum might play a concert." Along with the said program, all demonstrations and activities in the district over the weekend were cancelled. (June)

All events to be held in İzmir as part of Pride Week were banned by the province governor's office on grounds of "protecting public morality". (June)

The province governor's office of Kocaeli announced a ban on all activities as part of Pride Week on grounds of "maintaining public order, preventing crime and the risk to the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." (June)

The governor's office of Antalya announced that it had banned all activities under the 9th Antalya Pride Week to be held on 3-9 July 2023. (July)

A planned concert by Grup Yorum at the Evvel Temmuz Festival in the Samandağ district of Hatay was banned by the district governor's office. The reason for the ban was not stated in the notice issued by the district governor's office, which stated that the concert "was not deemed appropriate." (July)

The Kiği Nature and Culture Festival to be held by the Union of Kiği Associations (KİDEB) was banned by the district governor's office on grounds of "there being no festival areas." (July)

The 4th Aydın LGBTI+ Pride Week, which was postponed until July after it was banned in June by the province governor's office of Aydın, was banned once more on grounds of "public welfare, public health, public morality." (July)

Activities planned under the 9th Mersin Pride Week had been announced for a future date to avoid a ban by the province governor's office and the events were held a month before the date announced. The province governor's office banned the events for 10 days according to the announced calendar. (July)

Kuzey Fest, which was to be held in Akliman, was banned by the province governor's office of Sinop on grounds of "not being deemed appropriate." (July)

Grup Yorum, Grup İsyân Ateşi and Veradardz Folk Grup were removed from the billing for the 21st Munzur Culture and Nature Festival by a decision of the province governor's office of Tunceli. Members of Grup İsyân Ateşi were prevented from entering Dersim. (July)

The exhibition titled *muazZAM*, which the Republican People's Party (CHP) planned to hold at Eyüpsultan Square was banned by the district governor's office of Eyüpsultan due to the "possibility of the exhibition turning into a demonstration." (August)

The province governor's office of Samsun banned the event *Kadınlar Matinesi* (The Women's Matinee) to be held by Murat Övüç in Bafra and Atakum on grounds of "violation of national and spiritual values." (August)

As in last year, the Nilüfer Music festival was cancelled after bans on camping and alcohol issued by the province governor's office of Bursa. (August)

The province governor's office of İzmir announced that it would ban the event "We Make Noise Against LGBTI+phobic State Organs" on grounds of "protection of public health and public morality and the risk posed to the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." (September)

A concert planned by FEDAŞ workers on day 35 of their industrial action in Dersim was banned by the province governor's office. (September)

The Kurtuluş Street Festival, which has been held for the last two years, was not held this year due to the last minute “negative response” from Beyoğlu Municipality. (September)

BEKSAV Co-Chair Latife Canan Kaplan was detained at the international flights' terminal at Sabiha Gökçen Airport. (September)

BEKSAV Co-Chair Ahmet Uçar was detained at the airport. (September)

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism accused the censored *Kanun Hükmü* documentary of “terrorism propaganda” and withdrew from the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival. The Ministry of Youth and Sports also withdrew its support from the festival. (September)

Antalya Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Muhittin Böcek announced that the 60th Golden Orange Film festival had been cancelled. (September)

Mayor Muhittin Böcek said that the Golden Orange Film festival would be held by 31 December (October). The festival was not held in 2023 and no explanation or statement was provided. (December)

The march in Tandoğan Square and the concerts in Anıtpark as part of the World Women's March on 8 October were banned by the province governor's office of Ankara for “not being deemed appropriate.” (October)

The Çukurova Rock Festival was cancelled by the province governor's office of Adana for reasons such as “consumption of alcohol” and “security issues.” Following an objection, the Adana Administrative Court issued a suspension of execution order concerning the decision to ban the Çukurova Rock Festival. (October)

The Oktoberfest event planned to be held in Odunpazarı was cancelled by the province governor's office of Eskişehir on grounds that no official permit application had been filed, after it was marked as a target. The governor's office had given the same reason for banning the event last year. (October)

An investigation was launched against musician Şevinfor for speaking out against the stage ban imposed on Grup Yorum, Grup İsyân Ateşi and Veradardz Folk Grup at the 21st Munzur Culture and Arts Festival and singing the song “Şervano.” (October)

The district governor's office of Cizre banned the concert and children's art workshop at the Cizre Culture and Arts Festival held by the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions (KESK) and Sanatçâ Organizasyonu on the grounds that the concert venue “did not have a license” and that the children's workshop coincided with another activity that was planned by the appointed public administrator acting as mayor. Despite the obstacles, the festival took place on 11-12 November 2023. (November)

The district governor's office of Küçükçekmece banned the 32nd anniversary concert by the MKM to be held at the Yahya Kemal Beyatlı Stage Arts Center and the concerts were held in Bağcılar and Sancaktepe. (December)

All events at METU were banned by the university president's office. A viewing of the movie *Cars*, planned by the METU Motor Sports and Traffic Club, was also cancelled. (December)

Visual Arts and Modern Art

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The rights violations experienced in the field of visual arts in 2023 show that while censorship from known quarters continues, a new and increasingly popular method is also gaining a foothold. Artists and their work initially being targeted by non-state actors and judicial and executive organs, and then taking action has become a significant method of censorship in recent years. Systems of pressure, which used to rely mainly on anonymous and unnamed sources, today involve people whose names and titles are known and who gain visibility and an organizational identity through the civil society organizations they are a part of. This method, which we observed mainly in the cancellation of concerts and festivals in previous years has shown itself as a means of societal pressure and a tactic which lays the ground for interventions by the judiciary with the attacks on the exhibition titled *Ortadan Başlamak* at Artistanbul Feshane this year.

This year saw the continuation of the violation of the freedom of artistic expression concerning work treating of subjects which everybody knows are "suspect." The judicial harassment of the work of Mahir Akkoyun and Berkay Kahvecioğlu and the cancellation of the *Yeniden Buluşacağız: İmroz'un 1964 Belleği* exhibition due to being targeted and the pressure placed on them were not unexpected given their subject matter. With long judicial processes still being a systematic problem in Turkey, Akkoyun was detained on 7 April 2023 and was acquitted on 24 July 2023. Kahvecioğlu's trial was still underway as of the end of 2023. These cases, which we have observed and put up a struggle against for years, form a fundamental pillar of the censorship mechanism by showing the "permissible" limits to the freedom of expression to society at large clearly and loudly.

Three incidents which took place in the summer (Feshane, Odunpazarı Modern Museum -OMM-, İKSV) not only showed how censorship functions in political, institutional, cultural and societal contexts but also underlined the significance of resisting censorship.

The *Ortadan Başlamak* exhibition was attacked repeatedly while on display at Artistanbul Feshane and was marked as a target, physically attacked and became the subject of accusations. However, this difficult process also saw important steps being taken in the struggle against censorship.

A call for solidarity was put out by inviting artists and other artistic actors who were not initially involved in the exhibition to join. This call, which aimed to strengthen the sense of unity and solidarity against censorship and to unite the world of the arts was answered by the involvement of other actors of the arts in the exhibition.

The response to attempts at censorship, the criminal complaint filed against the exhibition and the attacks it faced was to prolong the end of the exhibition for two weeks. This strategy may be seen as an important decision taken to protect artistic freedom and to deploy effective resistance in the struggle against censorship.

Despite the tough censorship process it faced, the *Ortadan Başlamak* exhibition has furnished an example for the struggle for the freedom of artistic expression and a study in resistance against societal pressure and censorship.

The completely opposite approach was seen at the OMM. The exhibition titled *Yas ve Haz* (Grief and Pleasure) closed before the set date due to being targeted on social media for engaging in "LGBTI+ propaganda." While the museum administration did not issue any statements concerning the incident and cited the upcoming exhibition, a new poster with the end date altered was put up on the museum's website.

The method of targeting is used to trigger the three-phase process of "mark it as a target - get the state involved - get it banned." The grounds for legitimacy furnished by this process of "heeding the voice of the people" was clearly on display at both Feshane and the OMM. After they were marked as targets, an investigation was launched against the exhibition at Feshane by the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office on suspicion of "inciting the people to hatred and enmity," while the exhibition at the OMM came under investigation by the Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism for engaging in "LGBTI+ propaganda."

Therefore, the discriminatory attitude towards the LGBTI+ also continues in the field of visual arts. In both examples, attempts at censorship of works of art on sexual orientation and gender identity by calling out "LGBTI+ propaganda" are shaped by social discrimination. With such censorship limiting the freedom of expression of the LGBTI+ and marginalizing them within society, administrators of both exhibitions were criticized for not openly defending the exhibitions and their content. In this context, whether

the steps taken for the organizations of culture workers and artists in the field of modern art is of critical importance.

The crisis in the selection of the curator for the 18th İstanbul Biennale occupied the modern arts agenda for a long time. The İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) appointed its own member Iwona Blazwick as curator, over Defne Ayas, who was proposed unanimously by the consultation board. This decision by İKSV management drew a lot of criticism. That developments had to be followed from the foreign press, and the subsequent policies and statements of the İKSV led to several points of criticism, especially concerning transparency, but also accountability and institutional consistency.

Following these incidents, reaction has been forthcoming in arts and culture circles. While the texts *Open Letter to the İKSV: Towards a Better İstanbul Biennale*, written by previous entrants and members of the world of arts and *A Call to the İKSV from Filmmakers* targeted the İKSV directly, the text *A Call for Action Against Discrimination in Culture and Arts* more comprehensively discussed the structural problems of the field of arts and culture that includes the İKSV.

The critical text published by filmmakers against the İKSV is an important piece for reminding us of solidarity among fields of the arts. Meanwhile, the text titled *A Call for Action Against Discrimination in Culture and Arts* focuses on censorship and discrimination in the field of culture and arts and underlines the systematic roots of these issues. It discusses structural discrimination, mechanisms of denial and forms of violence and states that incidents should not be seen as individual cases but as societal problems.

All three texts present a strong criticism by emphasizing the rising censorship and pressure in the field of arts and culture in Turkey in the recent period. In their texts, actors of the arts have focused on the curator selection crisis at the İstanbul Biennale, the attacks and allegations against the exhibition at Feshane and the censoring of the exhibition at the OMM after it was targeted for engaging in "LGBTI+" propaganda and stated how the practice of censorship in arts and culture has become widespread and more prevalent at both the state and the society level. These texts underline that censorship not only threatens specific groups, but also the freedom of the arts and forms of expression, as well as the responsibility of the artistic world in defending a more transparent, accountable and egalitarian environment for arts and culture.

Finally, we have observed that culture and arts activities with more mass appeal are more often at risk of censorship. The momentum gained towards solidarity and organizing against the spiral of censorship, as in all rights areas, and especially the calls pointing out the fundamental problems of the field are some of the positive lessons learned from censorship in 2023. That rights-based, inclusive solidarity and arts institutions should take a stand alongside the arts against efforts to depoliticize them, which would also be a step that could be beneficial in defending the freedom of artistic expression against censorship.

Cases

The *Üç Kız* (Three Girls) statue in Ordu was attacked for the fourth time in 17 years and the foot of one of the girl figures was broken off (April).

Visual designer Berkay Kahvecioğlu is to face trial with the indictment requesting his imprisonment for between one and four years for using President Erdoğan's portrait as well as the expression *sürtük* (tramp) which the president had used to refer to Gezi protestors in one of his works. (April)

The poster for the graduation exhibition of the faculty of Fine Arts was replaced by the university administration two days before the exhibition opened, with the colors of the rainbow on the original poster being replaced with other colors. (June)

The exhibition *Ortadan Başlamak* at the İBB's Artİstanbul Feshane venue was presented as a target by a group of civilians for "deviancy" and was protested outside the venue. The exhibition was closed down until the crowd dispersed. (July)

A group which gathered outside the Feshane venue tried to attack the exhibition. (July)

The Yesevi Alperenler Education, Culture and Aid Association filed a criminal complaint against the exhibition *Ortadan Başlamak* at the İBB's Artİstanbul Feshane venue for "obscene and deviant content." (July)

The *Yas ve Haz* exhibition at the Eskişehir OMM came under investigation by the Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism and the exhibition closed early. (July)

Photographer Selahattin Kaya, who took images of the environmental protests in Akbelen was interrogated by the prosecutor at Milas Courthouse over his social media posts and was later released by the Criminal Court of Peace on condition of not entering Milas district and not travelling abroad. (July)

The exhibition titled *Yeniden Buluşacağız: İmroz'un 1964 Belleği* by journalist Melike Çapan that was to be held in Gökçeada was cancelled after it was marked as a target and placed under pressure. (August)

Director Bilal Kısa and model Ezgi Cebeci, who were on a fashion shoot at Kocatepe Mosque in Ankara were detained. After being transferred to the courthouse, Kısa and Cebeci were released under judicial control measures. (August)

It was revealed that the İKSV management had picked Iwona Blazwick to act as the curator for the 18th İstanbul Biennale, despite the consultation board proposing Defne Ayas. (August)

The İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into the exhibition *Ortadan Başlamak* at the İBB's Artİstanbul Feshane venue. (September)

Abbreviations

BEKSAV: Science Aesthetics Culture and Arts Studies Foundation

CHP: Republican People's Party

HDP: Peoples' Democratic Party

İBB: İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality

İKSİV: İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts

METU: Middle East Technical University

OMM: Odunpazarı Modern Museum

RTÜK: Supreme Board of Radio and Television