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Engaging Civil Society in Turkey and the EU: Can They Break Through the Deadlock?

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Engaging Civil Society in Turkey and the EU: Can They Break Through the Deadlock?

Özge Zihnioğlu*

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Abstract

At a time when Turkey's relations with the European Union have been frayed and official channels of communication are neither stable nor effective, civil society offers an important avenue of interaction. This paper looks at whether and how civil society organizations can influence public opinion in Turkey and across the European Union for closer cooperation. Accordingly, it first examines how civil society actors mobilized around Turkey's European Union membership bid in the early years of Turkey's candidacy. The paper explores the earlier efforts of prominent civic actors, and discusses the enabling factors. After a brief overview of the changing conditions, the paper then suggests different ways in which civil society can influence public opinion in Turkey and across the European Union today. In so doing, the paper considers the challenges that lie ahead.

Introduction

Lively relations during the initial years of Turkey's European Union candidacy soon gave way to a period of stagnation. The reform process and the membership talks first lost pace, then came to a halt. This has been followed in recent years by a turbulent period marked by rapid ups and downs.

EU–Turkey relations were shaken with the EU's strong condemnation of excessive police force against demonstrators during the Gezi protests in 2013. The launching of visa liberalization dialogue later that year, Turkey's declaration of 2014 as the "Year of Europe" and the announcement of the New EU Strategy had little impact on reinvigorating the relations. In response to the migration crisis, Turkey and the EU signed a Joint Action Plan in late 2015 that identified a series of actions. Most notably, the EU pledged to mobilize new funds to Turkey outside the pre-accession assistance, and in return Turkey would step up its patrolling activity and implement policies to facilitate Syrian refugees' access to public services. This collaboration was deepened with the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 that included an arrangement whereby Turkey agreed to take back new irregular immigrants whose application is found inadmissible.[1] The rapprochement following the migration crisis was short-lived. Turkish officials criticized

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1 EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement.

the EU for its rather slow reaction to the events unfolding on the night of the putsch in July 2016, while the EU leaders were alarmed by the purges that took place in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. Since 2016, tensions have once again been building between Turkey and the EU, as manifested in reactions by EU leaders to the purges, concern over EU citizens behind bars in Turkey, and diplomatic rows in several EU countries during electoral and referendum campaigns. In particular, the German and Dutch ban on political rallies held by Turkish government officials to address the Turkish diaspora, and Erdoğan's Nazi comparisons to Germany and the Netherlands that followed suit, have served to heighten tensions. While calls made in the European Parliament and in several EU capitals to freeze and even end the accession process are left unanswered, relations have clearly deteriorated over the past five years.

How to break the current deadlock in Turkey–EU relations and achieve closer cooperation is a challenge confronting politicians, bureaucrats and scholars alike. Different platforms for high-level dialogue[2] provide a communication channel for politicians. Important as they are, however, these channels and their sustainability are vulnerable to sudden changes in the political environment.

What may be encouraging here is the resilient public support in Turkey for EU membership. Different surveys reveal this general trend of public support despite the ups and downs in politics. A good part of this support is a result of the Turkish public's continued perception of the EU as an anchor for Turkey's struggling economy and faltering democracy. The issue is how to take on board this public support in a constructive way.

EU integration is not only a result of the deliberate actions of policy-makers to adjust rules. Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of a parallel development of linkages between different social actors that combine previously unconnected actors – what some have termed as "informal integration".[3] Informal integration results from "intense patterns of interaction" following the dynamics of markets, communication networks and social exchange rather than the intervention of governmental decisions. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations, are important agents in informal integration.

Turkish civil society has come to the forefront during the early years of Turkey's EU candidacy. Various civil society organizations across different ethnic, religious, social and political lines emerged as Euro-enthusiasts and actively supported Turkey's EU membership bid.[4] Their support, in return, has been instrumental in gaining and sustaining the momentum of the accession process in the 2000s. Today, at a time when official channels of communication are neither stable nor effective, it is timely to revisit the potential role of civil society in Turkey's relations with the EU. Despite deteriorating relations, civil society continues to offer an important channel for interaction. In addition, the EU's civil society support in Turkey not only continues but is expanding, while both sides have kept this dimension apart from daily political conflicts. Given this framework, what, if any, role civil society can play to move forward from this conundrum, and whether and how it can influence public opinion in favour of closer cooperation are relevant questions.

1. Turkish Civil Society and Support for the EU Accession Process

During the years immediately after the announcement of Turkey's EU candidacy, several civil society groups took action in support of Turkey's EU membership aspiration. Their efforts were multi-pronged. Several civil society groups focused on EU-related issues, mobilized their members and the public at large, and lobbied at home and abroad. Some acted on their own, while many more acted as part of established broad-based coalitions. Some other organizations acted in collaboration with their counterparts in EU countries.

For instance, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) devoted substantial energy to mobilizing support for Turkey's EU membership bid during this period. TÜSİAD established an EU Harmonization Committee as well as commissions and working groups to follow the harmonization work carried out vis-à-vis negotiation chapters.[5] It organized meetings with academicians, bureaucrats and business people to discuss the reform process. It also led publicity campaigns to inform public opinion. In 1997, even before the EU's announcement of Turkey's candidacy, TÜSİAD published a report on Turkey's democratization, which touched upon a number of sensitive political issues and put forward concrete proposals for reform. Through seminars, it fostered public debates on issues raised in this report. The report also generated controversy, and came under

2 For instance Association Council meetings and High-Level Political Dialogues meetings established by the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement.

3 William Wallace, *The Transformation of Western Europe*, London, Pinter and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1990, p. 54.

4 Ayhan Kaya and Raffaele Marchetti, "Europeanization, Framing Competition and Civil Society in the EU and Turkey", in *Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers*, No. 6 (February 2014), p. 7, https://www.iai.it/en/node/1594.

5 Hakan Altinay, "Does Civil Society Matter?", in Michael Lake (ed.), *The EU & Turkey. A Glittering Prize Or a Millstone?*, London, The Federal Trust, 2005, p. 109; Serap Atan, "Europeanisation of Turkey Peak Business Organisations and Turkey-EU Relations", in Mehmet Uğur and Nergis Canefe (eds), *Turkey and European Integration. Accession Prospects and Issues*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 107. See also TÜSİAD annual reports during this period, available in Turkish at https://tusiad.org/en/tuesiad-annual-reports.

major criticism from the military and state elites as well as some of TÜSİAD's own members.[6] TÜSİAD also lobbied lawmakers to accelerate the reform process, and even opened a permanent representative office in Ankara to facilitate its efforts in this direction.

In addition, TÜSİAD lobbied for support in the EU and across European capitals. It organized meetings at the European Parliament, European Commission and permanent delegations in Brussels. In the run-up to the Copenhagen Summit, TÜSİAD placed an advertisement in the leading newspapers in EU member states to start Turkey's accession negotiations without delay. TÜSİAD actively participated in the workings of the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederation in Europe (UNICE), now known as BusinessEurope, and conveyed its messages to representatives of businesses across Europe.

The Economic Development Foundation (İktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı, İKV)[7] was equally active during this period. In Turkey, İKV addressed both the business sector and the public at large. In the early 2000s, İKV held seminars on Turkey's EU accession process in several provinces to raise awareness on this topic. In this, it enjoyed the support of public institutions, local governments, universities and civil society organizations. Soon after the accession negotiations started, İKV gave training courses on Regulatory Impact Assessment and carried out a project on the effects of horizontal implementation of the EU's *acquis* on the leading Turkish sectors. İKV performed several activities at the EU level as well. It organized a series of seminars for experts at the EU institutions working on Turkey to give a better overview of Turkey's political, economic and cultural structure. It also brought members of the European Parliament and representatives of Turkish civil society together to create a discussion platform to better understand one another.[8]

During this period there were also several major collaborative efforts. One of the most prominent examples of this is the Turkey Platform. Following the invitation of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), over 250 civil society organizations came together to establish the Turkey Platform in 2002. Under the İKV's coordination, the Platform carried out intense communication and lobbying activities, both in Turkey and in the EU.[9] For instance, in the run-up to the Copenhagen European Council in December 2002, the Platform adopted a declaration called "*Türkiye'nin yeri Avrupa Birliği'dir. Kaybedecek zamanımız yoktur*" [Turkey's place is in the European Union, there is no time to waste].[10]

Finally, the activities of various other actors boosted the pro-EU campaigns. For instance, broad-based civic initiatives were active during the early years of Turkey's candidacy. A well-known example of this is the European Movement 2002. This initiative rallied support for the adoption of political reforms and Turkey's accession into the EU. The Movement lobbied lawmakers and organized publicity campaigns. It is best-known for its publicity campaign in 2006 in support of political reforms in Turkey with the slogan "*Başka yarın yok*" [There is no other tomorrow]. The Movement attracted well-known figures from academia, media, business and the arts, such as İshak Alaton (businessman), Mustafa Altıoklar (director), Murathan Mungan (poet/author) and Arzum Onan (actress), and enjoyed wide media coverage for its campaigns and activities. In addition, the Movement was active in several EU capitals including Brussels.[11] Universities, also, were active during this period. They organized informative seminars on EU affairs, and opened research centres with a focus on the EU.

Civil society groups moved to the forefront and gained visibility as Turkey's accession gained momentum in the early 2000s. Even then, however, they were not a genuinely strong actor. These groups could make an impact because they made good use of the conjunctural opportunities. Firstly, in general terms, there was a positive atmosphere within the EU regarding Turkey's accession process, which overshadowed the critical voices. Secondly, during this period, the AKP government prioritized Turkey's relations with the EU and devoted substantial energy in that direction. The AKP enjoyed widespread public support in this, as EU accession had become a goal of different sectors of society in Turkey. In addition, the AKP government was open to the contributions and participation of civil society. There were structured and coordinated dialogue mechanisms. For instance, the EU Communication Group was a joint initiative bringing together the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat General for the EU Affairs and the Directorate General of Press and Information on the one hand, and TOBB, TÜSİAD and İKV on the other. These groups worked together to identify prejudices against

6 Ziya Öniş, "Entrepreneurs, Citizenship and the European Union: The Changing Nature of State-Business Relations in Turkey", in E. Fuat Keyman and Ahmet İçduygu (eds), *Citizenship in a Global World. European Questions and Turkish Experiences*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 183.

7 The Economic Development Foundation was established in 1965 with the initiative of Istanbul Chamber of Commerce and Istanbul Chamber of Industry to inform Turkish business and the Turkish public on European integration and Turkey–EU relations.

8 See Economic Development Foundation website: *Projects: European Parliamentarians and Turkish Civil Society Dialogue Meetings*, https://oldweb.ikv.org.tr/icerik_en.asp?konu=projeler&baslik=PROJECTS

9 Economic Development Foundation, *50 Years. Turkey's EU Expert*, April 2015, https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/IKV50_yilBrosurENG.pdf.

10 Kemal Kirişci and Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, "Turkey on the Edges of the Convention on the 'Future of Europe'", in *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 2004), p. 184.

11 "Avrupa Hareketi 2002: ABye Katılalım" [European Movement 2002: Join the EU], in *Bianet*, 10 May 2002, https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/9871-avrupa-hareketi-2002-abye-katilalim.

Turkey in the EU public and inform relevant sectors on Turkey's recent efforts towards EU accession. In this way, Turkey's accession process captured momentum.

The work of the civil society groups was built on this existing momentum. In a way, these groups were sailing with the wind, not against it. What the civic actors achieved was to employ the right strategies to strengthen and maintain this momentum. They carried out intense and consistent communication, promotion and lobbying activities. In doing so they made successful use of their networks, and established strong partnerships and broad-based coalitions. Some campaigns enlisted individuals across the media, business, academia, the arts and culture, who helped disseminate and even popularize their messages and activities. Media support was particularly important as these campaigns and declarations have frequently found a place in the press, sometimes even free of charge.[12] In addition, the dialogue channels with state structures allowed campaigners to have regular dialogue with government officials, which enabled them to both follow and influence policy-making.

Finally, all this was coupled with an improving institutional and legal environment for Turkish civil society, thanks to the EU accession process.[13] This positive atmosphere not only encouraged the establishment and activities of civil society organizations, it also led many groups to champion the accession process.

However, not long after, the favourable conditions of the early 2000s changed. Firstly, Turkey's EU accession process had lost steam both in Turkey and in the EU as early as the late 2000s. There were several reasons for this, some of them interrelated. On the one hand, enlargement fatigue, the financial crisis and the rise of right-wing political parties created an enlargement aversion across the EU. This has not boded well for Turkey's membership prospects, already contested on not only economic and political grounds, but also cultural and societal ones.[14] In addition, the shy scepticism of some EU leaders towards Turkey's accession during the early years of its candidacy was now expressed more loudly. On the other hand, with other items in the Turkish government's foreign policy agenda, the EU accession bid lost its priority. With that, EU-related issues dropped off the Turkish media radar as well. All this has resulted in a de-Europeanization process whereby the EU has ceased to provide a normative and political context affecting politics, policy and public debates in Turkey.[15]

Secondly, the mood of optimism surrounding civic groups has given way with the changing landscape of civil society in Turkey. The fast-paced reform process of the early 2000s had slowed by mid-decade. This left several issues pertaining to civil society half-finished or untouched, giving rise to problems, particularly in implementation.

Less than a decade later, the government's conciliatory approach had disappeared. In 2013, the ban on International Workers' Day celebrations in Taksim Square was reinstated. After three years of peaceful demonstrations, the government denied access to the square on account of construction work being carried out. While some civil society groups and civic activists continued to organize campaigns and protests,[16] these often faced excessive force by riot police to disperse the protestors. The Gezi protests in the summer of 2013 are considered not only a culminating point due to their scale, but also a turning point, as the legal and political environment for civil society deteriorated soon after the protests.

In the meantime, the legal environment for civic engagement also deteriorated. In March 2015, in response to widespread protests against the government's decision not to intervene in ISIS's Kobane siege, the Turkish parliament passed a set of restrictive laws. The new laws considerably strengthened the powers of the police during demonstrations, extending police authority to the detriment of rights and freedoms.

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 became yet another turning point for Turkish civil society. Only days after the coup attempt, a state of emergency was imposed to investigate those responsible in a more efficient way. However, many people are of the opinion that the crackdown has become a tool to silence any opposing view.[17] A large number of arrests, closure of civil society organizations and restrictions on public gatherings significantly narrowed civic space. What is politically permissible in terms of civil society activities has changed, putting new pressure on activists and civil society groups. A presidential decree in July 2018 expanded the President's authority over civil society organizations through the State Supervisory Board.[18] The decree

12 Hakan Altinay, "Does Civil Society Matter?", cit., p. 111.

13 Özge Zihnioğlu, *European Union Civil Society Policy and Turkey. A Bridge Too Far?*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 140-154.

14 Senem Aydın-Düzgit, *Constructions of European Identity. Debates and Discourses on Turkey and the EU*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

15 Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Alper Kaliber, "Encounters with Europe in an Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a De-Europeanising Candidate Country?", in *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (2016), p. 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1155282.

16 Özge Zihnioğlu, "The Prospects of Civic Alliance: New Civic Activists Acting Together with Civil Society Organizations", in *Voluntas*, published online 10 September 2018, DOI 10.1007/s11266-018-0032-9.

17 AP, "Turkey Detains Editor and Staff at Opposition Cumhuriyet Newspaper", in *The Guardian*, 31 October 2016, https://gu.com/p/5a65m.

18 Turkey's Presidential Decree No. 5 of 15 July 2018 on a State Supervisory Board, Official Gazette No. 30479 of 15 July 2018,

empowers the Board with the authority to conduct administrative investigations and issue dismissals as a precautionary measure. A growing sense of uncertainty and fear has become the defining characteristic of Turkish civil society, especially since the coup attempt.[19] In turn, this has led many groups to shy away from carrying out activities and holding publicity campaigns on politically sensitive issues.

2. Turkish Civil Society and Influencing Public Opinion

The recent developments have considerably narrowed Turkish civil society's range of action and impact. Under the current circumstances, then, how could Turkish civil society organizations influence public opinion in Turkey and across the EU in favour of closer cooperation?

2.1 Public Opinion in Turkey

Identifying which strategies Turkish civil society organizations should adopt and what issues they should focus on requires first a careful look at Turkish public opinion on Turkey–EU relations. Despite varying figures and recent fluctuations, different surveys point to continuing public support in Turkey for EU membership.[20] This is important considering that the relations have had to endure a series of crises and that the accession process is de facto on hold. That said, there is persistent disbelief in Turkish society that Turkey will ever manage to become a member of the EU.[21]

Turkish civil society, on its own, cannot revitalize the relations between Turkey and the EU. However, it can focus on issues that could take on board societal support in a constructive way. The findings of the İKV's 2017 survey on Perception of Europe and Support for EU Membership in Turkish Public Opinion are telling in this respect. Over 38 per cent of respondents said that at least one of the reasons why they support Turkey's EU membership process is to benefit from "free movement, the right of settlement and educational opportunities".[22] This shows just how important the Turkish public considers mobility to and within the EU. Accordingly, the achievement of visa liberalization is one issue that could have a significant impact on Turkish public opinion. The visa liberalization process is important not only because of the value Turkish people attach to mobility. It is often considered an expected step for an accession country, since all accession countries, except for Turkey, enjoy visa-free travel to Schengen countries. The delay in officially launching the visa liberalization process,[23] and its slow progress with still no end in sight, likely dampens public perception of the EU and the accession process. Its successful completion could bring new momentum to the accession process, not least by stimulating public enthusiasm.

In addition, civil society organizations in Turkey can help keep a certain engagement with key European debates, such as Brexit and European Parliament elections. This will help Turkish society stay connected and informed on EU affairs. Considering that news outlets are restricted, civil society organizations can have a stronger social media presence.

All that said, we should be cautious with our expectations from civil society. It is true that during the early 2000s civil society organizations became increasingly vocal in support of the democratic reform process. However, much of this pressure was confined to major interest groups. The extent of these organizations' power and influence in particular over the media was crucial in making their voices heard. Today, Turkish civil society remains weak and divided, except for a limited group of actors who find it increasingly difficult to undertake their work under the current circumstances. The effectiveness of EU aid in civil society empowerment has been limited and ambivalent,[24] while for some civil society groups, the EU has lost its attractiveness as a reference point for their work.[25] Considering the high polarization in Turkey, it is a challenge to bring together civil society groups representing various interests and different segments of Turkish society. In addition, influencing public opinion requires civil society actors that can better penetrate society. Therefore, the task at hand should also be focusing on the organic growth of Turkish civil society. If we direct too much attention towards the instrumental role of civil society, we might risk submerging that very

http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/07/20180715-2.pdf.

19 E. Fuat Keyman, Nathalie Tocci and Michael Werz (eds), *Trends in Turkish Civil Society*, Washington, Center for American Progress, July 2017, p. 15, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/07/10/435475.

20 See for instance the regular surveys of Eurobarometer (http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion), Kadir Has University's surveys on *Social and Political Trends in Turkey* (http://ctrs.khas.edu.tr/25/turkiye-siyasal-sosyal-egilimler-anketleri), and Economic Development Foundation's surveys on *Perception of Europe and Support for EU Membership in Turkish Public Opinion* (https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?ust_id=70&id=207).

21 See surveys on *Social and Political Trends in Turkey* carried out by Kadir Has Center for Turkish Studies, http://ctrs.khas.edu.tr/25/turkiye-siyasal-sosyal-egilimler-anketleri.

22 Economic Development Foundation, *Türkiye Kamuoyunda AB Desteği ve Avrupa Algısı 2017* [Perception of Europe and Support for EU Membership in Turkish Public Opinion 2017], January 2018, https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?ust_id=207&id=3115.

23 The visa liberalization process for Turkey was officially launched in late 2013, several years after membership talks started.

24 Özge Zihnioğlu, "European Union Civil Society Support and the Depoliticisation of Turkish Civil Society", in *Third World Quarterly*, published online 24 December 2018, DOI 10.1080/01436597.2018.1545567.

25 Büke Boşnak, "Europeanisation and De-Europeanisation Dynamics in Turkey: The Case of Environmental Organisations", in *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), p. 75-90.

role from view.

2.2 Public Opinion in the EU

Despite all negative developments and the current unfavourable environment, neither Turkey nor the EU is willing to end the membership talks.[26] On the contrary, both sides are willing to engage further in a number of areas of joint interest, including migration, visa facilitation, trade, energy and counter-terrorism. In these areas, cooperation and progress are possible, feasible and at times necessary.

The willingness to cooperate and the possibility for progress in certain areas can be seen as a window of opportunity for Turkish civil society to influence public opinion across the EU. In these areas, civil society organizations can help step up cooperation. For instance, on the modernization of the customs union, TÜSİAD and the Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (Türkiye İşveren Sendikalari Konfederasyonu, TISK) have been lobbying EU institutions and politicians, at times with their European counterparts at BusinessEurope. Other civil society organizations, particularly interest groups, can follow suit with their European counterparts.

There is also potential scope for engagement on certain policy issues that pertain to common challenges. One such area is migration. There is already a wide range of collaborative activities and partnerships on migration among civic organizations in Turkey and Greece. These organizations engage with different stakeholders in both countries to exchange information and experience, and raise awareness regarding migrants and their rights. The civic organizations in EU countries could frame the benefits of their cooperation with Turkish organizations as finding common solutions to EU-wide problems. In addition, these partnerships could be extended to other EU countries that host immigrants.

While there is a strong reaction in the EU to Turkey's democratic backsliding, there are still civil society groups that support closer cooperation with Turkey. Turkish civil society organizations could reach out to EU citizens together with these organizations. Some of the civil society organizations and EU veterans in Turkey already have established relations. But such efforts should not be limited to the "usual suspects", to achieve more extensive influence over the EU public opinion. This is easier said than done. The EU's Dialogue Programmes have been important in starting new dialogues and establishing relations between several like-minded civil society organizations in Turkey and the EU. However, research shows that these relations do not sustain for long and tend to break off soon after the projects are completed.[27]

Focusing only on existing or potential areas of cooperation bears the risk of shifting the framework of relations from the accession process to a transactional one. In a transactional relation, Turkey and the EU can have close cooperation and achieve their aimed goals in given areas. However, a transactional relationship, practical as it may be, is still undesirable because such a relationship is not based on conditionality and lacks the normative pillar that the accession process has. What is desirable is to carry Turkey–EU relations forward within the framework of the accession process based on conditionality. After all, Turkey has been pursuing EU membership not only for economic gains and free movement but also to enhance its political and legal system and achieve an advanced level of democracy and fundamental rights regime.[28] An active accession process based on conditionality makes this possible. In addition, transactional relations cannot reignite the accession process. Both the 2016 Positive EU–Turkey Agenda[29] and the various high-level dialogue meetings on areas of joint interest have failed to revitalize Turkey's accession process. Therefore all civil society work within Turkey and in the EU should encourage closer cooperation not as transactional ties but as part of the accession process.

Conclusion

In the early 2000s, several pro-EU civil society organizations in Turkey both reflected and built their efforts on the positive mood, political will and widespread support for EU membership in Turkey. They established strong coalitions with different stakeholders and carried out persistent publicity campaigns both inside Turkey and across EU capitals. This helped them to accelerate the momentum for accession negotiations. Over the years, not only has Turkey's accession process lost its momentum, shrinking civic space in Turkey has limited the scope of civil society activity.

Today, while Turkish civil society on its own cannot put Turkey's accession process back on track, it may still influence public opinion. On the one hand, civil society groups could make use of public support among Turks for their country's EU membership. On the other hand, to influence public opinion across the EU, they could reach out and collaborate with their counterparts in the EU

26 While there are calls in the EU to suspend and even end the accession talks, for now their impact seems to be negligible.

27 Özge Zihnioğlu, *European Union Civil Society Policy and Turkey. A Bridge Too Far?*, cit., p. 124.

28 Çiğdem Nas et al., *IKV Report on Turkey-EU Relations: Keeping Together in the Face of Challenges*, Istanbul, Economic Development Foundation, June 2017, p. 16, https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?id=1922.

29 European Commission, *Positive EU-Turkey Agenda Launched in Ankara*, 17 May 2012, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-359_en.htm.

countries on issues of common interest or pertaining to common challenges. That said, we should be wary of an overly instrumental approach to civil society, and should also focus attention on its growth and on enhancing the resilience of Turkey at the societal level. Ultimately, to mobilize public opinion, we need a strong, independent and vibrant civil society. Mobilizing public opinion is an uphill battle, but one with the potential for success and a worthwhile payoff.

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