

Perennial Oppression of Nightlife, Pandemic Policies, and Resistance in İzmir's Popular Music Scene

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The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government neglected and marginalized music and nightlife industries in Turkey in various ways during and after the pandemic lockdowns caused by the COVID-19. As a result, the late-night popular music scene in İzmir has had to endure a hostile state's policies in addition to the impact of the virus. In this paper, firstly, I take a step back and illustrate how the government's hostility against nightlife and entertainment has been an ongoing process in the last two decades. Secondly, I analyze how the government has been marginalizing nightlife and entertainment practices during and after the pandemic restrictions. Finally, I examine how the popular music scene in İzmir has reacted to these policies through protests, adaptations, and defiance.

This study emerged as a side project in the Spring of 2020 when I was already conducting my doctoral dissertation fieldwork on the hegemony of slow-changing cover repertoires in İzmir's popular music scene, which I had started in the Spring of 2019. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Spring 2020, I had the chance to additionally observe the effects of the government policies on nightlife in the city. Moreover, as a native of the country, I have been witnessing firsthand the AKP government's cultural policies since 2002, when they came into power. Thus, in this study, my main sources of data are: 1) My observations and interviews in İzmir's popular music scene between March 2020 and May 2022; 2) Observations of the AKP government's cultural policies in the last two decades; and 3) Secondary literature.

A Perennial Battle against Entertainment and Nightlife

The Turkish state's battle against entertainment and nightlife started in 2005, when the conservative AKP government led by Tayyip Erdoğan prohibited selling and serving alcohol at many places, including: Near any sacred building, art institution, and gas station; locations within 200 meters of highways or roads and bus stations; and any location within 100 meters of public and private school buildings, elementary and middle-school dormitories, and kindergartens (Furman, 2021, p. 30). The rule itself was strong enough to wipe liquor shops and nightlife establishments off city centers. Some local governments in smaller cities, who were made responsible for the execution of this legislation, seized the opportunity, and pushed liquor shops and nightlife spaces to the outskirts; some of them even exploited their power to force nightlife establishments to completely shut down (Furman, 2021, p. 31).

Moreover, in 2013, immediately after the Gezi Park Protests that were suppressed with severe state violence, the president declared that "they want to raise a pious generation, not an alcoholic one!"¹ Accordingly, further restrictions over alcohol sales were introduced: Alcohol companies were prohibited from using logos, brands, and any other references to their products in public spaces; they were also barred from sponsoring activities such as concerts and festivals; selling alcohol was no longer allowed at liquor stores between 10 pm and 6 am; and finally, alcohol sales were completely prohibited on the internet (Furman, 2021, p. 31).

In addition to these restrictions, alcohol has been gradually overtaxed by the government since they came into power in 2002. According to Ozan Bingöl, a taxation specialist, the total amount of taxes has been raised from the former 18% to 146% for low-alcohol drinks, and to 280% for high-alcohol drinks in the last 20 years (Bingöl, 2022). A bottle of *rakı*, which is a double-distilled alcoholic beverage popular in Turkey, is supposed to be sold, before taxes and including the profit, for 85,65 Turkish Liras. However, after taxes, which are in total 239,35 Liras, the price rises to 325 Liras. As a result, the combination of these two hostile policies (the stifling restrictions on alcohol sales and nightlife spaces, and the overtaxation of alcohol) is a clear sign that the government has long had an agenda to oppress, as well as to profit from, drinking and nightlife practices. Thus, the marginalization of nightlife and entertainment during the COVID-19 restrictions should be seen in the light of this long-established battle.

Marginalization of Music and Nightlife During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this paper, I analyze the government's marginalizing pandemic policies in two main categories: 1) Double standards in the precautions against the gatherings of different types of crowds; and 2) Economic neglect of the nightlife and music industries. I will first examine the double standards in the precautions against crowds. With the decrees that were declared on March 15² and May 30, 2020,³ businesses that were licensed as "bars, discos, and nightclubs" were kept closed for a year and a half, until July 1st, 2021. In addition, the decree issued on May 30, 2020, banned all the remaining food and beverage establishments from hosting "live music that could lead to dance." The logic behind these decisions was that the virus could spread faster in places where people might get physically close to each other. However, during most of the pandemic restrictions, it was possible for many other crowds to gather. For example, Muslims were allowed to pray collectively in mosques for many months, shopping malls almost always enjoyed closing times that were later than that of leisure establishments, football fans were occasionally allowed to see games in crowded groups without physical distance, and foreign tourists were always kept exempt from curfew orders. These were clear signs that nightlife and music industries were seen as dispensable by the government, and other realms such as non-alcoholic commerce, sports, Islamic practices, and international tourism were privileged.

Moreover, President Erdoğan violated his own pandemic decrees many times by bringing masses together for his rallies. On multiple occasions in January and February 2021, he organized public meetings for his political party AKP, which hosted crowded audiences indoors and outdoors, even though public gatherings had been prohibited by his own government due to the pandemic.⁴ It was still forbidden for the other political parties in Turkey to hold such meetings. Needless to say, organizing concerts or festivals was not even a slight possibility. In a strict regime of pandemic restrictions enforced by his own government, the president gathered thousands of people for his rallies, most of whom did not maintain any physical distance and many of whom did not wear masks. It was clear that, for the government, *some crowds were better than others*.

To make things worse, music venues and musicians were economically neglected during the pandemic restrictions. There was no direct financial support for music venues. Furthermore, my interviews with venue owners revealed that the only subsidies that the state provided for them were the postponement of tax liabilities for up to a year and the right to low interest loans of up to 25,000 Turkish Liras. I would like to provide an economic context to understand the "power" of the subsidies here: even the monthly rents that many venue owners I was in touch with had to pay were either close to or more than 25,000 Turkish Liras during the pandemic. Thus, the loans were not even compensating a month's rent during a sixteen-month pandemic crisis, let alone the accumulating bills and possible pre-existing debt. Moreover, musicians did not receive support that is worth mentioning, either. After ten months of "zero" financial aid, it was only between January and July 2021 (for six months) that the government handed out financial support to select musicians only,⁵ and it was 7,000 Turkish Liras in total, which, calculated monthly, is 437,5 Liras per month for the duration of sixteen months. Again, to provide an economic context: In January 2021, the monthly poverty line was 3,222 TL for a single person and 8,638 TL for a family of four in Turkey (TÜRK-İŞ, 2021). Thus, the support that *only a small portion of musicians* could receive for a brief period of six months, if calculated monthly, was more than seven times lower than the poverty line for single workers, and almost twenty times lower than the poverty line for a family of four.

The literature on government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that many states have been allocating considerable budgets to support their music and cultural industries. For example, the Canadian government set aside \$50 million to help the live music sector (deWaard, Fauteux, & Selman, 2022, p. 264); the U.K. created a Cultural Recovery Fund of £1,57 billion that includes an Emergency Grassroots Music Venues Fund; Germany announced a €1 billion aid package for the arts, and New Zealand started an arts and music recovery package of NZ\$175 million (Anderton, 2022). However, other countries such as China (Gu, Domer, & O'Connor, 2021), Iran (Semati & Behroozi, 2020), and Greece (Bastani, Linardou, Sharafi, & Tsioulakis, 2021) have provided little to no support to their local music industries. In this context, my study contributes to this line of literature by shedding light on another neglectful country.

The Scene Resists: Protests, Adaptations, and Defiance

Many musicians and venue personnel across the country, including the ones in İzmir, protested the government's pandemic policies for a few times. In September 2020, they posted pictures that were merely red blank pages to attract attention, accompanied by a text in Turkish and English.⁶ The text pointed out that the workers and employers of the entertainment sector were frustrated by the way the society underestimates the impact of the pandemic on their livelihood and by the state's indifference to their essential needs. In early November 2020, a movement called "Finish Covid, Not Life" [*Hayatı Değil, COVIDi Bitirin*] was initiated by venues and musicians in İzmir, which then spread to other cities such as İstanbul and Eskişehir.⁷ After this incident, protests moved from social media to the streets. People stood in *complete silence* on both sides of famous streets in big cities in protest of the government's neglect of the music, leisure, and nightlife industries. A banner held by a protestor read: "The virus is only in cafes, bars, and restaurants; and never in mosques, malls, streets, or subway!"⁸

Since none of these protests evoked a response from the government, the protestors then changed their approach from silent to *noisy* protests a few weeks later. With their instruments and voices, musicians and venue personnel protested for four weekends in a row until mid-December. On January 31, 2021, a musician named Erdem Topuz, and on February 9, 2021, a percussionist named Mert El, who had both been unemployed for the past year, committed suicides in İzmir.

In May 2021, Bengi Şit, the singer of a prominent pop-rock covers band from İzmir, raised her voice against the government in an original rap song of hers, which was titled "Copy Paste the Days." The lyrics were seemingly complaining about how the routine of everyday life was making her feel numb during the pandemic. However, a closer listen immediately reveals that the singer protests the political authority for its double standards in restrictions, its recklessness against musicians, and she states that she won't forget how music and musicians have been treated throughout the pandemic. When I interviewed her a few months later, she confirmed that the target of her lyrics was indeed the government, and that it was a deliberate decision to indirectly refer to the authority, in order to avoid possible criminal charges. Considering the deterioration of freedom of expression in Turkey in the past few decades under the AKP government, this was not a surprising tactic. She still performs this song a few times a week at live music venues with her cover band Sinestezi, and every time she plays it, an intimate agreement between her and the audience on the meaning of the lyrics become palpable through the energy in the room.⁹

In addition to musical and non-musical protests, there have also been creative adaptations to overcome the pandemic restrictions. Many venue owners in İzmir filed applications to have their licenses changed by the municipality in order to bypass restrictions, and some of them succeeded. In addition, some venues that were still allowed to open, hosted shows where audience members were obligated to sit in their chairs, so that the decree clause that prohibits *dancing* inside food and beverage establishments would have been overcome. Moreover, during a few weeks in Spring 2021, when the government ordered these businesses to close at 7 pm, some venues introduced shows that happened between 4:30 pm and 7 pm, which turned the city's long-established nightlife into an *afternoonlife*. Surprisingly, despite the bizarreness that these afternoon shows with forced seating and the no-dancing rule led to; the venues were packed. Audience members whom I interviewed told me that they attended these shows because they were fed up with the life in the pandemic, as well as the government's discriminatory policies.

There has also been defiance. Many venue owners who did not have access to appropriate licenses defied the rules and opened anyway, which resulted in costly fines, although issued *only* for some of those places (the reason is still unknown to the author). Furthermore, despite the decree clause that prohibited "music that might lead to dance" at all leisure establishments, numerous shows were performed before a dancing audience at different times during the pandemic. I attended one of those shows in October 2020. It was a time when the number of deaths from the COVID-19 was not slowing down, and the world did not have an approved vaccine yet. I felt an obligation to attend for the sake of my field research. When my partner and I first entered the venue, with our masks on, we became seriously anxious about our health: we started laughing nervously because there was no physical distance between people, and not a single person, including the staff, was wearing a mask. It was like a time travel back to 2019, when there was no such thing as the COVID-19 on earth. People in the venue were in complete denial. After a few songs and a few beers, the atmosphere influenced us, too, and we joined the denial.

On July 1st, 2021, the government issued a complete reopening for the whole country. Lockdowns were ended and all banned businesses were allowed to reopen after a year and a half. However, the oppression of music and nightlife continued in a different way. With a decree issued by the Ministry of Interior on June 27, 2021, any live or mediated music performance was banned after midnight, even though no specific legal justification accompanied this decree.¹⁰ Erdoğan only defended the ban by saying "I'm sorry, but no one has the right to disturb another

person at night!”¹¹ which led to anger and resentment in the nightlife industry, although was supported by many of his followers. Before the pandemic, there was no such general rule in the country that prohibited music after a certain time in the day, and performances in İzmir would usually continue until 4-5 am. Erdoğan seized the opportunity to introduce a new restriction on nightlife, by exploiting the *pandemic normal* that the public had become accustomed to. On May 10, 2022, eleven months after the initial decree, the ban was only pushed to 1 am, and it is still in effect today.¹² Many venues in İzmir have been resisting this rule by putting on shows after 1 am, although discreetly, to the best of their ability. They don’t announce on their flyers and social media posts that there will be music after 1 am, but their audience members know the reality and attend accordingly.

Conclusion

In this paper, I firstly illustrated that the AKP government has been oppressing drinking and nightlife since they came into power in 2002. Moreover, I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has given Erdoğan an opportunity to intensify his ongoing oppression of these practices. During and after the pandemic restrictions, the crowds of nightlife were marginalized, while other “better” crowds such as shoppers, worshippers, Erdoğan supporters, football fans, and international tourists were privileged. Furthermore, the nightlife, entertainment, and music industries, unless they are touristic, were economically neglected; music venues and musicians were given little to no support. In this hostile political and economic climate, venues, musicians, and audience members in İzmir’s late-night popular music scene came up with various ways to resist the oppression. They protested, changed licenses, published songs, turned the nightlife into an *afternoonlife*, and have bluntly continued entertainment practices by defying decrees that have been commanding the opposite.

In their article on pandemic policies in the UK; Taylor, Raine and Hamilton suggest that, during the pandemic, live music spaces and practices were *dominated* by state legislations, which ask for sacrifices for the sake of a future “normal” that will be brought back. The authors claim that, since the ruling class cannot seem to understand the creative industries, this domination will not bring a reliable solution to the live music industry –particularly to the independent/grassroots/unsupported participants of it. Therefore, according to them, creative solutions must be built by the people themselves, which can also potentially lead to the subversion of the current power structures. In this light, I argue that the protests, adaptations, and the defiance performed by the people of İzmir’s late-night popular music scene can be seen as notable examples of such “from-below” efforts, although occurring in a much more authoritative context compared to the political climate of Western Europe.

Notes

¹ See (Lüküslü, 2016) for a detailed analysis of the government’s efforts to create a pious generation in the early 2010s.

² See the decree issued by the Ministry of Interior on March 15, 2020: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/81-il-valiligine-coronavirus-tedbirleri-konulu-ek-genelge-gonderdi> (Accessed May 5, 2022)

³ See the decree issued by the Ministry of Interior on May 30, 2020: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/81-il-valiligine-lokanta-restoran-kafe-vb-isyerleri-park-piknik-alanlari-mesire-yerleri-ve-giyim-pazarlari-genelgesi> (Accessed May 5, 2022)

⁴ See the news article from January 27, 2021: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/salgina-ragmen-mitinglere-de-kongrelere-de-devam-ediyorlar-331956> (Accessed May 5, 2022)

⁵ To be eligible for the aid, musicians had to “prove their musicianship” by uploading performance videos of two to five minutes onto a government website (muziksusmasin.com). Assessment criteria for the performances were never clarified. In the end, 30,744 musicians (out of 35,901 applicants) were selected. See: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/devlet-destegi-alan-muzisyenler-hic-yoktan-iyidir-haber-1511861> (Accessed May 20, 2022)

⁶ For an example, see this Instagram post by Volume Alsancak (a popular music venue in İzmir) on September 10, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE9esIWp3Vp/> (Accessed May 10, 2022)

⁷ See the news video that the internet newspaper Duvar prepared about the movement, from November 17, 2020: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/muzisyenler-ve-isletmeciler-hayati-degil-covid-19u-bitirin-video-1504731> (Accessed May 10, 2022)

⁸ See the picture of the protestor, posted by the Facebook page of the movement “Finish COVID, Not Life,” on November 21, 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/HayatiDegilCovid19uBitirin/photos/114810433782686> (Accessed May 10, 2022)

⁹ For the original recording, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1DzXHACbKI&ab_channel=SinesteziTV_
For a performance video, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1DzXHACbKI&ab_channel=SinesteziTV_ (Accessed May 10, 2022)

¹⁰ See the decree issued by the Ministry of Interior on June 27, 2021: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/81-il-valiligine-kademeli-normallesme-tedbirleri-genelgesi-gonderildi> (Accessed May 5, 2022)

¹¹ See the news article from June 21, 2021: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/436041/saat-24-00ten-sonra-muzik-yasak-erdogan-kusurabakmasinlar-rahatsiz-edemezsiniz> (Accessed May 10, 2022)

¹² See the decree issued by the Ministry of Interior on May 10, 2022: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/muzik-yayin-saatleri-yeniden-belirlendi> (Accessed May 5, 2022)

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