

MOVING — IN MOVING — ON

#8

TEH Startup Support
Programme 2020

Featuring:
Kharatian Art Center,
Gyumri, Armenia



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JUST BEFORE THIS PUBLICATION APPEARED, IN OCTOBER 2020, WAR BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN BROKE OUT AGAIN. THIS HAS SERIOUS IMPACT ON THE EMERGING CENTERS PRESENTED HERE. THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UNPREDICTABLE.

MOVING IN, MOVING ON

TEH Startup Support Programme 2020 Publication #8
Kharatian Arts Center, Gyumr, Armenia

Trans Europe Halles is a network of cultural centres initiated by citizens and artists. Our mission is to strengthen the sustainable development of non-governmental cultural centres and encourage new initiatives by connecting, supporting and promoting them. We facilitate international cooperation, provide opportunities for learning and sharing, and promote the practice, impact and value of arts and culture.

Read more at www.teh.net



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1. THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?



Through an open call, launched in July 2019, Trans Europe Halles (TEH) invited upcoming initiatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to apply for our Startup Support Programme.

Trans Europe Halles is a network of more than 100 cultural centres – initiated by citizens and artists who have revitalised vacant buildings for arts, culture and activism across Europe. We started our work in 1983 in Western Europe and we're now supporting emerging creative and cultural spaces in the Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries too. In 2017, we launched the Startup Support Programme – offering access to all the knowledge, the experience and the skills that we've gained in Europe over the past 37 years.

Why now?

From 2017-2021, we have been and continue to run a wide range of activities under the strapline **Factories of Imagination: Investing in Cultural Changemakers**. This project is motivated by an urgent concern: In many European countries, non-governmental cultural centres are under-resourced and have neither

the funds nor the conditions in place to fully achieve their potential. This is especially true in regions and countries where neither civil society initiatives nor critical artistic production is encouraged by public authorities – and indeed is sometimes actively discouraged.

This is true in the Balkans, which was the focus of the first year of our **Startup Support Programme**, and also in Ukraine and Belarus, the focus of 2019. The same is true for **Azerbaijan** and Armenia, although these two countries are different in many ways:

- In Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan, a combination of private wealth and state control has produced arts venues and institutes of a highly glitzy and globalised nature, mainly aimed at the local elite and international visitors. The independent scene, however, is barely visible and is severely restricted.



ANALYSIS



MATCHMAKING



COACHING



NETWORK

SEPTEMBER 2019
APPLICATION OPEN

OCTOBER 2019
APPLICATION CLOSED

OCTOBER 2019
SELECTION

MARCH/APRIL 2020
SCOPING VISIT ONLINE

JUNE 2020
TEH CONFERENCE ONLINE

JUNE 2020
WORKSHOP ONLINE

OCTOBER 2020
PUBLICATION

DECEMBER
TEH CAMP MEETING ONLINE

- **Armenia**, on the other hand, is redefining itself after its 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018. So far this has not resulted in a clear and transparent cultural policy to support citizen-driven initiatives. And yet, in the larger cities of both countries there are upcoming communities of defiant artists and activists who are determined to reclaim the vacant buildings and neglected public spaces in their cities.

Their ambitions dovetail with TEH's core values: to revitalise spaces that have the potential to become exciting social and artistic hubs. They are drawing on the energy of civil society in places where hapless or hostile public authorities, irresponsible capitalism and social conservatism are standing in the way of open-minded progress. At the same time, they have a strong understanding of their responsibility to mobilise the power of arts and creativity for the public good and conscious urban transformation.

The Startup Support Programme 2020 aimed to reach out to these kinds of initiatives across **Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia**. We launched a process that included an initial open call, a selection committee, scoping visits, conference participation, online coaching, organisational workshops and written reports, much of which was done online because of Covid-19 travel restrictions. Now we are very pleased to welcome three of these initiatives into the TEH network:

- Kharatian Arts Center in Gyumri, Armenia
- Salaam Cinema in Baku, Azerbaijan
- Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform in Baku, Azerbaijan

This case study will focus on Kharatian Arts Center in Gyumri, Armenia.

2. CHALLENGES OF CREATING ART SPACES IN ARMENIA: REGION & CONTEXT

In May 2018, Armenia had its own Velvet Revolution. Mass protests against corruption and cronyism brought down the Republican Party that had ruled for two decades. The new Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan of the My Step Alliance, has taken swift measures to clean up society. He has replaced judges, changed the tax system, lifted the immunity of oligarchs linked to organised crime and confiscated 'illegally obtained' property. The atmosphere remains explosive: fist-fights in parliament and on the street between political opponents are not uncommon. Tensions along the border with Azerbaijan led Pashinyan to remark:

"Any aggressive move against Armenia is an aggressive move against democracy in our region".

The situation was hopeful but not calm. And then Covid-19 came along. Strict measures were taken, including mass digital surveillance, but here too, the pandemic is not under control. The effects on the economy are disastrous. Workers who usually migrate during the summer months – last year 210,000 workers went to Russia alone – were forced to stay home. In previous years, roughly one-fifth of Armenia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was made up of remittances from abroad.

As elsewhere, the pandemic has exacerbated existing divisions in society in Armenia. Poverty and homelessness are on the rise. Protests are dealt with by force. Where such gaps open up, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. The centre-in-the-making that we are working with, the **Kharatian**

Arts Center in Gyumri – the country's second city – aims to be exactly such a place. The pandemic forced the tireless people working on the creation of this spectacular new/old building to take some time and rephrase their mission, sharpen their strategy and build new connections. The task they have set themselves remains formidable.

The concept they are pursuing – to transform a vacant and partly destroyed building into a shining meeting point of arts and culture – is highly unusual in Armenia, certainly on such a scale. Many of the essential ingredients that make it possible for civil society initiatives to flourish in Western Europe, where TEH was founded, are missing here. These ingredients include:

- clear structures for negotiating with municipalities about revitalising vacant property
- a transparent cultural policy that makes public funding accessible to new initiatives
- access to European and international funding options
- the education and mind-set among (younger) audiences and media to follow and understand innovative artists and their work
- a minimum of financial security for artists and arts professionals
- a certain understanding among municipal authorities of the potential contribution of new arts initiatives to the well-being and economy of their cities
- the ambition to rise above the provincial level through presenting a mix of local and international arts.

Even when these elements are all in place, it is never easy to create and maintain new spaces in old buildings. Across Western Europe, financial constraints, an overdose of regulation and a populist suspicion of the arts are conspiring to produce an environment of ongoing precarity, causing many new initiatives to falter and disappear – even before Covid-19 struck. Similar threats, in still bleaker form, exist in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan. In Armenia, the potential is there, but so far, even the most basic ingredients to create fair and sustainable cultural spaces are missing.

In spite of all these challenges, the future of the Kharatian Arts Center certainly looks promising and inspirational. Getting to know the initiative better from a distance – through online conversations, practical assistance and workshops – we discovered how precarious the current situation really is and how much support they will need to realise their dreams.

The challenges are daunting. But the people behind this initiative are working day and night, throughout these insecure and unpredictable times, to achieve their ambitions.

All three of the startups we worked within Belarus and Ukraine certainly look promising and inspirational. Getting to know them better – through our scoping visits, online conversations and local workshops – we discovered how precarious their situation really is and how much local and international support they will need to move from their current situation to the realisation of their dreams.

The challenges are daunting. But although their environment is insecure, these three inspirational initiatives are working day and night to realise their ambitions.

WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A PLACE WHERE GRAVITY WAS ONCE SUCH A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE, WHERE THE EARTHQUAKE BROUGHT SUCH TERROR AND LOSS. NOW, IN THAT SAME PLACE, WITHIN THOSE SAME WALLS, THE BUILDING CAN LITERALLY FLOAT, EVEN SOAR. AND THE PEOPLE WHO USE THE BUILDING WILL THEMSELVES BE LIFTED, BOTH LITERALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. DANCE HAS THAT SAME VOCATION. WE WANT TO TAUT GRAVITY.

**AZAD CHICHMANIAN
ARCHITECT OF KHARATIAN ARTS CENTER**

3. CASE STUDY: KHARATIAN ARTS CENTER, GYUMRI, ARMENIA

Azad Chichmanian is the world-class Canadian architect with Armenian roots who has created the design for the Kharatian Arts Center. In the quote above, he is talking about the former cultural centre of the railway company, on the square facing the Gyumri train station. The huge earthquake of 1988 destroyed the building. Only the walls were left standing. Over the following decades, the structure got more and more dilapidated. In 2004, it was declared a monument of national importance.

In 2019, the municipality of Gyumri signed a memorandum of understanding with Ballet 2021, the company behind the Kharatian Arts Center, for the transfer of the property rights of the building and the surrounding area, free of charge, for 99 years. Chichmanian's design imagines a balloon-shaped main hall floating between and above the remaining walls, which can also be used for high-quality sound recordings, surrounded by studios and offices, a gallery and a library, a kitchen, dressing rooms and open work spaces. Also, there are high expectations for the animation studio, which should bring new energy and investment. Estimated building costs total €11 million.

It all started with ballet. The artistic mastermind behind the project is **Roudolf Kharatian**, the legendary dancer, choreographer, director, teacher and painter. Baryshnikov was his classmate in St. Petersburg. He was the founder of ARKA Ballet in Washington, DC and the artistic director of the National Ballet of Armenia. His choreographies have been performed around the world. He founded Ballet 2021 in 2012. At the age of 73 is still a passionate teacher, a philosopher of dance and a gentle, spirited human being. His energy is unstoppable: he regarded the lockdown almost as a personal insult.

Ballet 2021's Executive Director is **Lilit Petrosyan**. With a background in linguistics, economics and civil society organisation management, and more than 20 years experience in marketing, development and communications, she has educated herself to become an all-round cultural manager. She is fully dedicated to doing all the hard work behind the scenes in order to make the floating building happen:

"This is about never giving up. We could give up on this idea, because the challenges are too big, and choose another destination. But we know that there will be investments in the building sooner or later, and it's a cultural monument, so it cannot be destroyed. Someone will have to bring it back to life – so why not us?"

Close to the borders with Turkey and Georgia, Gyumri is a two-hour drive from Yerevan, Armenia's capital city. It has largely recovered from the earthquake. The cobblestone streets, the art nouveau architecture, the Black Fortress and the trendy café's make it a popular tourist destination. The new government is working to decentralise arts and culture across the country, outside of bustling Yerevan, but at the moment, Gyumri has no suitable theatre or music hall.

The Kharatian Arts Center will change this. Its grand venue will be open for local and international performing arts, educational activities, a dance academy, recordings, animation, residencies, workshops, summer camps and exhibitions. It aims to bring the city back to life and work as a cross-roads between the East and the West, between tradition and experiment.

But there is much work to be done. Lilit and Roudolf have prepared everything: the artistic vision, the legal and the organisational structure, the building

and the programming budgets, the business model – all packaged in appealing promotional material, under the motto: The future of creative Gyumri is here. They are knocking on all the doors: funders, politicians, international bodies. But right now, neither of them earns an income from the project, and nothing will move until one major donor takes the first step.

The Ministry of Culture is still stuck in its own post-Soviet procedures. Everyone knows Roudolf, of course, but there is no system in place to support an independent initiative on this scale. Only recently, Lilit has succeeded in getting the attention of the Prime

Minister, through his head of staff. She says:

"This is the advantage of the new government: it doesn't matter anymore if you have personal connections, the only thing that counts is that this is a project of national interest. Things operate very slow, because the tools of corruption no longer work, but they operate."

The Prime Minister's letter, announcing this as a project of state importance, set things in motion. The Mayor of Gyumri, linked to the former regime and unwilling to cooperate so far, is



now ready to write a letter stating the municipal commitment, which is necessary to attract wider funding. The Governor of the region, appointed by the current Prime Minister is very cooperative. The Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Regional Development are now prepared to invest. Together, they are dividing the responsibilities to cover the whole project: the street and the public space leading from the train station to the building, the green zone surrounding the building – while external funders are expected to cover the expenses for the transformation of the building itself. With this commitment from local and national level, Ballet 2021 is now able to approach the European Bank and the World Bank.

European co-funding should have started much earlier, with support from the European External Action

Service (EEAS), the European Union (EU) delegation to Armenia. It carries out the EU foreign policy, including programme development cooperation through projects and grants. Lilit has met the head of the delegation and has sent neatly documented requests for almost two years now. The response has been evasive.

On behalf of TEH, we were supposed to have a meeting with them in Yerevan. Due to Covid-19, however, we were unable to travel, so we wrote a letter instead:

“As Ms. Petrosyan has mentioned before, both to you and to us, once you would be able to confirm the EEAS commitment, other international bodies such as the GIZ, UNDP and EBRD will be able to sign up as well. This in turn would provide the

Kharatian Arts Center with the basis to attract the private international donors they have been approaching over the past year. From our side, Trans Europe Halles is already providing international experts to work with the Kharatian team on their sustainable business model and fundraising strategies.”

So far there has been no response.

The Kharatian Arts Center has everything in place to create a new cultural model in the country, replacing the ones that are stuck in the 20th century. The EU should embrace this kind of arts centre, which could really help to shift this society into the next gear. It should invest and attract other investors, resulting not just in jobs, education, international visibility and urban regeneration – but also

in the artistic, mental and spiritual connections across borders that Roudolf Kharatian stands for.

In the meantime, TEH offered whatever support we could. We wrote letters, included Ballet 2021 as a partner in a Creative Europe application and organised workshops:

- by **Oksana Sarzhevskaya-Kravchenko**, Director of Izolyatsia in Kyiv, on strategic planning, fundraising and financial management;

- and by **Cecilia Martin**, brand strategist for culture, based in London, on the cultural branding of the centre, as a foundation for the fundraising campaign to be launched on 8 December, the day after the 31st anniversary of the earthquake, as a sign of the rebirth of the city – under the slogan Dance into a better future.



4. TO BE EUROPEAN

Each of these publications about the TEH Startups zooms in on a more general topic that is related to this specific case study but is also relevant to other emerging arts spaces.

It's a recurring theme among the emerging centres we work with in the TEH Startup Support Programme: they feel European, they speak European, they are European – but they are not treated as European. The programme has brought us to countries along and beyond the borders of the EU: Kosova, Romania, Greece, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia. So the cities we visit are not Berlin, Paris or Brussels. And yet, much of the street life feels familiar, no matter the obvious differences from one place to the next. And we certainly share a cultural vocabulary: music, film, TV shows, poetry, visual arts. We always have a lot of references in common.

Including Western European art in their programming comes naturally to these centres: Dutch animation at Anibar in Peja; French movie posters in the foyer of Cinema ARTA in Cluj; German DJs at Korpus in Minsk; Danish musicians at the Construction Festival in Dnipro. Nobody questions the organic way in which these interact with the local arts. This interaction, including whatever gets lost in translation, is exactly what motivates the organisers, the participating artists and the audience.

This is just a short and superficial sketch, and this hybrid Europeanness would merit a wider discussion, especially within a network like TEH. But the facts are obvious: these same centres that operate so naturally within a European sphere of influences have little or no access to the privileges, tools and funds that are available to like-minded centres in the heart of the EU. Travel is complicated. Knowledge of the contemporary Western European arts is available online, but not in state-funded universities, academies and cultural institutions.

Creative Europe and other EU funding is mostly out of reach. Western European

embassies have little interest, let alone money and capacity, to support the local independent arts scene. And the societies these centres are based in lack the tradition, capacity and will to open up a transparent public arts policy that corresponds to counterparts within the EU. The whole system seems to be organised as if to say: go away, forget about it, you are not European and you never will be.

This is certainly true in Baku, Yerevan and Gyumri, the cities where this year's Startups are about to enter the TEH network. These are cities that have every right – just as in cities like Sarajevo, Istanbul, Minsk and so on – to claim that they are at the crossroads between east and west, a meeting-point of languages and cultures. This is not a new claim. On the contrary, more often than not it's based on history and sometimes myth rather than on today's situation. It can sound like a tired or even desperate call for belonging, a yearning to find a way out of this depressing, corrupt and hopeless reality. It's true nonetheless. These cities are distinctly European in many ways. And exactly because the traditional European identity and importance are dissolving in a rapidly changing world, this call should be recognised and even valued.

The Kharatian Arts Center is based on a very European art form, ballet, and it draws its artistic and spiritual inspiration from sources across the European and Asian continent, including its own Armenian roots. Its main language, that of dance, is one without words. The art it aims to present transcends boundaries. This makes it all the more incomprehensible to see how the poetry of this ambitious enterprise has run into an institutional lack of interest and commitment on the European side – and all the more important to see how it works to break through those barriers.

- Go to teh.net/resources for workshop reports about the Kharatian Arts Center during the TEH Startup Support Programme 2020

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- + The pandemic makes us, our societies and nations look inwards. For the art world, it should be a wake-up call to do exactly the opposite: open up, cross boundaries, involve others. In a society where social and economic gaps are deepening, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. The Kharatian Arts Center aims to do exactly that. Over the past few months, they have called on international embassies and institutions, not just for support, but just to raise awareness to begin with. The response has been disappointing so far. Even at a time when so many of our members are struggling to survive, Trans Europe Halles wants to use our reputation and influence to make public representatives pay attention. If we are not able to do so in countries that we consider far away, we won't be able to do it at home.
- + The Kharatian Arts Center weaves together European, Asian and specifically Armenian influences. In that sense, it belongs to current-day Europe, a continent that will only flourish if it embraces all the languages and cultures that it now hosts. This hybrid Europeanness should be the topic of a wider debate, based on research and comparison, within the Trans Europe Halles network.
- + Because of its scale, the Kharatian Arts Center cannot simply be based on the bottom-up, collective energy without the financial means that drive many emerging centres across Europe. It will, by definition, rely on the collaboration with higher authorities, institutions and funders. But its agenda is also aimed at less affluent and educated communities. It will therefore have to develop a business model that accommodates both traditional and innovative elements. The classical model often used for traditional institutes of ballet and performing arts will have to make way for a more flexible, fluid type of organisation, finance and management style. Once this happens, it can serve as a model for lifting the traditional Armenian arts scene out of its rusty isolation.
- + It is the art itself that sets a high standard – at the Kharatian Arts Center as elsewhere. The quality and sophistication of the art should fend off ills that have polluted so many arts initiatives before: opportunism, nepotism, intellectual laziness. This is not easy in an environment of power structures that have no regard for contemporary art. Nevertheless, the standard is there, and it will guide this ambitious enterprise towards its realisation.

Two international experts worked closely with TEH staff to make it all happen: Mykhailo Glubokyi is the development director of IZOLYATSIA, a platform for cultural initiatives and IZONE creative community.

Chris Keulemans, a travelling writer and moderator, was the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is also the author of this report.

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