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The democratic potential of the Turkish civil society for better EU-Turkey relations

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ABSTRACT

This policy paper aims at examining the democratic potential of Turkish civil society and seeks to outline policy initiatives that could strengthen societal bonds between Turkey and the European Union (EU). Such measures could have a positive effect on the Turkey-EU-relations. This paper considers the necessity of fundamental support of civil society organizations (CSOs) with pro-EU attitudes, to counterbalance the one-sided support of anti-EU CSOs and the democratic setbacks since 2013. The later culminated just recently in the last presidential and general elections on 24th of June 2018 with a new and more authoritarian constitution.

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Introduction

Like the international political system as a whole, EU-Turkey relations are in great turmoil. Public opinion in Turkey has been shifting slowly towards anti-Western and anti-European attitudes in the last decade (Şenyuva 2018: 1). The heads of state or government of the EU and other EU officials lost their leverage with the Turkish government and their confidence towards the Turkish citizens. Notwithstanding, Turkish civil society retains a strong democratic and pro-EU potential. Turkish civil society organizations (CSOs) are at the core of this potential and became an important factor of Europeanisation, when they increased the visibility of both pro-democracy and pro-EU forces inside Turkey (Keyman & İçduygu 2003: 222; Seyrek 2004; Müftüler Baç 2005: 21).

Today, there are approximately 4000 CSOs¹ in Turkey, most of which have a positive impact on the development of the EU accession process (İçduygu et al. 2011: 74). Looking at their opinions, CSOs can be divided by pro-EU and anti-EU positions, or potentials thereof. In order to strengthen CSOs with a pro-EU opinion, it is necessary to provide them more support. However, to do so effectively, one needs to know more about CSOs in Turkey and

their European affinity. Thus, the analysis provided by this policy paper consists of a brief historical overview of the civil society landscape in Turkey and an analysis of the recent situation of CSOs. Additionally, the paper examines policy options for the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union, which include concrete measures to provide targeted support to pro-democratic CSOs in Turkey. By summarising the findings and concluding, it also offers recommendations to practitioners and policy makers on future strategies for a more stabilised political system and a possible EU-membership of Turkey.

1. Historical overview of the civil society landscape in Turkey

With the founding of the Republic of Turkey (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti*) in 1923, a long journey to Turkish democracy started. After the great recession in the 1930s the transition from a 'war economy' to a more 'private economy' (Steinbach 2012: 38–41), mainly invented by former President of Turkey İsmet İnönü, provided the developing civil society in Turkey with space to grow for the first time. By the late 1950s and 1960s, a large number of associations, interest groups and CSOs across all professional groups and social actors had been founded (Toprak 1996: 91; Steinbach 2012: 46–

¹ The number of CSOs depends on the definition and ranges to 113.225 CSOs using a very broad definition, see: Dernekler Dairesi Başkanlığı (2018). This paper uses a narrow definition of CSOs, with only non-economic political organisations without recreational organisations similar to the definition of

Keyman and İçduygu (2003). Having a statistic based on this narrow concept of CSOs is hardly feasible, as the Turkish law only recognised foundations and associations as law entities, see: Center for American Progress et al. (2017: 12).

47). In retrospect, these first movements cannot be characterised as a pluralistic civil society, as they embodied a predominantly elitist and corporatist system of interest intermediation with very few CSOs.

In the 1980s, together with a modernisation process in Turkey, new actors initiated another wave of CSO development, which was facilitated by a more liberal economic course of the government (Keyman & İçduygu 2003: 222; Gürbey 2014: 26). Many might think, the crucial turning point did not happen until the 21st century, when the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) came into power for the first time in 2002. Rather, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996 held in Istanbul and the Marmara earth quake tragedy in 1999 had already triggered the first pluralist civil society developments in Turkey without any state intervention (Sen 2013: 17; Yazgan 2015: 93). Before this pluralist civil society turn in Turkey, a conservative and Islamic elite had already been trying to build up a balance to the more Kemalist elite by developing CSOs and business interest groups (Jung 2012: 114). This conservative and Islamic elite later became the AKP's power base, which is why the AKP extensively supported the conservative and Islamic CSOs (Gürbey 2014: 26). A positive side effect of this development was the pluralisation and strengthening of Turkish civil society (Gürbey 2014: 25). But this pluralized civil society was and still is far away from a 'free' and 'plural' interest intermediation system (Karaman &

Aras 2000: 44), because it is partly characterised by a dualism between secular and religious CSOs (Jung 2012: 115), or even by a similar dualism of polarisation between pro-AKP and anti-AKP CSOs most recently (Büyükbay & Ertin 2017).

Today, the Turkish civil society landscape can be described as politically polarised but very diverse in issues and topics, as it is composed of different types of CSOs with varying priorities, such as environmental organisations, social aid, education, health, democracy, law, and human rights organisations (including rights for women, Kurdish community and other minorities such as LGBT). The attitudes of the CSOs are also very diverse. When looking at the political positioning, we can differentiate between liberal, social democrat, Kemalist, Muslim, conservative, revolutionist, Communist, *Ulusalçılık* ("Left"-nationalism) and *Ülkücülük* (nationalist) CSOs (Yeğen et al. 2010: 179). This diversity in types and political positioning shows the pluralist potential of the Turkish civil society, which should be supported selectively. The pro-EU CSOs need help urgently in several ways (see: 3. Policy options), as they must counterbalance the conservative, nationalist and Muslim CSOs with predominantly anti-EU positions and a strong support by the AKP and the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP).

2. Analysis of the recent situation of CSOs in Turkey

The accession process of Turkey to the EU led first to enthusiasm and later to more and more criticism in the public opinion and inside the more diverse Turkish civil society (Öniş 2003: 16; Eralp 2009: 164). EU's support to Turkey's accession process strengthened the pluralisation trend of Turkish civil society and had positive effects on a pro-EU opinion within civil society. Additionally, the financial support of the EU made it possible for CSOs to professionalise and grow (Sen 2013: 17). With more resources and more academic staff in the last 10-20 years it was possible to establish more pro-EU think tanks, trade unions, business associations, social movements and of course also more CSOs in Turkey. However, due to the one-sided support of anti-EU CSOs by the government, pro-EU CSOs are about to lose more and more financial resources and influence. That is why today, pro-EU CSOs need even more support by the EU than before (see: 3. Policy options 1 and 2).

The country changed remarkably, since the AKP government has come into office. Beside the institutional changes through the EU accession process and the constitutional reforms in Turkey, society and CSOs have changed as well. After an decade of only 'strategic' Europeanisation of the governmental party AKP, the political style and priorities of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former prime minister and current President of Turkey, shifted to a

more autocratic and anti-EU style, visibly with the Gezi protest in 2013 (Seufert 2014a). A significant worsening of this trend could be noticed since 2016 with the starting of the dispute between Turkey and Germany (Armenian Resolution of the German Bundestag, Böhmermann incident and the harsh rhetoric of Erdoğan), but most explicitly after the failed military coup in 2016 (Ertin 2016). Under the state of emergency and using decrees, Erdoğan imposed comprehensive purges on the entire political and civil society spectrum (Gürbey 2017: 15). Today, many CSOs in Turkey are affected by arbitrary arrests and long detention without charges, criminalisation, repression and restrictions on democratic rights. In addition to the 40,000 people arrested and the 140,000 people which have been laid off or suspended from their jobs or official positions, around 1,500 CSOs have been closed (Center for American Progress et al. 2017: 3). This crackdown against Turkish civil society was also a clear strike against the democratic forces within the Turkish society and of course weakened those who advocate a future EU-membership of Turkey. To ensure a pluralist Turkish civil society in the future the free-press, CSOs and their members need political and especially diplomatic support of the EU and its member states (see: 3. Policy option 3 and 4).

To understand the context and uncertainty in which CSOs in Turkey operate, analysts must look at the volatility of the legal basis for CSOs in the last decade. After two reforms of the Associations

Law in 2004 and 2008, that for example allows Turkish CSOs to receive foreign funding or to cooperate with foreign CSOs and organisations in general (Center for American Progress et al. 2017: 11–12), in the aftermath of the Gezi protest the AKP further deteriorated the legal and political environment for CSOs (Center for American Progress et al. 2017: 13). The Gezi Park protests were a caesura for the AKP, as the bodies were surprised by a group of environmentalists and the solidarity of other groups and CSOs (Özçetin & Özer 2015: 8). The huge protests against the government led to restrictive and repressive actions by Erdoğan and the AKP, which extended the use of Anti-Terror Law against opposing groups and later starting using it also against opposing CSOs.

3. Policy options

This paper gives a brief summary of Turkish civil society. As shown in the historical overview (see 1.), the democratic journey has neither been straight nor easy and has never developed Turkey to a full liberal democracy. Instead, the fundamental democratic setback after the last elections on 24th of June 2018, with which the new constitution came into force, brought Turkey closer to an authoritarian system. Today, Turkey has a more polarised civil society landscape than before, yet past improvements on the rule of law and civil participation, which empowered CSOs, are in the process of being reversed. Nonetheless, the breaking be-

tween the Gülen movement and the AKP government alongside the strengthening of the Kurdish CSOs in the recent past can be seen as first signs of a break-up of dualism (pro/anti AKP) and towards a more pluralist civil society. It remains to be seen whether the ever-changing political system under Erdoğan will allow such processes to develop further, or if he tries to prevent civil society from evolving through more hard repressions as in the case of the Gezi protests (Gür 2013: 137; Seufert 2014b: 505).

At this point, the democratic potential of CSOs, which rest in their diversity in types and political positioning (see 2.), has to be supported for better EU-Turkey relations in the future. This lies now primarily in the hand of the EU, seen as the only possible 'normative power' (Manners 2002: 242) and its support of a pluralist Turkish civil society, which is at the root of a more democratic Turkey. The EU already strengthened CSOs in Turkey with financial support (see 2.). This success might be used for more support for the opposition and pro-EU opinions within the civil society. For European officials it should be clear that if they want to stabilise Turkey's EU accession track, they must support the civil society in Turkey more actively. They are the forces of democratisation and agents for the public opinion towards the EU.

To support CSOs in Turkey, I propose the following policy options:

1. Provide more financial support to pro-EU CSOs to strengthen pro-EU opinions and elites in Turkey
2. Foster increased non-monetary services such as workshops, networking, studies and advice
3. Diplomatic support to threatened CSOs or members of CSOs
4. Financial and diplomatic support of the free-press, as they are an important mouthpiece for CSOs
5. More research on CSOs in Turkey, to monitor and better understand Turkish civil society
6. Better Exchange between European and Turkish CSOs via networks and trainings
7. Pressure on the Turkish Government to ensure progress on a more democratic Associations Law

essential components of all democratic systems in the world (Cohen & Arato 1997: vii–viii) and as such researchers and political actors should pay more attention to Turkish CSOs' further development and possible linkages to likeminded European organisations.

This paper recommends supporting CSOs in Turkey, financially as well as morally by commitments and diplomatic action. These actions include diplomatic support of threatened CSOs or threatened members of CSOs, clear statements and strategies towards EU-membership, and a support of more collaboration between Turkish and European CSOs. Instead of only blaming the Turkish government the EU should focus on strengthening the democratic forces in Turkish civil society.

4. Conclusion and policy advice

The enlargement policy of the EU and their Member States vis-à-vis Turkey was unsuccessful in the last decade for several reasons. The current situation in Turkey, which further complicates the bilateral-relations and the enlargement process, needs a new strategy. Political leaders and experts question whether Turkey's accession process to join the EU can or should continue (Tekin 2017: 41). CSOs play an important, if not the most important part for a transformative change in Turkish politics to a more harmonized political culture vis-à-vis the EU. Strong civil society and civic engagement are

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ABOUT VIADUCT

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