

# Engaging Civil Societies in Turkey and Europe: Can They Break Through the Deadlock?

by Sinan Ekim

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## ABSTRACT

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project established a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. Launched in 2012 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Centre (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator, GTE has been focusing on specific aspects of EU–Turkey relations, covering migration, security, economics, energy and civil society. Now in its fifth cycle, the project takes a more comprehensive look at all pillars of this dynamic. The latest workshop of the fifth cycle convened in Istanbul in February 2019, and discussed the role of civil society in the EU–Turkey relationship. Looking at how civil societies in both Turkey and across the European Union have championed Turkey’s bid for EU membership over the years, the workshop asked whether they could still influence public opinion on both sides in favour of closer cooperation, especially now that Turkey’s accession negotiations are at a standstill and the political relationship has been put on life support.

*Turkey | European Union | EU enlargement | Public opinion | Civil society*

**keywords**

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### Introduction

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### Session I: A closer look at some civil society organisations in Turkey

The first session revolved around the presentations of representatives from three leading civil society organisations (CSOs) in Turkey, namely Civil Society Development Center (STGM), Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TÜSEV) and the Economic Development Foundation (IKV). This section will give a brief overview of the missions and various activities of these organisations, and then discuss some of the common challenges they – along with other CSOs – face in their operations. Because the meeting was held under the Chatham House rule, the names of the representatives have been excluded from the report.

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· Report of the seminar “Engaging Civil Societies in Turkey and the EU: Can They Break Through the Deadlock?”, organised in Istanbul on 1 February 2019 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator under the Global Turkey in Europe V programme.

Founded in 2004, STGM seeks to strengthen the organisational capacity of CSOs in the country; represent the interests of civil society in important decision-making processes; and carry out advocacy campaigns. STGM is unique in that it functions as the first point-of-contact for the EU in terms of lending support to local CSOs. Between 2005 and 2019, it conducted 228 projects, organised under eight programmes, that focused on building a resilient civil society at the local and the grassroots level and provided technical and financial assistance to around 10,000 CSOs in the country. One of STGM's most influential initiatives, which ran under the slogan "Together We Change" (2008–09), lobbied for a greater freedom of association and saw the participation of 160 CSOs and around 3 million civilians. Another was "No Civil Constitution Without Us", which brought together over 100 CSOs and lobbied for civil society participation in the writing of a new constitution. Through dialogue and networking, STGM also lends support to activities and initiatives across many platforms, including those on autism, LGBTT rights, migration and refugee rights.



Tezcan Eralp Abay, Çisel İleri, Sezin Dereci.

TÜSEV was established in 1993 with the objective of strengthening the legal, fiscal and operational infrastructure of civil society organisations in Turkey. Promoting the EU accession process was, in fact, not among the foundational aims of the organisation, but became one of its focus areas over the years. TÜSEV's activities are grouped under four programmes, namely civil-society law reform, social investment, international relations and networking, and research and publications. TÜSEV also runs an influential database on legal and fiscal legislation that regulates the functioning of associations; lobbies for the creation of a legal framework that allows CSOs to operate more freely; and facilitates communication between the public sector and civil society. Furthermore, TÜSEV publishes annual monitoring reports and case studies; has developed a monitoring matrix to work on how to build enabling environments for the further development of CSOs; and has also released many advisory papers on how to actively participate in civil society, with commentaries on international standards of behaviour in this space as well as obstacles in national legislation that prevent such a space from being realised in Turkey.

In contrast to TÜSEV, IKV's founding mission is directly connected to EU–Turkey relations. Founded by Turkish business communities two years after the signing of the Ankara Agreement in 1965, its overarching goal was to monitor what was happening in Europe in terms of business development, trade and economy. Although the scope of its operations has widened over the years to include issues that are not linked to Turkey's economic and business interests, representing Turkish business communities still remains one of its chief objectives. To this end, IKV conducts studies and organises seminars, conferences and colloquia on issues

that are at the forefront of EU–Turkey relations in a given year, thereby seeking to strengthen Turkey’s relations with other countries and economic groups; ensure closer cooperation between business communities in Turkey and abroad; as well as inform the public on new developments within the EU. One of IKV’s key projects is “Presidencies and Turkey” (2009–now), which is held in each country that holds the rotating EU presidency, and brings together the CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the host country to raise awareness on the state of the EU–Turkey relationship. More recently, IKV held seminars on the importance of modernising the Customs Union, in 22 provinces in 2017 and 2018.



Seminar participants

The extremely polarised political climate was identified as one of the top challenges that CSOs face; in fact, it was argued that relations between CSOs and public authorities are at their worst state in the past 20 years, with the traditional channels of communications effectively sealed off. The representatives remarked on how the structure of decision-making has shifted into an unfamiliar form where the older chain-of-command no longer exists and the new system is still vague and opaque, with very few explanations on which official or body is responsible for what sort of legislation.

Added to these challenges is the shrinking civil society space – both at the national and the global level – and correlatively, the absence of a coordinated agenda on civil society, which prevents the organisations from forging a common vision and collaborating towards a common goal. Indeed, before CSOs can work on anything, Turkey needs guarantees for freedom of expression and association, as well as a political and legal framework that trusts and is willing to engage with civil society, and finds value in creating “an enabling environment” for civil society development. As long as the current situations persists, it will remain very difficult – if not impossible – for CSOs to effect any substantive change. Needless to mention, the absence of civil society in EU–Turkey negotiations does not portend well for the future, because the EU–Turkey relationship affects all segments of society. As the representatives underlined, the accession process is not a merely political concern that should only occupy the ministries and public officials. It also closely impacts the interests of the private sector and the wider public – which the CSOs are meant to represent and at the moment cannot.

### Session II: What role can civil society play in EU–Turkey relations?

Özge Zihnioğlu, associate professor at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, kicked off the afternoon session by presenting her paper, “Engaging civil societies in

Turkey and the EU: Can they break through the deadlock?"<sup>1</sup> Zihnioğlu's paper tackles the question of how to break through the current impasse in the EU–Turkey relationship, and asks – at a time when official channels of communications have effectively been shut down – whether civil society organisations could offer an alternative avenue for interaction.



Mia Forbes Pirie (left) and Özge Zihnioğlu (right).

Zihnioğlu starts her paper by discussing the level and scope of civil society activism in the early 2000s, immediately after Ankara had announced its candidacy. She puts forward several examples – such as the activities and publicity campaigns of Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) and IKV – that highlight the success of civil society groups in informing the public on key issues connected to Turkey's accession process, and rallying them behind the country's EU bid.

More importantly, she argues that these CSO-driven initiatives were effective in this period, because they were able to “make good use of conjectural opportunities”. Zihnioğlu shows how the AKP's foreign policy priorities – which placed a large premium on strengthening relations with the EU at the time – created an environment conducive to promoting closer alignment with the EU norms and regulations, as well as closer collaboration with its institutions, and how the CSOs were able to ride on the party's coattails.

Soon, however, these favourable conditions started to break down. Almost all Turkey-watchers will be familiar with what happened. On the European side, the financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of Euro-sceptic movements fuelled an aversion against the Union's further enlargement. In the meantime, the pro-EU reform agenda in Turkey was slowing down, as a result of which the legal and political environment for civic engagement quickly deteriorated, demonstrated first in the government's response to the Gezi Park protests in 2003 and then in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Most recently, the new presidential system that entered into effect after the parliamentary elections of June 2018 include regulations that significantly curtail the scope of the “politically permissible”.

How then can the CSOs influence public opinion under these circumstances? Zihnioğlu agrees that the current environment has enfeebled many CSOs, which are now unable to conduct research or carry out publicity campaigns for fear of retribution. She warns that, as things stand, it will become increasingly more difficult to bring together different organisations and channel their efforts towards a greater goal. However, Zihnioğlu puts forward that CSOs could still work on lifting

<sup>1</sup> Published as *Global Turkey in Europe Working Paper No. 20*, available at <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10091>.

the public's mood, and although the membership negotiations are effectively dormant, the CSOs could show the public that the EU still holds much to strive for. For instance, the benefits of granting visa liberalisation to Turkish nationals is one area that these groups could work more on. They could also reach out to their counterparts across the EU and collaborate on joint projects that highlight the benefits of a European future for Turkey, as Zihnioğlu advises.

The paper ends on a word of caution: Zihnioğlu asserts that one should be careful not to build too many expectations into the work of CSOs. At the end of the day, they cannot “salvage” the accession process. And instead of taking an “instrumental approach” to civil society, the chief objective should be to ensure its resilience and further growth, especially against an environment that is becoming increasingly more inhospitable.

### What is in store for Turkey's civil society?

In the discussion that followed Zihnioğlu's presentation, some participants pointed out that the paper should contextualise the bilateral relations in the early 2000s as form of informal integration. They added that this period was radically different from the 1970s and the 1980s, when there was formal engagement at the official level, but not at the informal level in the form of civil society activism. Comparing and contrasting two periods and briefly remarking on the important turning points in between, participants argued, would be helpful in setting a “more complete” stage for the later discussion.

Some also put forward that the paper should be clearer on how, in what ways and to what extent the CSOs in Europe influence European public opinion in favour of closer bilateral ties. For instance, Zihnioğlu argues that the CSOs in Turkey should work to mitigate disappointment by lobbying for visa liberalisation – an issue that is of much concern to Turkish nationals. In return, how do the European organisations frame the benefits of deeper collaboration with Ankara – or put differently, what are the aspects of Turkey that are an easier “sell” to the European public?

Some called attention to the several internal issues that Europe is beset with, including the erosion of rule-of-law in Poland and Hungary, Brexit and economic slowdown in Italy – which means that the EU has less bandwidth to deal with other, seemingly less important issues, namely the state of civil society in Turkey. Accordingly, the paper should address how civil movements could “prove” to Europe that Turkey still matters. Connected to this, Zihnioğlu was asked to spend more time on discussing what is being done in terms of cross-country CSO cooperation on key political issues and common challenges. As some underlined, one way of keeping Europe interested in Turkey is showing Europe that Turkey is still interested in belonging to its fold: in this sense, participants wondered whether civil society groups in Turkey have run any campaigns on the “hot topics” on the EU agenda, such as the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Another point raised was how the political environment in Turkey did not promote a culture of voluntarism and activism: more and more people do not want to be perceived as activists, fearing that the term has become associated with anti-government opposition and could trigger retribution. Furthermore, there is also the problem of rampant conspiracy theories that the Turkish public has proven more than ready to buy into. For instance, as soon as an organisation accepts funding from a non-Turkish source, it runs the risk of being an object of such blame. In this sense, some pointed out that the paper should discuss in greater depth what opportunities CSOs might have left in Turkey under these conditions.

A transactional relationship is also unpalatable to CSOs, as it will not change Turkey's internal situation – which, as mentioned above, severely limits the space in which these organisations can operate. That this is not the preferred solution, however, does not change the fact that it might represent the only way forward. Indeed, many agreed that preserving what is at hand – despite its not being ideal – is still better than scrapping accession negotiations.

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