

THE ROLE OF TURKISH NGOs IN THE INTEGRATION OF TURKEY INTO THE EU

This essay is a discussion of the involvement of Turkish civil society in the integration process of Turkey to the European Union (EU) and its domestic and international dimensions. The author argues that civil society in Turkey emerged as an important and active player in the integration process. Such an active civil society is a positive indicator for the development of democracy in the country. Moreover, this involvement is critical to enhancing dialogue between Turkey and Europe on a societal level. The author further points out that integration into the EU goes beyond economic or political factors and that this is also about the integration of societies.

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Civil society is considered to perform crucial functions for democracy and the democratization process. “It enables the emergence of a public sphere in which differentiated social sectors express their experience and formulate their opinions”¹ through different information channels. In this respect, civil society can often be more attractive than the state in democratization process and thus within this context civil society organizations have emerged as key players in democratic countries.

This analysis of civil society is also of importance in discussions concerning the role of the civil society in the democratization process of Europe through European integration and EU enlargement. European integration is a unique process in the history of mankind and one of the basic principles of this integration is democracy. In this broad democratization process, civil society has played a vital role and will continue to do so in the future. This role has often been examined from the perspective of civil society organizations based in EU Member States, though it is also interesting to examine the opinions and activities of civil society organizations within candidate countries. In candidate countries, civil society organizations act in two different ways. On the one hand, they transmit the major economic, political and social dynamics of the EU to their countries and create the necessary environment for the transformation of the state and society in line with the values of European integration. On the other hand, they try to influence EU decision-making mechanisms and to lobby for the acceleration of the process from the EU side. However, it is important to note that these functions are not valid for the euro-skeptic and anti-EU civil society organizations.

Turkey is a special case in the history of European integration in many aspects. While the long journey seems to be coming to an end for Turkey, with full membership on the horizon within eight to ten years, Turkish civil society has been playing an increasingly significant role in the integration process. In many aspects, the best way to examine the European integration/enlargement - civil society relationship would be to focus on Turkey. Due to the state-centric tradition within Central and Eastern European Countries, it has been difficult to observe the role civil society has played within these countries during the integration process, except in more developed accession countries like Hungary. However, despite its deficiencies, Turkey is a country, which has been developing democracy for more than 80 years in all its different dimensions, including civil society. Moreover, civil society has shown a marked development in Turkey particularly since the 1980s.² This development has had a direct effect on the integration process of Turkey to the EU. Turkish civil society has been a unique contributor to the reform process implemented by the government in line with the Copenhagen Political Criteria. This scenery became crystal clear in the post Helsinki period.

Involvement of Turkish civil society in the integration of Turkey to the EU has domestic and international dimensions. To start with, I will try to present fundamental points of the domestic dimension and afterwards I will go into details of the activities of Turkish civil society organizations within the EU.

¹ Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.155.

² Sefa Şmsek, “New Social Movements in Turkey since 1980”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 111–139.

Domestic Dimension

Turkey-EU relations over the last 40 years have gone beyond the relations between Turkey, as a nation state, and the EU, as a supranational entity. As a result of the increasing involvement of the Turkish public, civil society has become an active party in the process. EU-Turkey relations have become a central issue in daily Turkish life. Not only in political and academic spheres, but also in the public sphere, it has become one of the most hotly debated issues. From articles in daily newspapers and debates on TV programs to the discussions in different spheres of the daily life, this topic has obtained a special status. It is very common to see groups of Turkish people discussing the EU on buses, at cafés, barbershops and so on. It would be hard to find a community in Europe that has placed so much importance on the EU. Thus, Turkey-EU relations have also turned out to be one of the main subjects of Turkish CSOs. Especially in the last 10 years, which has been the most dynamic period in Turkey-EU relations, there has been a clear change in the perceptions of Turkish civil society regarding EU matters.

Turkey-EU relations gained new impetus with the 1995 Customs Union Agreement and this impetus reached its peak with Turkey becoming an official candidate in December 1999. As a next step, Turkey requested the opening of accession negotiations in December 2002. At the moment, Turkey is waiting for the decision of the European Council in December 2004 to launch accession negotiations as a final step for full membership. Turkish civil society has increased its involvement within these processes and has become a key element in integration. While many existing NGOs have given top priority to EU issues, other NGOs have been specifically formed to focus on Turkey-EU relations as their main area of activity.³ On several critical issues, many of these NGOs have come together through different platforms and coalition-making mechanisms to facilitate progress in EU-Turkey relations. In fact, the level of consensus displayed in this regard is rare in the history of the countries.

Relations between Turkish civil society and the EU actually have two dimensions. On the one hand, the EU has been supporting the development of civil society organizations in Turkey as an important element of a working democracy. On the other hand, since many Turkish civil society organizations see EU membership as a catalyst for a more democratic and modern country, they have been supporting the integration process of Turkey to the EU. In this sense, there is a reciprocal collaboration in the nature of this relationship.

The integration process and the EU itself have played a significant role in the development of Turkish civil society. Changes in the legal framework, social structure and mentality throughout the integration process have created the necessary environment for such a development. Taking into consideration the recent enlargement process, such a development has become more visible in the case of Turkey. The main reasons for this are the existence of a relatively longer democratic tradition in Turkey and an established civil society background. Moreover, indirectly related to this process, civil society gained special momentum with the August 17th earthquake in 1999, which caused the deaths of over 30,000 people. This earthquake was one of the biggest catastrophes Turkey has ever undergone. Civil society organizations took important initiatives that resulted in them gaining enormous prestige in the eyes of the Turkish public. This was particularly significant since the state has traditionally been powerful in Turkey and society expected the state to take care of any difficulties. Thus, the August 1999 earthquake helped to highlight the role of civil society organizations and

³ For more details about Turkish NGOs see www.stgp.org (Civil Society Development Program).

became the turning point in terms of the development of participatory democracy with an emerging confidence in civil society organizations.

The financial support from the EU in recent years has also proved to be very constructive in the development of Turkish civil society. In a developing country, funding is one of the main problems for civil society organizations in terms of survival, development and creativity. EU funded projects have been significant in allowing civil society organizations to realize their objectives. In 2003 and 2004 alone, direct support to Turkish NGOs from different EU programs amounted to **EUR 4.2 million**. Moreover, Turkish NGOs have benefited from other EU funds via partnerships. Below are some examples of direct support for Turkish NGOs from the EU:

<i>Name of the Fund</i>	<i>Amount of the Fund (Euros)</i>
<i>Mosaic and Horizons</i>	400.000
<i>Turkish-Greek Civil Dialogue</i>	800.000
<i>Local Civil Initiatives</i>	1.200.000
<i>European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) 2001 (in 2003)</i>	600.000
<i>EIDHR 2002-2003 (in 2004)</i>	1.200.000
TOTAL	4.200.000

Source: Rana Birden Güneş, Civil Society Development Program – European Commission

Thus it is possible to argue that various factors, including direct and indirect support from the EU and the integration process itself, have led to the acceleration of the development of civil society in Turkey. More importantly for this paper, it is the effects of this development on European integration that is of essential concern. Civil society organizations have influenced the integration process in two different ways. Firstly, while working in their own specific area, such as human rights, they also use European standards, namely the Copenhagen Political Criteria, as a base for their efforts. Within this context reforms were strongly supported by civil society organizations campaigning for progress not just for the EU integration process itself but also for socio-political development in Turkey. Secondly, various civil society organizations have started to play a role in putting pressure on the government, in monitoring the integration process in a comprehensive way and in giving technical assistance in some instances. While some civil society organizations, such as the Human Rights Association and KA-DER (the leading woman NGO), have done this only in their specific sphere of activity, others, such as, the ARI Movement, the Economic Development Foundation, Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), have done this in a general way without restricting themselves to a specific arena. Area-specific NGOs have contributed to the process with their specific expertise and experience and this has been used as an input in the process. With regards to the second category, the main contributions of these organizations are more related to the general framework of the process. Since they have broader social, economic and political aims, these organizations have a wider perspective in terms of the continuation of the process, fulfillment of European standards and their implementation. The first group with its precise expertise has been more involved in technical assistance and the second group, due to their capacity and broader aims, has had monitoring and lobbying functions.

The domestic dimension of the involvement of Turkish civil society in the integration of Turkey to the EU is not only in the form of support. While nearly 80 percent of the Turkish

population supports EU membership, as a *sine qua non* for a European democracy, there are also euro-skeptics and anti-EU NGOs.⁴ In this category, it is more likely to see NGOs which have political incentives, such as nationalist-leftists and right wing nationalists and religious fundamentalists. Though politically, their capacity to have an effect on the integration process is small, euro-skeptic and anti-EU Turkish NGOs have a significant influence on public opinion especially during difficult periods in Turkey-EU relations. Moreover, in many cases, they are also supported by those who are in favor of the status-quo.

International Dimension

Being based in a candidate country active within EU mechanisms, Turkish civil society is an interesting case study. This section of the paper elaborates upon the activities of Turkish civil society organizations in Brussels and in other major capitals of the EU while examining the effect of these activities on Turkey-EU relations.

At this point, the question that comes to mind is; “How is Turkish civil society involved in EU decision making procedures?” The answer is simple: “not very differently than any other civil society organization in a member state.” It is useful to explore these procedures in order to better comprehend them. There is the institutionalized procedure, through direct involvement in the consultation committees of the European Commission, Economic and Social Council etc., and also a “semi-institutionalized” or “less institutionalized” procedure, i.e. through lobbying these institutions. Although, indirect involvement is possible, and is sometimes realized, through the partner organization, the first, by nature, cannot be effectively used by Turkish civil society. However, the second process is used by Turkish civil society as effectively as the civil society organizations of the Member States.

With regards to lobbying, the possibilities for representing civil society interests differ from one EU institution to another.⁵ Traditionally, the European Parliament (EP) is viewed as the most receptive to lobbying by non-profit civil society organizations and also a popular target of Turkish civil society organizations. Nevertheless, the EP is considered the most unenthusiastic EU institution when it comes Turkey’s full-membership and thus changing the perspective of the EP has been politically very important.

The Council, by contrast, is generally regarded as being the least open entity to lobbying though Turkish civil society tends to lobby them indirectly via the member states. Organizations, which hold economic power, such as the Turkish Businessmen’s and Industrialists Association (TUSIAD), usually use their member state contacts, economic and social partners, and put pressure on national governments. Moreover, lobbying which targeted European public opinion also has a direct effect on the Council. Since the Council consists of “government and state leaders,” public opinion is a determining factor in some decisions. Turkey is increasingly one of the main subjects in the domestic politics of some EU countries, such as France, Austria and Germany, and this makes the Council decision regarding Turkey even more sensitive for the domestic politics of these countries. Although activities targeted at the EP and the Council have proven to be effective and vital, direct lobbying activities are

⁴ “Euroskepticism in Turkey: Manifestations at the Elite and Popular Levels.” Project Director: Hakan Yılmaz, Boğaziçi University, Department of Political Science and International Relations. 1 July 2003 –30 June 2004.

⁵ See LOGON, LOGON REPORT 2002: Lobbying in Europe: A Challenge for Local and Regional Governments (Vienna: Association of Austrian Cities and Towns, 2002).

concentrated towards the Commission. Compared to the Council, it is relatively easy to approach the Commission. One reason for the willingness of the Commission to listen to outside views is that it is understaffed. Turkish civil society has a significant role as independent sources of information on the socio-political situation of the country, implementation of the reforms in compliance with the Copenhagen Political Criteria and other problems dealt with in the integration process.

The Commission finds it easier to evaluate a situation and implement relevant policies if it has access to several different perspectives. Consultations can thus be said to contribute to the efficiency of the system and civil society organizations are thus important tools.⁶ Consultations take place in a variety of ways; through providing interested groups access to proposals, holding conferences and organizing workshops, through formal committees and also through informal meetings. In the case of Turkey, informal meetings are the most popular method through which the Commission gathers different perspectives.

Activities of Turkish civil society in Europe have increased and become more institutionalized in the last ten years. The main target of these activities has always been Brussels - as the capital of the EU. As a leading Turkish pressure group, TUSIAD opened their office in Brussels ten years ago and this was followed by IKV. In 2003, the ARI Movement, which has been active in the area for many years, established a branch office in Brussels to pursue more active policies within the EU. These organizations are devotedly working for the improvement of Turkey-EU relations, not only in Brussels but also in other major capitals of the EU. Some other civil society organizations, such as TUSEV, TESEV and the Marmara Group, also organize activities and have developed relations within the EU countries but are not necessarily as established as those with offices based in the member states. Furthermore, there are also some Turkish organizations that have been established by Turkish diaspora in Europe, such as TOSED (Turkish Private Sector in Belgium) and TAM (Turkey Research Centre - Germany).⁷

It is possible to better comprehend the significance of an increasingly institutionalized Turkish civil society in Europe by looking at the year 2004. Turkey is one of the main topics in the EU this year and the countdown has already started for the decision of the European Council at the end of the year to launch the accession negotiations with Turkey. As December 2004 nears, Turkish civil society is expected to be involved in the process even more vigorously. Turkish civil society has spent the first half of the year actively involved in this process. Both individually and through cooperation with European partners, they have organized many events in EU capitals, organized a number of meetings with European politicians and bureaucrats, prepared numerous of projects, reports and evaluations.

European capitals will witness a number of activities organized by Turkish civil society in the remaining part of the year. The Economics and Foreign Policy Platform (EDPF), functioning under the umbrella of the ARI Movement, will announce the results of their co-project with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS); Open Society Institute-Istanbul will publish an independent commission report on Turkey, consisting of important European political

⁶ For details of lobbying in the EU structure see Rinus Van Schendelen, *Machiavelli in Brussels: The Art of Lobbying the EU* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).

⁷ Websites of the NGOs mentioned in this paragraph: IKV: www.ikv.org.tr ; ARI Movement: www.ari-tr.org ; TUSIAD: www.tusiad.org.tr ; Marmara Group: www.marmaragrubu.org ; TUSEV: www.tusev.org.tr ; TESEV: www.tesev.org.tr ; TOSED: www.tosed.org ; TAM: www.zft-online.de

figures; TUSIAD as a major Turkish pressure group will be actively working in the EU capitals; Young Businessmen Association of Turkey (TUGIAD) will be organizing many activities within the framework of its “Open Your Heart” project and the ARI Movement will continue its dynamic approach with its “The Final Countdown for a Stronger Europe: Turkey in the EU” campaign. These are only a few examples of the upcoming activities of Turkish civil society within Europe and they will be followed by many other activities and projects.

Conclusion

Turkish civil society has a growing role in the integration of Turkey to the EU and such an active involvement in the domestic and international sphere is a good indicator in terms of illustrating the level of democratic development. It is possible to further argue that Turkish civil society will also play an important role during the negotiation process and act as a mediator and a communication channel between the EU and Turkey in the challenging stages of the negotiations. The contributions outlined above are proof of a deeper involvement and success in the future. Thus, this will have a positive effect on the democratization process and the implementation of reforms in Turkey. Further, considering its role and activities within the international arena, Turkish civil society will be a voice which will be vital in changing the image of Turkey. Furthermore, European integration is not only economic and political integration but also social integration in the form of the integration of the peoples of Europe. In this respect, close relations and cooperation between civil society organizations of the EU countries and of Turkey will be an increasingly beneficial and facilitating factor in the integration process, enabling the societies of the two sides to know and to understand each other.