

## How Turkish is it? Art and culture in Vienna

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### Abstract

The Viennese Turkish community constitutes 4% of all people residing in Vienna. This considerable presence has also brought with it many artistic and cultural activities. In this paper I question how far these activities have diversified Viennese cultural life. The results are two-fold: my quantitative analysis of public-funding data shows that Viennese Turkish artistic activities are still perceived as a marginal addendum to Viennese cultural life. However, as my qualitative analysis of selected activities highlights, they have contributed to making the diversity of both Austrian and Turkish cultures visible, albeit only in the margins, rather than in the centre of Viennese cultural life.

**Keywords:** Turkish immigrants and their descendants; theatre; literature; performing arts; diversity.

### Introduction

The Turkish community currently constitutes the second-largest group of foreign origin in Vienna after those originating from Serbia and Montenegro. In 2011, 4% of all Viennese residents were either born in Turkey or held Turkish citizenship (N = 74,416) (Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 2011: 69) – figures which do not include Viennese residents of Turkish origin born in Austria and holding Austrian citizenship, a growing group (see also Schnell's contribution on the Turkish second generation in this special issue). Of course, this considerable Turkish presence has also had an impact on Viennese cultural life. Viennese Turkish artists have been particularly active in the field of popular music, but have also entered other artistic fields, such as theatre, film and literature (Gebesmair *et al.*, 2009).

Research on Viennese Turkish art and culture is scarce and has mainly focused on charting cultural activities. More-theoretically inspired research has analysed the use of ethnicity as a resource in cultural activities from a sociological perspective (Parzer and Kwok, 2013) as well as processes of change

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and fusion in Viennese Turkish musical cultures from an ethno-musicological perspective (Sağlam and Hemetek, 2009). My paper builds on these insights, but widens the focus by asking how far Viennese Turkish cultural activities have diversified Viennese cultural life. How far is the diversity brought about by migration from Turkey adequately represented in Viennese cultural life? Or, in Steven Vertovec's (2012: 298) terms, does Viennese cultural life look "like the population it serves"? And do Viennese Turkish cultural activities also bring about a diversification of Viennese cultural life in terms of their content and style? Cultures are neither monolithic nor fixed, but constantly in a state of flux, with migration being one of the factors initiating cultural change (Bhabha, 2004). However, this dynamic may be impeded by pre-imposed understandings of culture underlying public funding (Hall, 1999), which is still of major importance in Viennese arts and culture.

Based on these presuppositions, my article will analyse data provided by Austrian and Viennese public-funding institutions, the most inclusive data on cultural activities in Vienna, from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. From a quantitative perspective, these data allow me to analyse whether the cultural diversification brought about by migration from Turkey to Vienna is also reflected in the share of public funds granted to Viennese Turkish cultural activities. In other words, I use the approach of what has been called "statistical proportionality" to determine whether Turkish immigrants and their descendants are adequately represented in public cultural funding, given their proportional size in the overall population (Vertovec, 2012: 290). In the qualitative analysis of the same data, I discuss selected Viennese Turkish cultural activities in more detail in order to understand whether and how they diversify Viennese cultural life. In particular, I am interested in when, how and why they include elements from their cultures of origin, be they artists, themes, texts or music. This analysis yields two unrelated and partly opposing processes of diversification happening in the Viennese cultural sphere. The first process diversifies Viennese cultures by moving beyond understandings of culture as ethnically homogeneous, which Viennese culture never has been, but has been presented as such (Sievers, 2014). The second process, by contrast, makes the diversity of Turkish cultures visible in Viennese cultural life by contributing to the creation of new imagined Alevi and Kurdish diaspora communities, built on an alleged cultural or ethnic homogeneity.

### **Public funding for Viennese Turkish cultural activities**

The politicians responsible for Austrian art and culture have been slow in recognizing the growing cultural diversity which has followed immigration movements since the 1960s, both on the federal state level and in the city of Vienna. Postwar labour immigration to Austria, as to many other European countries, was based on a model of circular migration that never really worked in practice, but long maintained a perception of immigrants as temporary

guests who did not need to be included in society, politics or culture. Even, today, the right-wing populist Freedom Party excludes “oriental cultures” – a term the party mainly uses to refer to Turkish immigrants and their descendants – from Austrian culture in their party program (Freedom Party Austria, 2011: 11), while only the Green Party explicitly subscribes to fostering cultural diversity in theirs (Die Grünen, 2001: 44–46). Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that there is no policy, let alone law, at the Austrian state level that guarantees the adequate representation of immigrants and their descendants in Austrian culture and that state cultural funding for these groups has always been low. By contrast, the city of Vienna has actively tried to include immigrants and their descendants in culture since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the amount of funding spent on immigrants and their descendants in the field of culture has also remained comparatively low in Vienna (Sievers, 2014).

This slow process of recognising immigrants and their descendants in the cultural sphere is confirmed by the small share of less than 0.5% of public funding spent on Viennese Turkish cultural activities by the responsible federal ministry (the *Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur* – Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture – in the period analysed here) and the department responsible for culture in the Viennese magistrature (MA 7–Kulturabteilung). Table 1 presents detailed data for 2010, representative for the whole decade.<sup>1</sup> The calculation includes only those funds granting monies to Viennese Turkish cultural activities. This means that many of the large funds, such as those devoted to state museums, state theatres and the state opera house, architectural heritage, education and research are not included in the calculation below because I could not identify the involvement of the Viennese Turkish community in these data.<sup>2</sup> If all funds spent on culture in 2010 (811.46 million Euros spent by the federal state and 225.17 million by the City of Vienna) were included in the calculation, the share awarded to Viennese Turkish cultural activities would be much lower than the 0.3% shown in Table 1. At the same time, the number of cultural activities involving Viennese Turkish artists is most probably higher than shown here, but there is no detailed reporting on the inclusion of immigrants and their descendants in Viennese cultural activities – data that exist for the inclusion of women, for example. Hence, the calculation only contains those Viennese Turkish cultural activities recognisable as such in the existing data (i.e. films directed by and theatres headed by Viennese Turkish directors, or cultural activities carried out by Viennese Turkish associations). The same holds true

<sup>1</sup> In most cases, I additionally analysed the years 2000 and 2005. This was not possible for the Viennese film fund, where detailed data became publicly available only in 2003, or for the Viennese fund for intercultural activities, where the first detailed data were published in 2009. While there were slight changes within some of the funding streams, the overall shares remained roughly the same over the period of time analysed.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these institutions are highly internationalized, but not diverse in the sense that they look “like the population they serve”. Among the resident groups under-represented are Turkish immigrants and their descendants (Medienservicestelle 2013).

for the data I gathered on cultural activities involving Viennese immigrants and their descendants (called Viennese migrant cultural activities in Table 1 for the sake of brevity), included in the table for comparative purposes.

**Table 1.** Austrian and Viennese cultural funds granted to Viennese Turkish cultural activities in 2010

	Total funds analyzed	Viennese migrant cultural activities	Share of total funds %	Viennese Turkish cultural activities	Share of total funds %	Share of Viennese migrant cultural activities %
State: general arts*	82,780,390	719,782	0.9	80,625	0.1	11.2
State: cultural initiatives**	4,994,970	234,200	4.7	41,000	0.8	17.5
Vienna: performing arts	88,984,802	1,455,000	1.6	345,000	0.4	23.7
Vienna: film fund	11,500,000	269,620	2.3	64,333	0.6	23.9
Vienna: intercultural activities***	622,000	449,550	72.3	128,350	20.6	28.6
Total	188,242,305	3,128,152	1.7	596,183	0.3	19.1

*Notes: \*Funds devoted to visual arts, music and performing arts, film and literature, as well as prizes, event management and public relations. \*\*Funds targeting privately organized non-profit local and regional bottom-up initiatives including multicultural initiatives. \*\*\*Funds devoted to associations carrying out intercultural activities in Vienna, with some being linked to autochthonous ethnic minorities (Volksgruppen).*

*Sources: BMUKK (2011: 68–122); MA 7 (2011: 58–77, 240–250, 270–276); author's calculations.*

The results clearly show that shares are particularly low in funds devoted to the arts in general, compared to those partly devoted to multicultural or intercultural activities. Only 0.1% of the state funds spent on the arts are awarded to Viennese Turkish cultural activities, while these constitute 0.8% of the state funds devoted to cultural initiatives, a funding stream open to all Austrian cultural initiatives, but with a particular interest in furthering multicultural initiatives. This latter share almost matches the 0.9% share of the Viennese Turkish in the Austrian population. The situation is similar in Vienna, where the funds spent on Viennese Turkish cultural activities constitute less than 1% in the general arts, but more than 20% in the funding stream devoted to intercultural activities. So Viennese Turkish cultural activities have received recognition through funding streams devoted to the integration of immigrants, but they still lack recognition in mainstream funding. This means that they are still perceived as an addendum to the Viennese artistic field rather than as an integral part of it. This may have the effect of diminishing the artistic recognition of these cultural activities, as they could be perceived as not being good enough for mainstream funding (see Delhaye, 2008, who observes this effect for the cultural activities of immigrants and their descendants in Amsterdam). This problem concerns only those cultural activi-

ties which aim to be recognized as art in the Viennese artistic field, which is not true for all funded activities, as I show in the qualitative analysis below. The fact that the amounts granted under these funding streams are usually lower than those awarded under the general arts funds affects all Viennese Turkish cultural activities.

At the same time, Table 1 shows that Viennese Turkish cultural activities receive a comparatively large share of the funds devoted to Viennese cultural activities involving immigrants and their descendants. The Viennese Turkish community constitutes roughly 13% of all Viennese residents born abroad or holding foreign citizenship. This means that the Viennese Turkish community is over-represented in almost all of the funding streams analysed in detail here, except for state funds devoted to the general arts but, even here, Viennese Turkish cultural activities constitute 11.2% of all Viennese cultural activities involving immigrants and their descendants. This share reaches more than 20% in all Viennese funding streams. This clearly documents that the Viennese Turkish community is strongly interested in getting involved in Viennese culture, which may be due to the fact that they suffer the most from exclusion in Austria, as explained in the introduction to this special issue.

That this may be one reason for the high interest in cultural funding among the Viennese Turkish is further confirmed by the fact that minority groups within the Turkish community are particularly active within this field, as documented in the Viennese funding stream devoted to intercultural activities. Table 2 shows that about 45% of all funds awarded to Viennese Turkish associations through this funding stream each year were granted to Kurdish or Alevi associations. Only in 2010 is this share considerably lower, partly because the Kurdish umbrella association FEYKOM, which received a comparatively large amount of funding in all other years (12,000–15,000 Euros) did not receive any funding in 2010.

**Table 2.** Viennese funds for intercultural activities granted to Kurdish and Alevi cultural associations

	2009	2010	2011	2012
Turkish	116,965	128,350	104,400	103,000
Kurdish %	31	9	31	33
Alevi %	15	20	13	10

*Sources: MA 7 (2010: 240–249, 2011: 270–276, 2012: 280–288, 2013: 274–282); author's calculations.*

Unfortunately, there are no official figures on the number of Kurds and Alevi residing in Vienna, since official sources only gather data based on the country of origin; however, the two groups are estimated to include around 20,000 people in each (Ramsauer, 2004: 81; Saçlam, 2009: 329). About 10% of

the Kurds in Austria are estimated to come from other origins than Turkey, which would reduce the number of Kurds to be considered for this study by 2,000.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, about one-third of the Kurds are estimated to be Alevi, which reduces the numbers in the two groups to be considered here by another 6,000. If these estimates are correct, there are roughly 32,000 Kurds and Alevi of Turkish origin residing in Vienna, i.e. more than 40% of the 74,416 Viennese residents born in Turkey or holding Turkish citizenship. This implies that the two groups together are adequately represented in Viennese funding granted to Turkish associations for intercultural activities, albeit with Alevi associations generally receiving less than Kurdish ones, probably due to the fact that their interest in self-representation emerged later, as I explain below.

### **How Viennese Turkish cultural activities diversify Viennese cultural life**

The diversification of cultural life is not, of course, only a matter of an adequate distribution of funding, even though, as Stuart Hall insists, “[t]he idea that a major culture-change – nothing short of a cultural revolution – could take place in the way the nation represents the diversity of itself and its ‘subject-citizens’ without a major redirection of resources is to reveal oneself as vacantly trivial about the whole question” (Hall, 1999: 8). However, as Hall goes on to say, the diversification of cultural life is also a question of who is represented and how. A major problem for diversification in the field of art has been that the concept of art, which evolved in the modern period in Western cultures, has implied the denigration of all non-Western art (see Buchholz, 2008 for art, and Greve, 2002 for music). This division has also marked the reception of the literary, artistic and musical works produced by immigrants and their descendants in European countries. They were described as ethnic and consequently denied acceptance as art. The following analysis of three Viennese Turkish theatre projects shows that this division has been questioned in different ways over the last three decades in this field. Or, in other words, we may observe a process of “globalization from within” in the field of theatre which has also led to an extension of the concept of what it means to be Viennese (see Cheesman, 2007). For this purpose, all three projects explicitly move beyond ethnically homogeneous understandings of culture.

Among the early artists active in the field of Viennese Turkish theatre is Gül Gürses, who went to Vienna in 1981 to read theatre studies there after having finished her acting studies in Istanbul and having amassed sufficient experience in several plays performed in Istanbul and Ankara. Her first attempts at staging theatre in Vienna openly referred to her Turkish origin; the first play which Gürses directed in Vienna in 1985 was not only a Turkish play

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<sup>3</sup> The Kurds in Austria are organized by country of origin.

– Nâzım Hikmet’s *Letters to Taranta Babu* – but was also staged in Turkish. Following the foundation of the *Theater des Augenblicks* (Theatre of the Moment) together with Sigrid Seberich in 1987, Gürses directed a second version of the same play in 1988, with a small but important difference: this second version was in German. Since then she has progressively moved away from any kind of open Turkish identification, be it in the language used or in the choice of plays performed. As pointed out by Michael Hüttler, the *Theater des Augenblicks* “has become an integral part of the Viennese off-theatre scene and only few of its visitors know that its director is of Turkish origin” (Hüttler 2003). However, this does not mean that Gürses abandoned the diversification of culture in her work. In fact, she established the *Theater des Augenblicks* as an international theatre and art project mainly interested in the various possibilities of artistic expression. This international framework has allowed Gürses to overcome the divide between Western and non-Western art by involving Turkish actors and discussing gender in her plays with reference to Turkey.

Aret Güzel Aleksanyan’s *Interkulttheater* (Intercultural Theatre) uses a different approach which allows him to include plays and music from Turkey in his program. Aleksanyan, who went to Vienna in 1974 to study, started his career with an ensemble staging Turkish plays at the theatre which would become the *Interkulttheater* under his directorship in 1992. Since then, he has established this theatre as an intercultural space where artists from all cultural backgrounds can perform. Performances include theatre productions imported from Turkey in the Turkish language, and artistic contributions addressed to other groups of immigrant origin in Vienna, ranging from Brazilian music to Persian poetry (Hüttler, 2003).

While this approach views cultures as closed containers and the *Interkulttheater* as a bridge between these cultures, more recent theatre projects, such as Aslı Kışlal’s *daskunst* or Emel Heinrich’s *Cocon*, have tried to move beyond this closed understanding of culture by establishing themselves as a natural part of Austrian society and criticising exclusion and discrimination, both in Austrian society in general and in the theatre scene in particular. In her most recent project (*da.Heim.AT.los*), Emel Heinrich shows how identities and belonging are changing through migration in a process that brings about conflicts but which should, in the end, lead to a new understanding of community (Dogan, 2010). Aslı Kışlal’s *daskunst* is a mixed theatre group of performers of many different origins who explicitly describe themselves as Austrian. Their plays – such as, for example, *Wiener Blut* (Viennese Blood), a persiflage on a well-known Austrian operetta of the same name composed by Johann Strauss – express their claim for inclusion by writing their voices into the Austrian canon. At the same time, their hybrid mix of references to many traditions and cultures implies that this inclusion will generate new understandings of identity and community that move beyond ethnic or cultural homogeneity.

Apart from this trend towards a globalization from within, we may observe a second process of diversification in the Viennese cultural field that has mainly concerned the Turkish community. Several cultural activities aim to create new imagined communities, in this case Alevi and Kurdish diaspora communities, built on an alleged ethnic or cultural homogeneity. These activities are not primarily interested in being accepted as art, but in getting Alevis and Kurds accepted as minority groups. Alevis and Kurds were repressed in Turkey by such violent means that they have continued to hide their roots, even after their migration to Austria. Only recently have Kurdish and Alevi associations begun to use cultural activities to openly express their Kurdish and Alevi roots in the public sphere.

Kurdish associations in Vienna go back to the 1970s, when similar associations sprouted in many receiving countries of Kurdish migration. But they became particularly important after the military coup in Turkey in 1980 as suppliers of information on the increasing repression of Kurds. Since the turn of the century, when the situation in Turkey relaxed, Kurdish associations have focussed more on furthering Kurdish culture (Ramsauer, 2004). Since 2005, the association KOMKAR, the federation of workers' associations from Kurdistan first founded in 1979, with the Austrian branch being established as late as 1995, has been organizing an annual Kurdish book fair designed to contribute to creating a Kurdish identity. Apart from the exhibition of books by and about Kurds, the program includes lectures, readings and films on Kurdish history, language and culture, in the Kurdish, Turkish and German languages. Events in German serve to raise the awareness of Kurds in Austria partly because projects funded as intercultural activities have to include intercultural components, and because the recognition of Kurdish claims for a nation-state strongly depends on the support of existing nation-states. It is in this vein that the organizer of the book fair, Metin Can, stresses how important Austria has been for the formation of Kurdish identities: "Austria gives us the freedom to further our language and culture" (Kılıç, 2011).

Viennese Alevi cultural activities are part of a transnational Alevi movement which began in the late 1980s and grew in importance particularly after the attack on an Alevi culture festival in the Turkish town of Sivas. The focus of Alevi associations in Europe has mainly been on improving political and legal conditions for Alevis in Turkey (Sökefeld, 2006: 273–274). However, Alevis have also organized several international cultural festivals that "turn the imagination of community into a tangible experience", as Martin Sökefeld (2006: 277) put it. Two such festivals – called *Bin Yıllık Türküsü* (officially translated as "Saga of the Millennium") – took place in Cologne in May 2000 and in Istanbul in October 2002. In April 2012, two Austrian Alevi associations, the Alevi Youth Austria and the Federation of Alevi Communities in Austria, organized a similar event in the wider framework of Alevi Youth Europe and, together with other Alevi associations in Europe, *Gençlerin Türküsü* (officially translated as "The Epic of the Youth"). Like the two previous festi-



vals, the Viennese event included a large number of Alevi youths performing on stage, among whom hundreds of *saz*<sup>4</sup> players and a choir of several hundred people. It took place at the *Wiener Stadthalle*, a location for large popular concerts in Vienna, and attracted an audience of 8,000. All information provided by the organizers presents the event as an intercultural musical potpourri combining Austrian and Alevi traditions to narrate the story of fifty years of Turkish guestworker immigration to Austria (Sarı, 2012). However, this does not mean that the event was also addressing a majority audience, as was the case with regard to the Kurdish event: the only language used was Turkish. Rather it served to build a spirit of Alevi community, as became particularly obvious when the whole audience joined in for the last song “*Ötme Bülül Ötme?*” (Don’t Sing, Nightingale, Don’t Sing), a song based on a poem written by the Turkish-Alevi poet Pir Sultan (K., 2012).

### Conclusion

Viennese cultural life is marginally Turkish in quantitative terms. Viennese Turkish cultural activities, like those of other immigrants and their descendants, have mainly found recognition in funding streams specifically devoted to intercultural and multicultural activities, all the while remaining underrepresented in mainstream funding for the arts. This marginalization of immigrants and their descendants has also been observed in other contexts (Delhay, 2008; Stern *et al.*, 2010). However, further study is needed to identify the reasons for this marginalization. Social and ethnic discrimination plays a role, as has been shown for theatre (Educult, 2012), but the lack of knowledge with regard to such funds on the part of the immigrants also seems to be a major problem (Parzer, 2009). At the same time, my quantitative analysis highlights that the Viennese Turkish community shows a comparatively high interest in using these limited opportunities to make diversity visible within the Viennese cultural field. Further research will be necessary to identify the reasons for this high interest, but earlier research on immigrant literature (Sievers, 2008) implies that it may be linked to the fight to overcoming exclusion either from Austrian or from Turkish culture.

The limited funds have been used to initiate two processes of diversification in Viennese cultural life. The first is a process of “globalization from within”, which implies a questioning of alleged ethnic and cultural homogeneity, as illustrated by three examples from the Viennese Turkish theatre scene. These theatre projects developed different strategies for including their cultures of origin in their work in Vienna: an international approach which included Turkish actors and themes, an intercultural approach involving Turkish performances of music and theatre plays and a post-migrant approach which made reference to Turkish cultural traditions as part of Austrian cul-

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<sup>4</sup> The *saz* is a long-necked lute.

ture. This process has initiated a change in the understanding of what it has meant to be Viennese over the last thirty years, but this change has not yet reached what is perceived to be the centre of the Viennese theatre scene, such as the *Burgtheater*. Similar processes of diversification through Turkish migration have been observed for music (Sağlam and Hemetek, 2009) and literature (Adelson 2005; Cheesman 2007). The second process of diversification initiated by Viennese Turkish cultural activities has mainly served to make the diversity within the Turkish community visible in public life. It was openly pushed forward by Kurdish and Alevi cultural activities that are not interested in being accepted as art in the Viennese artistic field, but in getting Alevis and Kurds accepted as separate ethnic/cultural voices, not only in the Viennese Turkish community, but also in Turkey and worldwide. This process has, as yet, received very little attention and would need further scrutiny, in particular since it opposes the first process of diversification, often posited as the standard process of cultural diversification initiated by Turkish migration.

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