



# Turkey's Civil Society: Playing the Long Game

By Dilek "Dee" Ertukel

Annual evaluations by organizations such as The Economist Intelligence Unit, the World Bank, Freedom House and the Council of Europe consistently report declining conditions for democracy and civil liberties in Turkey. Despite this deeply worrisome trajectory, especially for the fate of human rights defenders, the country's civil society is demonstrating remarkable resilience and capacity to evolve. Whereas domestic political actors across the spectrum are falling short of the leadership needed to move Turkey forward, civil society persists as a vital source of ideas, inspiration, and alternative thinking. A deeper understanding of the ways it is keeping democracy afloat provides valuable insight to those concerned about Turkey and its role in the transatlantic alliance.

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At a time when Turkey's media have lost independence and credibility, civil society is responding to increasing demand from the public for objective information. Civil society organizations are creating new forms of civic activity through the use of information communication technologies. Growing in influence are independent fact-checking platforms such as Teyit.org, which focuses on holding media accountable for accuracy in reporting, and DoğrulukPayi.org, which reports on the accuracy of statements by public officials. Helping citizens

monitor the activities of public officials are digital platforms such as Mecliste.org, which provides analysis of upcoming legislation and enables citizens to follow the work of parliament, and Beyond Istanbul.org, which supports local communities affected by large-scale urban development.

Civil society is also working to mitigate the effects of polarization by helping diverse interests build common ground around issues that cross ideological, class, regional, faith, ethnic and partisan divides. In the last two years, this approach has secured significant legislative and legal victories for groups such as the Platform for the Elimination of Child Abuse, the Delegation for the Monitoring of Animal Rights, and the Federation of Consumers. It has also helped community-based organizations motivate state and private-sector actors to reverse actions harmful to wetlands and streams, ancient olive groves and historic settlements. Vote and Beyond has mobilized tens of thousands of diverse volunteers from across Turkey to observe election-day activities, helping bring greater accountability and transparency to the election process. The non-partisan Checks and Balances Network, a coalition of more than 270 diverse civil society organizations, has emerged as the country's leading barometer and advocate for institutional reform, championing the need for a strong parliament, an independent judiciary and an accountable executive. The independent Tigris Community Research Center (DİTAM) is helping more than 150 diverse stakeholders engage in dialogue on questions of peace and social cohesion. The Rights' Initiative Association, established in 2018, works to coalesce diverse religious-conservative



groups in efforts to ensure justice and freedom of religious expression.

Think tanks use evidence-based methodologies to help shape the country's policy agenda. The Istanbul Policy Center is helping draw attention to climate change and challenges of urbanization. The Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) is fostering discussion on key security and cyber issues. The Education Reform Initiative (ERG) is pushing for long-term thinking on education policy, while the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is drawing attention to issues of inclusion, inequality, and sustainable development.

Helping to nourish the sector is a homegrown community of civil society experts and trainers who are well-schooled in international best practices, human rights, and freedoms. Their efforts serve a sector that now exceeds 100,000 associations and foundations.<sup>1</sup> Expert entities working to develop leadership capacity include the Boğaziçi School of Politics, which works to deepen understanding of political and governing institutions, to facilitate discussion of alternative public policy matters solutions, and to foster relationships across sectors and partisan lines; the Argudan Governance Academy, which helps private-, public- and civic-sector professionals and volunteers to practice good governance and to improve delivery of public services and resource utilization; Habitat, which helps young people from diverse sectors develop entrepreneurial and creative-thinking skills through information communication technologies; and the Human Rights School, which works to sustain human rights defenders through online learning.

In addition to leadership development, institutions such as Think Civil, the Social Incubation Center and the Civil Society Development Center support the institutional capacity needs of a wide variety of actors, including youth and environmental groups as well as advocates for the rights of children, LGBTQ individuals, the disabled, minorities and women.

<sup>1</sup> According to DERBİS, the associations information system maintained by the Ministry of the Interior.

Civil society's role in the response to the Syrian refugee crisis has increased the number of professionals, volunteers, and organizations with specialist knowledge and competencies. Since the start of the war, new and old Turkish CSOs have partnered with international counterparts and diversified or developed

new programming to support the material needs of refugees, to advocate for their rights and to improve access to vital services. Their efforts to address the special needs of women and children, to combat violence and human trafficking, to reduce conflict in local communities, and to manage large-scale programs and grants have given the sector the experience to support Turkey as it begins to address the challenge of integration and social cohesion.

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## The Role of External Support

These are just a few of the many examples of CSOs working to expand the space for civic activity in Turkey. That so many have evolved or made their most significant impact during the last five to seven years is evidence of civil society's ability to play the long game despite the odds.

External support has been instrumental in bringing it to this stage and may well be the most enduring and positive legacy of the international community's engagement with Turkey. Sustaining this impact under deteriorating conditions may require outside actors to adjust their strategies and tactics.

In particular, donors should consider expanding and diversifying funding priorities in closer alignment with trends and patterns on the ground. Consumer protection, education, climate change, urbanization, income inequality, cultural preservation, and

occupational safety are burgeoning fields in Turkey. There should also be a shift to supporting long-term program aims rather than short-term project results. Multi-year grants and increased funding for personnel, data collection, research, and technology should be considered when it comes to supporting civil society actors.

There is also a need to develop new mechanisms and funding opportunities to support promising leaders and initiatives in local communities outside of Istanbul and Ankara. While civil society organizations in these provinces are more mature, better schooled in funding development, and more adept in speaking the language of international relations and development, their reach into the country's heartland is generally poor and their ability to represent the plurality of citizens is often limited. Fostering initiatives in the regions of the Black Sea as well as Eastern and Central Anatolia, where civil society is underdeveloped yet highly motivated, is critical to sustaining momentum and securing the future of the sector.

It is advisable to diversify sources of information and contacts in these regions as well as to develop assessment tools to understand better the political, social and cultural nuances on the ground. Further, civil society leaders there should be helped to access

English-language information, to track international trends and to engage more effectively with counterparts abroad through funding of activities designed to develop their English-language skills.

It should be kept in mind that as nationalist views spread and grow more intense, civil society organizations that partner with or receive funding from outside actors come under increasing stress and become more vulnerable to attack. Consequently, there is a growing need for external supporters of civil society to de-couple or distance their funding priorities from geopolitical strategic aims to the extent possible. They should consider establishing transparent funding bodies managed independently of state institutions and/or of bodies that pool resources from diverse sources.

Finally, as the examples cited here suggest, civil society has the potential to provide new platforms for communication and cooperation among domestic and international actors relating to Turkey's economy, sustainability, democracy and other issues of importance to strengthening transatlantic and regional relations.

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## **About the Author**

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