

THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN  
**CIVIL SOCIETY AND**  
POLITICAL ACTORS  
**IN TURKEY**

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**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT**  
  
**STIFTUNG**

**Coordination**  
EMİNE UÇAK

**Interviews**  
DERYA KAP

**Analysis and Report**  
İNANÇ MISIRLIOĞLU

**Contributors**  
MEHMET ALİ ÇALIŞKAN  
ULAŞ TOL

**Translation**  
MURAT ÖZBANK

**Editing and Redaction**  
DIEGO CUPOLO

**Graphic Designer**  
SELİN VATANDAŞ

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**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**

# CONTENTS

4	INTRODUCTION
5	OVERVIEW
9	THE MULTI-LAYERED INACTIVATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS
12	THE DEADLOCK IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL ACTORS
16	THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, THEIR ACTIVITIES AND BEST PRACTICES
20	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE JULY 15TH 2016 COUP ATTEMPT
23	THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS
24	SUGGESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL ACTORS
29	LIST OF THE RESPONDENTS
30	QUESTIONNAIRE

# INTRODUCTION

*Turkey's last decade has been marked by profound social and political upheavals that have had far reaching effects on all segments of society. Among the casualties of this turmoil were two of the most effective instruments regularly used in democratic societies to reach and influence political decision makers: namely non-governmental civil society organizations (NGOs) and the media, both of which have been rendered practically dysfunctional and ineffective in Turkey. The coup of February 28, 1997, left a mark of deep political polarization on Turkish society, and by the 2000s this wound appeared to be in the gradual healing process. Unfortunately, however, social and political developments since 2015 have once more driven a new wedge into the Turkish society, leading again to a widening political polarization. The result has been substantive losses on the part of both NGOs and the media.*

**S**ivil Sayfalar (Civil Pages) is a news portal focusing on civil society journalism. It was established in 2016 and has since published over 10,000 news and opinion pieces. Thanks to our various contacts with diverse civil society groups we, at Sivil Sayfalar, have first-hand experience of the fact that civil society organizations are also affected by the political and identity-based polarization besetting Turkish society and that most groups refrain from getting in touch with groups other than those with which they feel cultural or political affinity. We also observe this situation significantly curtails the social benefits and policy effectiveness which civil society initiatives aspire to produce or achieve. Yet many civil society groups, including Sivil Sayfalar, strive hard to carry on working even under these wearying conditions of political polarization and government crackdowns. In response to what can be described as an attitude of

introversion, a new generation of formal and informal civil society initiatives are emerging with aims to overcome the prevailing political polarization within society. We see that such developments make significant contributions to the transformation of civil society groups in Turkey.

What are the effects of the current political crisis on civil society initiatives and organizations? Can we find ways to overcome this crisis? What can we do to change this current situation, in which civil society is constrained and inactive? In attempt to find answers for these questions, we have conducted a series of in-depth interviews with NGO professionals and political actors. The interviews were conducted with more than 20 respondents (see appendix-1 List of Respondents) over Zoom and each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions grouped under the following five categories: the perception of civil society; NGOs' access to public and international funds; the obstacles encountered in developing healthy working relations between political actors on the one hand and civil society groups on the other, including suggestions about how these obstacles can be overcome; and the state of civil society groups under conditions of the Covid-19 pandemics. We also organized two debates over Zoom in which participants from NGOs and political parties discussed these questions with one another.

In this report, we aim to present an overview and a combined analysis of this work. Since, however, all the interviews are rich with interesting and striking points, it will also be possible in the coming days to read them as individual parts of a series of interviews to be published on Sivil Sayfalar.

Parallel to this work, we also produced and broadcasted four Sivil Mikrofon (Civil Microphone) episodes titled: sociological dimensions of polarization, effective participation of civil society in legislative processes; struggle against violence against

women; and ecological struggle and politics. We hope this multi-dimensional exploratory work and the subsequent in-depth interviews, which we plan to conduct as a follow-up project, will make valuable contributions to ongoing efforts aiming to develop healthy relations between civil society groups and political actors, as well as increase the participation of civil society organizations in policymaking processes and finding exit strategies to overcome the prevailing polarization in the Turkish society.

We thank Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung for making this work possible with its generous support and cooperation.

## OVERVIEW

*The most striking finding from the research is that irrespective of whether they are pro-government or pro-opposition, all respondents find the constrained state of civil society and the introversion of the political actors deeply disturbing and they all perceive the current political crises to be more distressing than those Turkey has experienced in the past. The NGOs working in the issue areas of women and ecology are found to be the most effective ones.*

**I**n their comments, many respondents said responsibility for the current ineffectiveness of civil society organizations rests with the political actors themselves. Respondents described the current crises with observations like "the doors of the parliament have been closed to civil society organizations" or "[the coup attempt of] July 15 [2016] was an attempt on the part of politics to eradicate civil society." This contraction of the legal, financial and political relations of civil society organizations is very disconcerting. Our research has also revealed that because of the government crackdown on civil society organizations, there was a reduction in the

availability of human resources as well. As progress in civil society is mainly premised on the accumulation of knowledge and experience, it is not difficult to predict that in the short, medium and long terms, this contraction will lead to a qualitative degeneration and quantitative decrease in the outputs produced by civil society organizations.

In evaluating civil society organizations activities, the following factors have been identified as the leading criteria for success:

- Unifying discourse which can overcome polarization
- Openness to different segments of the society/inclusiveness
- The ability to bring an issue to the parliamentary agenda
- The ability to influence political decisions

The current political climate is seen as the main culprit for the current ineffective state of civil society organizations, but it does not seem to be the sole reason. Political actors emphasize that doing good work is not necessarily the same thing as being effective. They point out that governmental or other political actors fail to make use of the outputs of civil society organizations. For civil society organizations to be politically effective, it is crucial that they focus on developing policy proposals in their respective fields and find ways to communicate those proposals to political actors. Particularly urgent is the need for civil society organizations to be more vocal in their attempts to overcome the current crises and to spread this voice to larger segments of the society.

We observed respondents from different political and ideological backgrounds differed in the ways they answered our questions, but in their reactions to the current problems they showed more similarities than differences. It was striking to see that civil society professionals and political actors who come from different political or ideological backgrounds could at times voice the same opinions when asked about particularly

blistering social or political problems. This indicates there is an urgent need for platforms that would allow them to talk and listen to one another and even to act together.

When we look at how civil society organizations are perceived we noted that particularly respondents from political parties see them as intermediary mechanisms. Political actors expect civil society organizations to act as bridges by communicating enacted legislation to the society and thus assisting the government in implementing its policies, but also by giving feedback to the government about possible objections and disquietude that may be prevalent in the society. It is remarkable that political actors usually characterize civil society organizations as one of the indispensable building-blocks of democracy, while constricting them into narrow definitions relying on such terms as “voluntary,” “altruistic,” or “self-sacrificing.” In contrast, civil society groups see themselves as organizations developing policies, expertise, and models in their respective issue areas, and performing vital social services in areas where the government lags. These discrepancies between how political actors and civil society professionals see the essential functions of civil society organizations suggest there is no common ground on which their perceptions rest. This lack of a common ground may prevent civil society organizations and political actors from developing good working relations with one another. While politicians do not expect civil society organizations to be anything more than democratic embellishments serving, at best, as sidekicks to political actors, civil society organizations aspire to play a more active role in policymaking and implementation processes - a role for which they feel they have the necessary expertise and experience.

The term “opposition” is used almost exclusively to designate political parties. The perception that civil society groups can also be seen as parts of the “opposition” is

very weak. This weakness manifests itself on both sides. Civil society must strengthen its ability to influence the policies however, as a first step they should be concerned about this need. On the one hand civil society representatives complain that irrespective whether they are in the opposition or in government, politicians fail to make use of the expertise of civil society organizations and that they disregard their criticisms. On the other hand political actors do not seem to accept that civil society organizations can also perform the functions of an opposition.

The civil society organizations with which political actors most frequently get into contact are chambers of commerce, Bar associations, human rights organizations, think tanks and labor unions. Professional associations have been criticized for positioning themselves as “opposition” for using discourse exclusively premised on this positioning and thus for renouncing their functions as bridges between the general interests of the society and public administration.

Civil Society organizations demand to be seen as structures performing oppositional functions. Civil society organizations think they are misused by the politicians wishing to gain the support and trust of the public opinion. This comment rests on the observation that politicians, who establish cordial relations with civil society groups before they get elected, change the terms of that relationship once they enter into office. Civil society professionals widely share the opinion that politicians pay lip service to civil society's importance but go on discriminating between favored and unfavored groups.

What are the published research and policy reports through which civil society organizations are most frequently followed by political actors? When asked this question the respondents mention *Denge Denetleme Ađı*, *TESEV*, *PODEM*, *MAZLUMDER*, *TEPAV*, *Hak İnisiyatifi*, *İHD*, *DİSA* and until 4-5 years ago, *SETA* as the top ones. Political actors, particularly those from the opposition

parties, emphasize the importance of the reports produced by civil society organizations. Political actors also underline the fact that in the last ten years no new civil society organization has emerged that can actually produce an impact with its reports. We can easily conclude this is a direct result of the government crackdown on civil society organizations and the climate of fear that has been generated in the last years. We see a decrease in the production of research reports on a variety of issue areas ranging from transportation by bicycle to disability rights.

Why do the relations between civil society organizations and political actors continue to remain underdeveloped? Respondents ascribe this to the lack of a legal and political structure that can shape those relations. They say that for the same reason, lobbying and advocacy activities have also not found much opportunity to develop in Turkey.

According to civil society professionals, no government has been more unresponsive to civil society organizations than the current one. They are also of the opinion the current period is one of the most unproductive ones in terms of the relations between political parties and civil society organizations. This criticism was directed not only against the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) but also against such opposition parties as the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Opposition parties have been criticized for doing exactly what they criticize the governing party for doing, namely working exclusively with civil society organizations with which they feel political affinity and disregarding others. A similar criticism has also been voiced by political actors, who complained that civil society organizations fail to get in contact with political parties apart from those with which they politically align. Political actors also emphasized NGOs who manage to adopt a more inclusive approach toward different political parties are more likely to become effective. In addition, respondents

have drawn attention to the necessity in NGO-to-NGO relations for “dissimilars” to come together and for horizontal interactions between different civil society organizations to multiply.

When we look at existing relations between political actors and civil society organizations we see they get weaker as we move from local to central levels of government. According to our research, municipalities take the lead among the public institutions when it comes to cooperating with civil society organizations in crises situations like the Covid-19 pandemic or earthquakes. Civil society professionals also emphasize it is often the municipalities which struggle to find funding for projects to which the central government fails to allocate necessary financial resources. Some respondents express the opinion the recent wave of urbanites leaving cities to settle in rural areas is likely to increase the impetus of local movements and suggest the emergence of environmental and ecological awareness in certain segments of the society. Along with recent cooperation between municipalities and local producers, such promising developments are signaling the emergence of what can be called a “new localism.”

When asked about NGOs' access to public funds, respondents emphasized the need for the government to develop mechanisms that are equally transparent to all civil society organizations. Some striking comments have been made regarding the national and international financing of civil society organizations. It seems that particularly after 2010 there has been a marked increase in the number and strength of pro-government NGOs, for which respondents gave specific examples. The government has been criticized for not allocating public resources to civil society organizations in an equitable manner, and the fact that only non-oppositional organizations can get public funding has been the most frequently mentioned point of criticism. Particularly in reference to the allocation of resources from the Social Support Program (SODES)

and the discretionary fund of the presidency, respondents emphasized the need for running more transparent processes – a need which is of extreme significance for government-civil society relations to flourish on healthier grounds.

The majority of the respondents emphasized the strength of civil society organizations has been weakened due to closures through executive decrees during the state of emergency, which was declared after the 2016 coup attempt, as well as the atmosphere of fear generated by the continuing criminal prosecutions of civil society professionals. When discussing the reasons for the current inactivity and ineffectiveness of civil society organizations, respondents talked about tactics of self-protection such as self-censorship, self-closure and lying low, which they felt compelled to use to survive in the current political climate. Interestingly, self-censorship turned out to be a practice used not only by the pro-opposition NGOs, but by pro-government NGOs, as well. Our research found pro-government NGOs refrain from pointing out flaws they see over concerns such actions would weaken political support for the government.

Freedom of expression, along with civil society organizations' and the media's capacity to criticize and follow governmental policies are sine qua non requirements for democracy. Yet interviewees also emphasized that lately democracy in Turkey has been in considerable decline. The leading area in which civil society organizations are still seen to be strong and successful is the Women's movement, with the ecological movement as a close runner up. In the debates concerning the Istanbul Convention, women's organizations were particularly effective in overcoming the current climate of political polarization and running campaigns against

the political attempts to withdraw Turkey from the convention. Women's and ecological movements have been found successful in terms of their effectiveness in influencing legislative, policymaking and policy-implementation processes.

According to our research, civil society organizations follow each other's and political parties' activities through social media platforms. While civil society organizations are not covered by mainstream media outlets and there are not many other platforms where civil society organizations can present their activities to the general public, there is considerable room for civil society organizations to further develop their communication strategies. The panels and conferences organized by civil society groups are the least followed events by political actors. For their part, civil society professionals follow other organizations through social media posts and their online bulletins.

**We grouped the most important findings of our research under six categories..**

1. The multi-layered inactivation of civil society organizations
2. The deadlock in the relations between civil society organizations and political actors
3. The public perception of civil society organizations, their activities and best practices
4. Civil Society Organizations from the perspective of the July 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 coup attempt
5. The effects of the pandemics on civil society organizations
6. Suggestions to strengthen the relations between civil society organizations and political actors

## THE MULTI-LAYERED INACTIVATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

*Almost all respondents expressed in different ways and words their common concerns about the government crackdown on civil society organizations and the resulting contraction of the public spaces for civil action. The research findings suggest this contraction has multiple reasons.*

The reasons, which respondents cite to explain the current weakness and ineffectiveness of civil society organizations, can be grouped in two categories, namely internal and external ones. Internally, civil society organizations need to develop their abilities to organize and cooperate with one another around specific topics, to strengthen their culture of concerted action and to mobilize support from different segments of the society. Respondents pointed out the need for civil society organizations to be more inclusive. According to the respondents, however, the failure of civil society organizations to include 'dissimilar' segments of the society in their activities is not an exclusively internal problem that could be solved through capacity building measures by civil society organizations alone; it is rather a reflection of the political polarization besetting Turkish society in general and as such it has an external, political dimension as well.

*"Turkey has the potential to find a solution to this polarization, but we can say that civil society organizations are very, very few in number and very, very weak. I mean since the politics of it is prone to put the cat among the pigeons it cannot attract too many supporters. I think a more developed civil society requires these spaces to work more effectively, but in Turkey somehow everything leads eventually to politics. I mean there is an environment in which politics almost unilaterally determine civil society."*

**Fatma Bostan Ünsal**

AK Party Founder, Political Scientist

Another critical factor mentioned by the respondents to explain the current ineffectiveness of civil society organizations is self-censorship. It is interesting to note self-censorship turned out to be widespread practice used not only by the pro-opposition NGOs, but by pro-government NGOs as well, albeit for different reasons. While pro-opposition NGOs practice self-censorship to protect themselves against closures by the authorities or even criminal prosecution, pro-governmental NGOs practice it not to harm the popular support base of the government or to not lose the public funding they receive by the grace of their contacts in the government.

Respondents emphasized that self-censorship brings about a significant level of ineffectiveness on the part of civil society organizations and that it is impossible for them to overcome it solely through their own actions on the civil society side of the equation.

Respondents emphasized that criminal charges brought against human rights advocates and civil society professionals

in such court cases as the Büyükada or Gezi trials generate a climate of fear that discourages NGOs from engaging even in such mundane, daily activities as doing follow up work or reporting. This climate of fear also makes it difficult for NGOs to find qualified and experienced personnel, as most NGO professionals do not feel safe and NGO jobs are deemed to be rather risky. This difficulty in finding and employing a qualified work force is also seen as one of the factors contributing to the current ineffectiveness of civil society organizations.

*“Osman Kavala is being unjustly kept in prison for years on end. Think about a young person contemplating to work in civil society organizations. Let’s say she is 28-30 years old and she met Kavala when she was a university student. She knows he is very active in civil society. Now such a person would think: If even this man is kept in prison, who will protect me if something happens to me? I mean the state of emergency has created such huge injustices that people feel compelled to think selfishly and the trust in civil society organizations has diminished considerably. They say, for example, ‘if I become a member of IHD (Human Rights Association) or any other association, who knows what will happen to me?’”*

### **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, Istanbul

One of the striking findings in the interviews was the fact that although academia, media and civil society organizations have been subjected to similar crackdowns, they were not successful in cooperating with one another to launch a concerted struggle. Academia, which has an important function in promoting democracy and pluralism, particularly by producing and disseminating knowledge and information, experienced crackdowns ranging from university closures and the dismissals of faculty members from

their teaching positions through executive decrees, to criminal trials and even unjust imprisonment of academics. Both media workers and civil society professionals also had to endure similarly harsh measures, yet a concerted attempt by these three groups to cooperate with one another to find a collective way out is conspicuous by its absence. There is a marked lack of efforts to follow other groups’ court cases or to contribute to other groups’ legal defense activities.

The first and foremost external factor which has been mentioned in the interviews to explain the current state of inactivity on the part of civil society organizations is the increasing political pressure put on civil society organizations and the climate of fear it generates. Respondents share the opinion that the ongoing criminal trials of civil society professionals have served their intended purpose and the current, inactive state of civil society organizations bears witness to that fact. One of the direct consequences of this repressive political atmosphere is the monophony of the media, which respondents deem to be one of the factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of civil society organizations. Mainstream media coverage of civil society organizations is almost nonexistent and all civil society professionals share the opinion this is one of the reasons why civil society organizations find it extremely difficult to reach out to large masses of people or to have their voices heard in public debates.

Respondents also pointed out that the new presidential system of government is also a factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of civil society organizations. Most respondent emphasized that under the new presidential system, not only civil society organizations, but also the political parties, including opposition parties and the governing party itself, have lost their standing in policymaking and implementation processes. The governing political party does not see civil society

organizations as expert institutions whom it needs to consult, but as obstacles or hurdles to its own decision-making processes which it needs to set aside to move ahead, was an opinion expressed by many respondents.

*“I mean in this one-man regime, a lot of things have changed in the sense that the president was put on a pedestal as the supreme authority and almost everything else was linked to the presidency. And they changed them not only for civil society, but as I have already mentioned, for the parliamentarians as well. They reduced parliamentarians to rubber-stamping clerks.”*

### **Filiz Kerestecioğlu,**

MP (HDP, Ankara)

Our research suggests the rising wave of nationalism also plays a critical role in rendering civil society organizations ineffective. Civil society organizations that receive international funding are stigmatized as ‘traitors’ or ‘foreign intelligence agents’ and that fact leads other NGOs, political parties and, in fact, any other actors could otherwise cooperate with them, to distance themselves from stigmatized organizations. Such distancing occurs even if both the stigmatized organizations and their potential partners share the same worldview. The fact that such stigmatization is used to exert pressure on civil society organizations receiving international funding was one of the points stressed frequently by the respondents.

According to European Union’s 2020 Turkey Report, there is a rapid decline in spaces where international donors funding civil

society organizations in Turkey can operate freely. After the Büyükada and Gezi trials, some donors have closed down their offices in Turkey. Taken together with the prevalence of non-transparent governmental practices in providing public funding for civil society organizations, this flight of international donors from Turkey suggests the chances for civil society organizations to reflect the culturally, ethnically, linguistically, religiously and denominationally diverse reality of Turkish society is diminishing and that civil society in Turkey runs the risk of turning into something where differences are not tolerated and not included and where only “similars” can find a chance to be seen and heard.

*“In European societies, civil society organizations have this thing: compared with our country everyone can easily work within an organization, everyone can get registered. But they are not stigmatized as pro-this or pro-that. Now, our civil society organizations have this situation of not being able to get mentally civilized.”*

### **Zeynep Alkış**

AK Party Vice-Chair, Political and Legal Affairs

While admitting the policy approach which prioritizes state security over other concerns is an important factor contributing to the constriction of civil society in Turkey, some respondents pointed out it would be unfair to put the blame for this situation solely on the government, citing the headstrong, non-dialogical attitude which some civil organizations adopt in dealing with governmental actors.

*“The conjuncture in Turkey and the world requires the prioritization of state-security over other concerns. This inevitably leads to a constriction in civil society. This is understandable and one must expect this situation to last for a while. It is unfair to blame solely the politicians for this constriction. For one thing, I think it has something to do with how strong civil society organizations are. For another, it has something to do with how and where civil society organizations express themselves. I understand that at times it can be important for the parties not to lose ground, but at times they also need to be open to engage in negotiations and compromises.”*

### **Nihat Erdoğan**

Chairperson of the Board of Trustees,  
ILKE Foundation

## THE DEADLOCK IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL ACTORS

*The research revealed a significant degree of disconnectedness between civil society organizations and political actors. The relations between civil society organizations and political parties have been described as based on an unequal balance of power. The most salient feature of the relations between civil society organizations and political actors is the fact that it is usually the former which shows an effort to engage in dialogical interactions with the latter, and this leads to the development of a form of relationship which is asymmetrical and hierarchical.*

*Respondents from civil society organizations said their efforts to reach out to political actors, to convince and persuade them usually remain unilateral affairs, and that they expect political actors to reciprocate the favor with their own efforts at communication with civil society organizations.*

*“I mean more than 300 women organizations have paid a visit to our party chairman. We actively supported their efforts regarding the Istanbul Convention. It was they who directed us there. And anyways I think that is the correct way of going about politics. Now the same women organizations are about to launch a campaign to include a provision in the constitution for a women quota in the general elections for the TGNA – the parliament. More than 300 women organizations are engaged in an internal debate about whether they should demand a quota of, if I am not wrong, 33% or 50%. As a political party we committed ourselves to vote for whatever proposal they eventually decide to bring to the parliament. This, for example, is how the relationship between civil society organizations and political parties ought to work. What I try to say is it has an ideological dimension as well. It is naive to claim civil society organizations ought to be ideologically neutral. There is no such thing as ideological neutrality, even when drinking tea or coffee, there may be an ideology at work.”*

### **Yüksel Taşkın**

Member of CHP (Republican Peoples Party)  
Party Assembly

**O**ne of the reasons why civil society organizations and political actors cannot develop cooperative relations with one another and why their expectations from each other differ, is the lack of a comprehensive governmental strategy or mechanism to develop a legal framework. Respondents point out this lack of

a legal framework is also the reason why civil society organizations encounter difficulties and obstacles in their lobbying activities and usually fail in reaching their intended goals in such endeavors.

*“They pay a lot of lip service, but in reality they are not willing to either develop civil society or work with civil society organizations. In practice and in reality, there is more of an introversion going on.”*

### **Fuat Keyman**

Director, Istanbul Policy Center

Along with the differences in how civil society experts and political actors perceive one another, the differences in their expectations from each other are also worth noting. Politicians see civil society organizations and experts as groups or specialists who have a narrow focus on the specific issue areas in which they happen to be active and who, therefore, have a limited understanding of the broader realities of Turkish politics. For their part, civil society experts say politicians do not see civil society organizations as integral parts of the political processes. Civil society professionals think politicians see civil society as a reservoir for votes and make scarce use of the knowledge and expertise of civil society organizations.

*“I get really surprised when I see a politician who takes a genuine interest in me and engages in a serious debate about ideas with me because in general they do not care much. You must understand that in Turkey the research and development centers of the political parties are very insufficient. For example, how qualified is the staff of a vice-party chairman? Yet this is a must. Political parties can and must close this gap with*

*the accumulated knowledge and experience of civil society organizations. They do not see civil society organizations even as an opportunity which they can use for their own good.”*

### **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

*“As civil society gets beaten up by politicians occasionally, and at times its excessive support is needed by them, I think civil society cannot show much of its independence and its power stemming from that independence.”*

### **Fatma Bostan Ünsal**

AK Party Founder, Political Scientist

According to civil society professionals, political actors see civil society organizations also as convenient instruments to spread their own ideas. Political actors turn to civil society organizations to establish relationships furthering their own interests and satisfying their own needs. The culture of cooperative, professional relationships is underdeveloped, and most respondents expressed the opinion that in the current political climate, civil society organizations producing knowledge outside governmental control are frowned upon. The many court cases against civil society organizations and professionals as well as the restrictions imposed upon them are seen as attempts by the government to generate a climate of fear to intimidate civil society organizations. And these attempts leads to inactivity not only on the part of the pro-opposition NGOs, but also on the part of pro-government NGOs as well. Both civil society professionals and political actors agree the Osman Kavala case contains the clearest message given in this sense.

***“The AK Party has pursued a policy which, at least on its own side of the political fence, has sucked up all the energy of civil society. I mean, they increased their institutional and physical capacities and economic resources, but in return for these increases, they bought up their willingness to resist, to take critical stances or simply put, their very vitality. And because of this price they paid, all civil society organizations, I mean all civil society organizations close to the AK Party feel restricted in their actions. I mean they are wary of speaking their own minds in every respect, or of giving responses according to their hearts’ content and this leads to nothing really exciting. This is the reason why they cannot come together, and nothing ever is created.”***

### **Hatem Ete**

Academician, Ex-adviser to the Prime Minister

One of the striking findings expressed by the respondents is the fact, that the more centralized political decision-making processes become, the more distant political actors become to civil society organizations. According to respondents, contacts with civil society organizations become more frequent as we move from central to local levels of the government.

Respondents are of the opinion that opposition parties are closer to civil society organizations than the governing party. The governing party is seen as the most distant, while the HDP is seen as working as if it were an integral part of civil society. Respondents find the CHP to be remote to those segments of civil society which are different than its own popular support base.

The AK Party is seen as the most distant party to civil society, but respondents agree that its relations with civil society organizations have undergone profound changes since its first years in office. In the early years, the AKP used to thematize social issues with the help of media institutions and independent think tanks, listen to civil society organizations’

opinions and suggestions, and even work with them to develop policies. Nowadays, however, the AK Party seems to have adopted the exact opposite of that approach. The governing party is criticized, mainly because of the lack of transparency in its decision-making processes and because it has given up on the practice of consensus building. The main opposition party, CHP, also was criticized for its failure to create suitable venues of cooperation with civil society organizations and to make meaningful use of their expertise and experience.

All respondents said that municipalities appear to be more open to cooperate with civil society organizations, partly because they are elected bodies. Getting re-elected is a major source of concern for municipal leaders and therefore they care about voter satisfaction which, in turn, impel them to develop cooperative relations with civil society organizations. When operating under the pressure of the central government, municipalities took inspiration from civil society organizations to overcome the difficulties they encountered and this opened a new chapter in the relations between civil society organizations and political actors. Municipal leaders realized that civil society organizations’ know-how in developing creative solutions to social problems and finding funding for social projects can be transferred to public sector as well.

***“When we look at it ideologically, I think it is only recently that both the government and the opposition have grown warm to the idea of using civil society organizations. For example, Imamoglu’s election process has generated a new trend in the CHP world. Using the instruments of civil society organizations to develop their own policies and things like that – that quest has now started in the CHP as well. They realized that it is useful. I mean this is something which is still in the process of being learned.”***

### **Etyen Mahçupyan**

Author  
Vice-Chairman of Future Party

In comparison to political parties in the governing block, political parties in the opposition block were found to be better disposed to listen to and work with civil society organizations. Yet because of the government's discrimination between what it labels to be ‘reasonable’ and ‘inimical’ civil society organizations, municipalities and opposition parties encounter difficulties in approaching all civil society organizations.

***“For one thing, civil society organizations need to focus not only on their own work, but they need to develop policies for a better government in Turkey, generally. When they do that, they need to realize that in civil society, that is to say in those realms of politics other than those of economics and family, there is something called a ‘new locality’ which contains such actors as activists and also cooperatives. The more municipalities include these new spaces, the more powerful they get.”***

### **Fuat Keyman**

Director, Istanbul Policy Center

According to our research, when politicians take initiative and get involved, issues on which civil society organizations’ work get more recognition in the public sphere and results come more easier and at faster speeds. In other words, the political realm more or less determines what civil society can accomplish. Respondents voiced criticism that in a democratic society, it must be civil society which determines the political realm, and not the other way around. Yet for this to happen civil society must have a greater power to raise public awareness about issues in which they work.

For civil society organizations to be able remain autonomous and influence the political realm, less institutionalized and more flexible organizational structures, like platforms or initiatives, are widely seen to present more opportunities. In terms of the ability to build trust-based relations in a climate of political polarization, such flexible formations are seen to be more advantageous

than those of more established and tightly structured institutions. Established, well-structured civil society organizations are seen as politically loaded and they tend to encounter difficulties in building trust. Such civil society organizations can be effective, to a certain extent, in raising public awareness but less so in influencing the political realm.

Civil society organizations are relatively successful in working with other civil society organizations, particularly if they share the same worldview. They are however less effective when it comes to bringing their own issues to the agenda of civil society organizations from different cultural or ideological backgrounds. The overwhelming majority of the respondents see civil society organizations as integral parts of the prevailing political polarization in the Country. Civil society organizations are widely believed to serve only those with whom they feel an ideological or cultural affinity, and this is believed to hold true as much for civil society organizations as for political actors. The fact political parties usually prefer to work with civil society organizations which they find close to their own worldview is partly responsible in the emergence of this widely shared perception. Most respondents think that if politicians and political parties maintained an equal closeness to all civil society organizations, interacting with more organizations from different backgrounds than their own, it would be much easier to achieve greater inclusiveness and overcome the current climate of polarization. Both civil society organizations and political actors expect from one another to take similar steps to achieve greater inclusiveness.

Yet various respondents also observed that recently some civil society organizations have broken this familiar pattern and started approaching different segments of society as potential beneficiaries in their activities. It was also said that in terms of reaching out to segments of society other than their own, civil society organizations fare much better now than 10 years ago and that there has been a marked progress in that respect.



One of the most urgent societal needs for which both political actors and civil society organizations ought to work hard is finding ways to increase their inclusiveness. This observation has been made frequently by various respondents espousing different political views. Both civil society organizations and political actors were called upon to find ways to explain themselves to people whom they regard as not their own, to reach out to communities other than their own, and to focus on activities which could overcome the prevailing polarization in Turkey.

**“As a matter of fact, social and political polarization is reflected in our NGOs. It is unfortunate, but that is the case. Therefore, every political group has its own NGOs and every one of them works to serve its own social, political and cultural segment of society. Yet recently, for the last couple of years, there have been some NGOs that sought to reach out to communities other than their own. This is a positive development.”**

**Esra Elmas**

DPI Director of Turkey

## THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, THEIR ACTIVITIES AND BEST PRACTICES

*The basic tasks which respondents think civil society organizations should perform include providing checks and balances, acting as a line of communication between*

*civil society actors and political decision-makers and transmitting societal demands to the executive and legislative branches of the government. Particularly respondents who have a background in political science think of civil society organizations as ‘intermediary’ mechanisms. While politicians see civil society organizations as voluntary charities, civil society organizations identify themselves as expert institutions producing knowledge and policy proposals and performing vital social services in areas where the government lags.*

It is widely believed that in the last five years, civil society organizations have been unable to perform their functions. For civil society organizations to become effective and functional, the emergence of a favorable political climate is seen as the most important requirement. Most of the respondents think that in Turkey, the government and politicians are usually the ones who control the fates of civil society organizations. Almost all respondents say that whenever the political climate shifts towards democratization, the effectiveness and participation of civil society organizations increases.

Yet the European Union’s report on Turkey emphasizes that a change in the political climate in and of itself would not be enough for civil society organizations to start performing their functions and that a legal and financial framework is also needed for that to happen. The report indicates civil society organizations are usually excluded from policymaking and monitoring processes and draws attention to the elements of democratic participation mentioned in the 11th. National Development Plan (2019-2023) as a realistic solution to the problem. In short there is an urgent need for the creation of a favorable legal, financial and administrative environment in Turkey so that civil society organizations can flourish unrestrictedly.

**“Civil society organizations are trying to perform their checking and balancing functions, but everyone thinks that for the last four, four and a half years there have been problems in that function as well. As the media, from which people can get their messages, have already been constricted quite considerably, and with the pandemic added to that, the field of operations for civil society organizations have been constricted even more with regulations and various decrees.”**

**Muammer Bilgiç**

Felicity Party Board Member

Respondents also expressed the opinion that for democracy to flourish, civil society organizations need to be strong. Civil society and democracy were two concepts respondents frequently uttered together. Civil society organizations were seen as the foundation blocks on which a democratic society rests. Respondents said civil society organizations also need to question their functions and priorities and, if necessary, to restructure themselves in line with societal transformations and changes. What are the essential functions and tasks which civil society organizations are expected to perform? The answers given to this question varied according to whether the respondents are civil society professionals or political actors. Political actors expected civil society organizations to act as transmitters of societal needs to the government, while civil society professionals put more emphasis on checking and balancing functions, as well as on acting as guardians of diversity and pluralism.

**“We need to establish new bridges in Turkey. The political parties cannot do that. I mean political parties are either terrorized or they are themselves parts of the polarization, or**

**their hands are dirty because they benefit from the government and are thus complicit in Turkey’s current situation. Yet, I am not saying that civil society organizations alone can lead the political struggle in Turkey, I think they must engage in a dialogue with the political parties.”**

**Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

Another interesting point is that neither civil society professionals, nor political actors think that civil society organizations ought to have a say in political decision-making processes. Political actors are seen as the only players who single-handedly shape both the public sector and civil society. When civil society professionals are asked to define their tasks, they emphasize their functions as defenders and watchdogs. Some civil society professionals see civil society as a kind of public sphere where they can meet with other professionals to share their experiences. While civil society organizations were defined as spaces that allow like-minded people to meet, civil society itself was defined as a space where differences meet.

**“I think each and every civil society organization feels close to a particular political camp or network and runs its political relations through them. If we look from the perspective of civil society, they need to be able to get out of their small networks. They must be able to communicate with the actors of other, and I say this in quotation marks, ‘opposing’ camps on the basis of their projects, reports or events. They should follow the agendas of political parties closely and they should force political parties to act in certain ways.”**

**Mehmet Emin Ekmen**

Vice Chair, DEVA Party

***“It is one of the indispensable founding blocks of a democratic order. It is the basic constituent of the public sphere. It can be formally organized, but let’s say there are also informal versions as well. All in all, they are the visible faces of the society in the public sphere. Let’s say that civil society is the visible face of socialization.”***

### **Etyen Mahçupyan**

Author  
Vice Chair, Future Party

Respondents also emphasized that democracy is in decline in Turkey and there are political crises in the country. They said civil society organizations cannot assume the responsibility for overcoming those crises all on their own, that political actors and the business and art worlds must also urgently start carrying some of the burden. They called upon opinion leaders who are particularly influential in shaping public opinion to take up this issue and draw more attention to it.

Political actors say they become aware of the issues over which civil society organizations seek to raise awareness only if media outlets take them on, in other words, only to the extent they manage to make it to the headlines. Political actors follow civil society organizations through media outlets. Only those political actors who have previously worked in civil society organizations or those who have an academic background studying civil society organizations say they follow NGO activities through channels other than media outlets.

***“I think the NGOs in Turkey are completely subject to the prevailing mentality in the public sphere, their success depends on that, too, and therefore only when that environment is favorable we see good NGO activities and practices. When that environment gets corrupted, they either***

***close down, or become introverted, or they engage in activities which are guaranteed not to ruffle some feathers, and thus they lose their purpose.”***

### **Etyen Mahçupyan**

Author  
Vice Chair, Future Party

Political actors expect civil society organizations to conduct research to understand society, perform monitoring activities to check state institutions and to strengthen the ties between society and the state in areas where such ties appear to be weak. Most political actors as well as some civil society professionals say that for civil society organizations doing a good job does not necessarily mean they are effective. Most respondents are of the opinion that politicians and the government do not make adequate use of civil society output. In this sense they find Turkish civil society to be markedly ineffective.

***“We at Istanbul publish various reports and policy papers in an attempt to raise awareness about the real problems in Turkey and present some possible solutions to them. In most cases they do not attract much attention, but some of our reports have been fairly effective. For example, our report on women’s inequality – you too used a visual of it – have been debated quite a lot. The HDP presented it as a parliamentary question, and the CHP took notice of it. We have also published a report on the youth in January which was noticed by a number of different parties.”***

### **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

When asked about which issue areas they see within the scope of activities of civil society organizations, the respondents defined a fairly wide universe, ranging from freedom of expression issues and media activities, to children’s, seniors’ and disability rights.

When asked which issues they see as the most pressing ones, respondents listed women’s rights, access to justice, freedom of expression and ecology as the leading areas where Turkey is faced with problems that need to be urgently solved. Respondents also emphasized that progress in these areas is premised on civil society organizations’ ability to sustain regular monitoring activities and in fact that such activities are of vital importance.

When asked about the best civil society practices, almost all respondents mentioned the achievements and struggles of the women’s movement as exemplary. The women’s movement’s inclusiveness, its ability to overcome the prevailing political polarization and to bring issues to the public agenda, as well as their campaign in support of the Istanbul Convention<sup>1</sup>, were all factors which respondents cited as contributing to the successful stopping of the attempts to revoke the said convention. The ability of the different segments of the women’s movement to act in concert even under the conditions of the prevailing polarization was seen as the most important factor contributing to the women’s movement’s success.

Among the good examples offered were also successes achieved as a result of lobbying activities. The eventual adoption and realization by the state institutions of proposals first presented as visionary policy papers prepared by NGOs were chalked up as civil society victories.

Activities which can include diverse segments of society, overcome the prevailing polarization, and intervene in the agendas of the government or opposition parties at the policy-making level were seen as successful. Respondents found those activities to be valuable, as they could motivate political

actors to take action or could prevent certain legislative proposals from being passed by the parliament. In this context the activities of Oy ve Ötesi (Votes and Beyond) were given as a good example of a civil society initiative which motivated political parties to take action in the issue areas of ballot box security and integrity.

***“I was most affected by what happened to Şule Çet. You know Turkey. Here, you are not considered a real victim, unless you are a perfect victim. When it comes to those types of issues, I think if it weren’t for the efforts of the women’s movement, a lot of cases would have remained forlorn. For me, when we talk about civil society in Turkey, it is the women’s movement that first comes to my mind. And frankly I say this without discriminating among religious women, Kurdish women and all the various other women’s movements in Turkey.”***

### **İlkan Dalkuç**

Content Producer, Daktilo 1984

***“The fact that some of the contentious articles have been withdrawn from the proposed legislation regarding certain regulations in the area of food, agriculture and forestry, which is due to come to the parliamentary floor in October 2020, can be chalked up as a success of the NGOs active in the area of food and agriculture.”***

### **Erol Erdoğan**

Researcher and Author

Respondents also noted effectiveness could be increased if civil society organizations could present their suggestions in the form of analytical policy papers supported by statistical data that could help political actors to visualize them.

<sup>1</sup> Update: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a decree at midnight last Friday that annulling Turkey’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women. Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56516462>

Please also see the column published in Civil Pages by Ayşe Bingöl Demir, regarding the analysis of Turkey’s withdrawal from Istanbul Convention in terms of international human rights law. <https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/2021/03/26/statements-do-not-suffice-concrete-steps-are-a-must/>

“As I said earlier NGOs are important elements in the functions of democracy, important for the country and for the dynamics within the country. But if they don't make the democratic breakthroughs with the right people, on the right basis, sometimes these NGOs may very well undermine their own existence. For example, there are some professional associations, these are powerful associations, they are perhaps the symbols of an organized civil society.”

### Zeynep Alkış

AK Party Vice-Chair, Political and Legal Affairs

“Civil society organizations need to improve themselves in terms of policy development. By policy development I mean, let us say clearly, for example day care centers are one of the demands generally made by women. When I was working at KAGIDER, I voiced that demand and the minister of labor at the time asked me: If I give day care support to women, how can you prove to me, that this will have a positive impact on the labor force participation rate? Our argument was that more day care centers meant more women participating in the labor force. This was the link we were establishing. We had World Bank reports to support that assertion. We established that link with data from other countries. But the minister asked for more concrete research on that. So we worked with an international consultancy firm, and came up with a simulation of the impacts of a 300 TL monthly support for day care on the entrepreneurship of women, on the employment of women, on education, and even on decreasing crime rates in the long run. We presented that simulation to them and we eventually succeeded to be part of their campaign promises. What I mean is, in order to make policy, you need to do the intellectual work as well. It is enough to say ‘that I demand this’ but in order to exert pressure on the government, you need to present something that can convince large masses of people, you also need to work on and present the intellectual background of your proposal.”

*This is what we call lobbying activities. These are the methods of influencing policy makers and policy-making processes. This is what is needed. They need mechanisms they can take and implement right away.”*

### Gülseren Onanç

Former member of CHP Party Assembly, Founding member of SES Equality Association

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE JULY 15<sup>TH</sup> 2016 COUP ATTEMPT

*In interviews, respondents made important observations about how the coup attempt of July 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 deepened the prevailing political polarization in the country. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, the government's sphere of influence has expanded, while that of civil society has shrunk considerably.*

The scenario that eventually emerged has forced civil society organizations and individuals to take sides, while the deepening of the already existing polarization has only been a natural consequence of that process. Most of the respondents were prone to compare this period with the coups of September 12, 1980 and February 28, 1998. Some respondents suggested they found the current period to be even more strident than that of the February 28. The victimization that has been experienced in the last couple of years has had significant negative effects on democracy and civil society in Turkey, but these experiences have also created an environment in which different people from different cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds

could form more empathetic relations with one another on the basis of their common victimhood. However, these experiences cannot be translated into something akin to progress towards a better future, unless both civil society organizations and the political actors play their respective parts.

*“All I can say is that it was an attempt on the part of the government to destroy civil society. I do not see anything hopeful in the emerging picture. Quite on the contrary, it was a process in which all opponents were labeled as terrorists, in which a huge number of people were put in prisons. Journalists, civil society leaders, lawyers, women, attacks against the women's march, all of these were in fact attempts to intimidate and silence the opposition.”*

### Filiz Kerestecioğlu

MP (HDP, Ankara)

Pro-government organizations and representatives of the governing party admitted civil society was constrained after the coup attempt, but they expressed the opinion the constriction was needed and necessary. They were inclined to defend the government's decisions and actions after the coup attempt as legitimate moves. They also criticized the government for throwing out the baby with the bath water or for lagging behind in improving civil society and state relations but the tenor of their criticism was much milder than that of the opposition. The process was mostly approached as a human rights issue. For its part, the European Commission's Turkey Report focuses on the slanderous remarks by public officials and suggests the process has raised grave concerns about Turkey's disregard of due process rights, including the right to be presumed innocent before being found guilty by a competent court. The report also mentions the confiscation of the properties of civil society organizations closed down by executive decrees during the state of emergency and expresses the expectation for an effective solution to the problem.

*“There is a serious shift toward authoritarianism in Turkey. Some of the NGOs which know very well they cannot be active in the field because they are faced with all sorts of sanctions including the detention of some of their members. On the other hand, however, in Turkey we are not successful in creating alternative spaces and media. For example, at times using a softer, less radical language in a campaign can be seen as a betrayal of a political current and unfortunately civil society organizations often choose to play that game instead of trying to change it.”*

### Seren Selvin Korkmaz

General Director, ISTANPOL

Among the hundreds of NGOs closed down by executive decrees during the state of emergency, there were three lawyers' associations, two of which, namely Çağdaş (Contemporary) and Özgür (Free) used to represent torture and other police abuse victims, while the third, namely Mezopotamya (Mesopotamia) used to represent the victims of the government imposed curfews in the southeast regions of the country. The Van Womens' Association (VAKAD), which supported and assisted victims of domestic violence against women, Gündem Çocuk (Agenda Children), which was one of the leading NGOs in the area of children's rights, and Sarmaşık Derneği (Ivy Association), which was active in the areas of enforced disappearances, food assistance to more than 32,000 people and education, were also among civil society organizations that were closed down by executive decrees. Civil society organizations were closed down or their operations were suspended summarily and there was no legal recourse for an appeal.

*“Now I think July 15<sup>th</sup> was a real disaster for Turkey, and the worst part of the July 15<sup>th</sup> is that with the declaration of the state of emergency, it destroyed all grounds for*

*reasoned debate. It destroyed public debate and we lost all our spaces for public debate. Civil society organizations had to become preoccupied with their own troubles. They had to find ways to survive on their own. Some of them didn't survive, a lot of people lost their jobs, some of them had to leave the country. There were voluntary and enforced exiles, imprisonments, a lot of bad experiences. It was a very difficult period for Turkey and I do not think that we are out of it yet."*

### İlkan Dalkuç

Content Producer, Daktilo 1984

*"July 15<sup>th</sup> caused a trauma. After the coup attempt, the state has set into motion a very rapid mechanism. I think they made a strategic mistake, and that mistake was to use most or even all of the emergency powers given to them so they could find the coup plotters and to suppress elements of the opposition."*

### Vahap Coşkun

DISA, Chairman of the Board

Some experts said that since the July 15 coup attempt, autonomous civil society organizations pursuing their own agenda which had capacity for impact have been replaced with professional, introverted and pro-government civil society organizations.

Both political actors and civil society professionals frequently talked about the increased pressure on civil society organizations. A number of civil society professionals had to leave the country and settle abroad because of such pressures, which resulted in a narrower human resources pool for civil society organizations to tap. These pressures also contributed to the emergence of the perception that some civil society organizations are friendly, and some others are inimical. Even among civil society workers who are not prosecuted or under investigation themselves, the prevailing mood was one of anxiety and discomfort, and

some respondents suggest civil society jobs have started to be seen as risky work. Even opposition parties were advised to refrain from working with civil society organizations labeled as inimical by the government. Opposition parties were said to be afraid of being targeted by the government.

*"I mean none of them managed to construct a neutral, independent identity. And precisely because everyone is identified with somewhere, there arise concerns like 'if I work with this NGO, it will mean that I will be associated with this political party...'"*

### Esra Elmas

DPI Director of Turkey

In general respondents said that the state of emergency measures taken after the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt caused civil society organizations to lose a lot of blood. Measures like NGO closures by executive decrees, the Büyükada and Gezi arrests and the detention of Osman Kavala all served to silence voices from all segments of civil society.

The criminal prosecution of civil society professionals in the Büyükada and Gezi trials, the detention of civil society leaders and professionals and the heavy prison sentences they were facing all contributed to the generation of a climate of fear in which NGOs were afraid of doing even their most mundane daily tasks, and refrained from applying for international grants. Parallel to these developments in civil society, there occurred a monopolization in the mainstream media, accompanied by the widespread arrests and detentions of journalists and closures of critical media outlets.

In this process we observed that even though the trials of journalists were generally covered and documented by the media outlets, the trials of civil society professionals have remained mostly underreported. There appears to be a need for different civil society organizations to cooperate with one another to follow and document the court cases against civil society professionals.

According to Freedom House's report, in 2019 Turkey ranked 114<sup>th</sup> among 195 countries in terms of freedom, and its situation was worsening in comparison to previous years. The report placed Turkey among the "not free" countries, along with China, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Russia and Venezuela.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

*Respondents observed the pandemic has deepened the constriction in civil society and the government used it as a pretext to legitimize pressure on civil society organizations. They said the current political climate was already unfavorable for civil society organizations and the pandemic brought the activities of civil society organizations to a screeching halt. As face-to-face interactions decreased during the pandemic, respondents also feared awareness raising activities by civil society organization would also be adversely effected by it.*

Civil society organizations were criticized for being overly preoccupied with their own survival and for losing their focus on the changing needs of the people who benefit from their services. Respondents also suggested civil society organizations need to reconsider their functions and the purpose of their existence.

*"Yes, the pandemic presented authoritarian governments with a golden opportunity because currently we are talking about an*

*environment where mobilization is very low, where people cannot come together in solidarity, street demonstrations are restricted, alternative thoughts cannot come together and organize. In such an environment, civil society, the real civil society has much to do, we need to work hard to keep that dynamism alive because we are already passing through a period where it is impossible for people to physically meet and organize."*

### Gülseren Onanç

Former member of CHP Party Assembly, Founding member of SES Equality Association

During the pandemic civil society organizations were unable to present their research findings or continue doing their most basic tasks, yet some respondents also said the pandemic also worked as a great equalizer, opening up new communication channels between people through applications like skype, zoom, streamyard etc.

Respondents said a significant number of people working in civil society organizations have lost their jobs during the pandemic. In fact, many people in many different sectors have lost their jobs throughout the country, yet as most of these people are not unionized or otherwise organized, they could not defend their rights.

*"As the media from which people can get their messages have already been constricted quite considerably, and with the pandemic added to that, the field of operations for civil society organizations have been constricted even more with regulations and various decrees. But even then, I witness that well-meaning people are doing whatever they can under very difficult conditions."*

### Muammer Bilgiç

Felicity Party Board Member.

*“Of course, the pandemic had a terrible impact on the activities of civil society organizations. I mean a lot of civil society organizations are busy figuring out how they are going to convert their current resources, their current budgets. Only a few organizations could adapt. Therefore, there is this difficulty, but on the other hand the pandemic showed us politicians in Turkey are not ready to solve a crises of this magnitude. It transpired that there were a quite a few shortcomings in the area of social policy. There are the issues of seniors, of unsecured laborers, of women. I remember a report we had written about home-office working. Now there are civil society organizations focusing on each of these issues and doing valuable work. I mean they provided assistance when needed or developed proposals. Yet we see none of the political parties have a comprehensive social policy to solve such problems. Even the main opposition party, which is the strongest among them, came up with proposals regarding small shopkeepers only after six, seven months into the pandemics. The same goes for other political parties as well. The governing party can't offer any solutions anyways, which means there is a shortcoming. But civil society is working. From the very beginning of the pandemic, various organizations and institutions have thought about the impacts of this thing on the society and about current policy proposals. Politicians should take these and use them. There is an opportunity, as we have seen the shortcomings. ”*

**Seren Sevin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

### To Summarize;

Respondents emphasized civil society organizations need to reconsider their organizational and administrative structures, figure out the direction into which civil sphere is evolving and find out ways to provide services accordingly. In terms of the relations between civil society organizations and public administrative or political actors, there appears to be a need to show more effort to build up interactions and institutional

grounds for cooperation. Civil society organizations were said to have important roles to play in building a crises-resistant society.

*“My personal opinion is – and what I am going to say now is based on what I am working on – for one thing civil society organizations have to reconsider their purposes, missions, organizational styles, decision-making mechanisms, and relations with their members by taking into account that they are confronted with a new reality. And after that, after a correct reading of what is going on around them, they need to reposition themselves. At this point, this is what all civil society organizations must urgently do, whether they can do it is another question, but they must do it. Because in a world where so many changes are happening, civil society organizations cannot just move on with their old habits. If they do, then their whole existence would come into question.”*

**Nihat Erdoğan**

Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, ILKE Foundation

## SUGGESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL ACTORS

*Various respondents expressed the opinion that it is one of the hallmarks of democratic countries for political mechanisms to listen to what civil society has to say and ensure their participation in the decision-making process. Transparency in policymaking and implementation processes were further*

*necessities for democracy which respondents mentioned. The foremost expectation of civil society organizations is the development of a suitable legal, political and financial climate. In relations between civil society organizations and state institutions, what is required more than anything else is the institutional structuring of fair and transparent processes.*

*“I mean from the point of view of democracy, Turkey's general political climate is problematic, and therefore civil society organizations' involvement in these political processes is just as problematic. Let's say the parliament is the most important thing in terms of decision-making. Yet as the supreme decision-making body, the relations between the parliament and civil society organizations have never been institutionally structured. I mean even entering the parliament is very difficult. In fact, the opposite must be the case. After all, the parliament is a representative body. It represents the nation and therefore it needs to invite and embrace civil society organizations working in various issue areas. Instead, it is civil society organizations working in their respective issue areas which make every effort to share information with the parliamentarians. Yet the exact opposite must be the case, the parliamentary commissions must invite and demand information from civil society organizations, but there are no formally institutionalized structures for that. At times, the relations with civil society organizations improve, but this is not an institutional thing. I mean there can be occasional periods of opening, but that can be reversed at a moment's notice.”*

**Fatma Bostan Ünsal**

AK Party Founder, Political Scientist

**S**ome political actors said that despite the political pressures, civil society organizations strive hard to do what they can, and they encouraged them to persist in doing so. To increase their effectiveness, Civil Society Organizations were advised to use a more accessible language

that can speak to the majority of the society and a more dialogical and reconciliatory approach.

*“I do not think civil society is composed of anything other than ordinary human beings and I think it is necessary not to give up. I mean civil society organizations should not stop using the right to petition, or urging the opposition to act, or asking for an appointment from the government, or disclosing, or standing in solidarity with one another. Civil society organizations should shatter their internal hierarchies, they should avoid being overly institutionalized and static. Civil society organizations should not lose their creativity.”*

**Filiz Kerestecioğlu**

MP (HDP, Ankara)

Respondents suggested that reaching out to large masses of people and creating spaces where different segments of the society, different organizations and institutions can come together around common issues are the best bets for civil society organizations to be effective in the political process. Most respondents underlined the success of the campaign to defend Istanbul Convention was largely due to the women's movement's ability to overcome the prevailing political polarization.

*“I mean, what I think civil society organizations should do at this point is to increase the pressure on the political parties, perhaps also on the opposition parties and to try to get results in this way. And the way to do that is this: civil society organizations in one political camp should try to open new, cross-channels of communication by reaching out to other political parties which do not have much of a following in that particular camp. I think Turkey needs this.”*

**Muammer Bilgiç**

Felicity Party Board Member.

Respondents frequently emphasized that to be effective it is important for civil society organizations to be independent. Independence was defined as having two dimensions, namely economic freedom, and freedom of expression. Civil society organizations that can cover their own expenses and are economically independent of the government were seen as more likely to have a higher impact capacity. In this context respondents also emphasized using objective criteria in allocating public funds to civil society organizations was a must, but this was not how public funds were being allocated in Turkey. If it were possible to establish a transparent grant giving procedure to allocate such funds, and if the government didn't discriminate between civil society organizations which are close to it and others which are not, it would have been possible for civil society organizations to use these funds without compromising their freedoms of expressions.

***"It does not matter whether you are a civil society organization or just an individual, if you know the right people, you find easy access to funds. Therefore, under the present circumstances, some civil society organizations who have good connections with political power holders in the central government are in a much better position to access funds."***

### **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

***"I mean there is also this: Under normal circumstances civil society organizations must be based on voluntary work, its operations must be funded by someone. But in Turkey economic hardship, I mean the economic hardships people face also effect civil society organizations. As civil society organizations have insufficient funds, they go to power holders for support, and as the***

***power holders are close to the government, civil society organizations turn into public institutions."***

### **Muammer Bilgiç**

Felicity Party Board Member.

About the other dimension of independence, namely freedom of expression, respondents said it is a variable determined by the political climate prevailing in the country and, as such, it was not something civil society organizations can achieve on their own through internal capacity building measures. In this context it was also emphasized that civil society organizations need to show more effort to become more inclusive.

Some respondents noted there were a number of donors funding civil society projects, but the correlation between social investment and impact still remains largely unexamined. They suggested funds must be seen as social investments and more functional tools must be developed to measure their impact.

Respondents commented that the effectiveness of civil society organizations increases as they get to know their field and start operating in their field. It was suggested that the political impact of a civil society organization is more likely to increase if their effectiveness in society increases. Particularly in the face of a repressive government, civil society organizations can increase their effectiveness only to the extent they can strengthen their connections with the society and mobilize the societal power to form public opinion. This, however, requires civil society organizations to establish closer relations with people, understand their needs, and give a stronger voice to those needs. It was also suggested that the many shortcomings of democracy in Turkey are also reflected in civil society organizations, and that democratization is a need for the internal structures of civil society organizations as well.

***"I see civil society organizations as bodies which transmit the demands of the people, of peoples, to the executive and legislative branches of the government, as well as to public institutions, and which work for the realization of these demands. In other words, I see civil society organizations as intermediaries between the state and society, more on the side of the people than that of the authorities, giving voice to the quests for freedom of the different segments of people. Or that is how I want to see them."***

### **Muammer Bilgiç**

Felicity Party Board Member.

Respondents from civil society organizations also talked about the responsibilities of political actors and emphasized they should interact more with civil society organizations and make more use of their expertise and experiences. They called upon political actors to look at civil society organizations not merely as convenient sources of information but as partners with whom they could cooperate and work together. They said, that particularly when it comes to responding to natural disasters, political actors would be well advised to make extensive use of the volunteer networks of civil society organizations and their hands-on presence in the field and that a coordinated and close cooperation with civil society organizations in such cases is not something from which political actors can simply opt out.

Another observation made by respondents from civil society organizations was that political parties do not have comprehensive and well thought-out policies on critical social issues as the right to health, employment security and work life. They suggested political parties should pay more attention to the research reports and policy papers produced by civil society organizations on such urgent societal issues.

***"If the opposition parties want Turkey to democratize, I think they should pay attention to civil society organizations, not so much as paying attention but more as working with them, because with something like an unrestrained cooperation, they can construct the ideal of an alternative Turkey. I see there are some new political actors there who have been making this discovery and who are open to cooperating with civil society organizations, but this has not yet become a culture. It still depends very much on the initiatives of individual actors."***

### **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**

General Director, ISTANPOL

Respondents emphasized a change in mentality is needed for political parties to be able to evaluate the issues brought forth by civil society organizations objectively, sincerely, honestly and without prejudgments and use that information to rectify their own failings. On their part, civil society organizations were encouraged to use a more dialogical and reconciliatory language, and instead of lashing out at politicians and political actors, to show a more deliberative approach in their relations with them.

***"My observation is that when they are in opposition, most political parties think civil society organizations are useful things but once they assume governmental power, they start seeing civil society organizations as things they have to struggle against. I mean this is how this mechanism works in Turkey."***

### **Muammer Bilgiç**

Felicity Party Board Member

***"I mean political decision-makers make decisions but what they expect from civil society organizations is not participation in the making of these decisions, but their assistance in running the PR campaigns***

*of these subjects, communicating them to the society. Unfortunately, civil society organizations are not very effective in the decision-making processes.”*

### Vahap Coşkun

DISA, Chairman of the Board

Civil Society professionals advised political actors not to look at civil society organizations merely as inactive transmitters of political decisions to the general public. Rather, political actors were encouraged to approach civil society organizations as expert institutions with which they could actively cooperate in policy-making and implementation processes. Civil society organizations can assist political actors by contributing to the development of a universal language for politics, by serving as national and international sources of knowledge, and by sharing their international connections.

It was emphasized that what is required is a mentality change both on the part of civil society and political actors – a change that would allow them to develop a new form of relationship.

*“We need new actors, both political actors and civil society actors, who are more inclined to understand one another, to listen to one another, to work and produce with one another.”*

*One more thing which is of critical importance is that in addition to the universities, each and every political party must have an organ to reach out to and get in contact with civil society organizations in the sense we are talking now. Furthermore, it is also a widely shared opinion that civil society organizations should not have organic relations with political parties, that they should be maintaining their independence, that this increases their effectiveness..”*

### Etyen Mahçupyan

Vice Chair, Future Party

It was also suggested civil society organizations should find ways to reach out the large masses of people and that they need a much larger grassroots basis in the field. The lack of adequate financial resources was cited as the most important limitation in this respect.

*“If there is a fire in Turkey, we need to ask for help from everyone who has a bucket, or everyone who has the capacity to fill that bucket and carry water, we must contact them irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, creed, etc.”*

### Muammer Bilgiç

Felicity Party Board Member

## APPENDIX 1 LIST OF THE RESPONDENTS

Only those who gave consent to have their names published are listed

1. **Doğan Gürpınar**  
Academic
2. **Erol Erdoğan**  
Researcher, Author
3. **Esra Elmas**  
DPI Director of Turkey
4. **Etyen Mahçupyan**  
Author/Vice Chair, Future Party
5. **Fatma Bostan Ünsal**  
AK Party Founder, Political Scientist
6. **Filiz Kerestecioğlu**  
MP (HDP, Ankara)
7. **Fuat Keyman**  
Director, Istanbul Policy Center
8. **Gülseren Onanç**  
CHP Former Member of Party Assembly, Chair, Ses Eşitlik Derneği
9. **Hatem Ete**  
Academic/Formal Advisor to the Prime Minister
10. **İlkan Dalkuç**  
Content Producer, Daktilo 1984
11. **Nihat Erdoğan**  
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, ILKE Foundation
12. **Mehmet Emin Ekmen**  
Vice-Chair, DEVA Party
13. **Muammer Bilgiç**  
Board Member, Felicity Party
14. **Zeynep Alkış**  
AK Party Vice-Chair, Political and Legal Affairs
15. **Seren Selvin Korkmaz**  
General Director, İSTANPOL
16. **Sunay Demircan**  
Civil Society Specialist
17. **Vahap Coşkun**  
Chair, DISA
18. **Necla Zarakol**  
Chairperson at Zarakol

# APPENDIX 2

## QUESTIONNAIRE

### 1. PERSONAL QUESTIONS

- 1.1. How do you define civil society and civil society organizations?
- 1.2. Which civil society activities do you follow?
- 1.3. Which civil society activities do you think are the most important?
- 1.4. Which NGOs do you find most effective? Why?
- 1.5. Which civil society organizations are you a member of?
- 1.6. Have you visited any NGOs in the last months? What was the purpose of your visit?
- 1.7. Which media outlets do you use to follow civil society activities?

### 2. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

- 2.1. What are your general evaluations of civil society organizations in Turkey?
- 2.2. In what areas do you find them successful?
- 2.3. In what areas do you find them unsuccessful, ineffective or weak? In your opinion, how effective are civil society organizations in political decision-making mechanisms?

- 2.4. Based on your own experiences and observations, can you give us an example of a civil society activity where participation in the decision-making process resulted in getting/ not getting effective results? Can you provide concrete examples about how the relations between political actors and civil society organizations work?
- 2.5. Are there any civil society organizations that you think are in a more advantageous position in terms of having access to public funds and decision-making bodies? What do you think such relations are based on?
- 2.6. In your opinion, is there a correlation between the political conjuncture on the one hand, and the participation of civil society organizations in political processes and their effectiveness in getting results, on the other?
- 2.7. How do you evaluate new, flexible and non-institutional civil initiatives in terms of their ability to include the priorities of civil society in political decision-making processes?
- 2.8. What were the effects of the July 15th Coup attempt and the state of emergency which was declared after that on relations between civil society and political actors in Turkey? How would you describe the picture that has emerged since then?

### 3. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL ACTORS

- 3.1. How do you think political actors see civil society? How do they look at civil society organizations?
- 3.2. In Turkey, how much value do political actors ascribe to civil society activities and what is the extent to which they involve NGOs in legislative processes?
- 3.3. Can political actors make use of civil society organizations? How? If not, in what sense?
- 3.4. Do you think there are differences among the central government, political parties, the parliament, the presidency of the republic under the new system of government and local politicians in terms of how they see civil society organizations?
- 3.5. Are the mutual communication channels between NGOs and political parties open? Can you evaluate governing and opposition parties separately?

### 4. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE? IDEAL SITUATION?

- 4.1. Is there a need for change in the relations between civil society organizations and

political actors? If yes, what are your suggestions?

- 4.2. What do you think a civil society organization wishing to participate in decision-making processes should do? How can political actors benefit from civil society organizations? How can we establish more bridges between the two worlds?
- 4.3. Under democratic rule of law, what are the factors that we need to pay attention to in relations between political actors and civil society organizations? Are there any ethical boundaries? What is the proper distance that civil and political actors should keep in their relations with one another?

### 5. PREDICTIONS/FUTURE

- 5.1. What do you think about the effects of the pandemic on relations between political actors and civil society organizations?
- 5.2. How can civil society organizations make effective use of this process?
- 5.3. Have you heard of Sivil Sayfalar (Civil Pages)? Do you follow it?



 [www.sivilsayfalar.org](http://www.sivilsayfalar.org)



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