

EU support for NGOs in Turkey is not a short-cut to democratic change.

by Blog Admin

*EU funding for NGOs in Turkey is part of a long-term strategy aimed at strengthening democracy in the country, with funded organisations seen as a ‘bulwark’ against the excesses of state power. **Markus Ketola** argues, however, that Turkish NGOs do not operate in a vacuum – they are affected by the socio-political dynamics of Turkish society. While they play an important role in promoting democratic change, they are not a magic bullet for EU policy-makers.*



In October, the European Commission published its [Annual Report](#) on Turkey's progress in preparation for EU membership. Only a few years ago, the publication of this report was eagerly anticipated and the main conclusions made headline news in all of the major newspapers in Turkey, but this year many of Turkey's biggest daily newspapers failed to cover the report on their [front pages](#) at all. This is not entirely surprising, because at least as far as the role of civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is concerned, it says nothing new.

In the report, civil society and NGOs continue to feature heavily as a key ingredient of democratisation. The role of NGOs is also tied closely to the implementation of human rights legislation, particularly in the areas of freedom of assembly, women's rights and cultural rights of minorities. Financial assistance to NGOs flows to programmes that support ‘civil society capacity building’ and ‘civil society dialogue’ between Turkey and the EU. These same themes – democratisation, human rights and dialogue – repeat year on year.

So what's the problem? Aren't these important themes that should take a prominent place in the Annual Report each year? The problem is the way in which NGOs become utilised as vehicles of the accession process. The EU understands civil society from a liberal democratic perspective; that is to say, it sees civil society as a bulwark against the excesses of state power. At the same time, this approach sees the number of NGOs as an indicator of a state's democratic development. Therefore, the EU sees NGOs as the means to an end – as catalysts for democratisation and Turkey's EU accession – rather than as ends in themselves. In other words, the EU believes that by sprinkling the NGO ‘fairy dust’ it is possible to generate democracy.

But what are the grounds for making such an assumption? Why should we view NGOs as detached from the political debates that otherwise dominate the agenda? Instead, we need to understand that NGOs are part of the same socio-political, ideological and historical context as all other political actors, including the state. Therefore, it only makes sense to refer to NGOs and civil society as a ‘bulwark’ and as an ‘agent of democratisation’ when this assessment draws on the relevant socio-political and historical context.



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This is certainly the conclusion [my research](#) in Turkey has led me to. Given the historical context of four military coups and a political context spiced with deep-seated secular-Islamic tensions, it is impossible to detach the activities of NGOs from the pressing political issues of the day. Let's take the example of the women's movement. On the one hand, women's NGOs have engaged in two tremendously successful advocacy campaigns to reform both the Civil Code (2001) and Penal Code (2004) in Turkey. Through tireless lobbying these campaigns led to the adoption of several gender sensitive pieces of legislation that included divorce rights and tougher punishment for rapists. On the other hand, the campaign was hindered by religious and political arguments among the participating NGOs. For example, the Islamic women's NGOs did not wish to remove references to 'chastity' and 'honour' from the proposal, as doing so would challenge their religious commitment.

Following on from these successes, in 2007 the women's NGOs regrouped behind a new campaign to oppose the governments proposed social security reform for its lack of gender perspective. However, this time the campaign was characterised by political claims that reflect the Islamic-secular tensions in Turkish society. The secular women's NGOs seized this opportunity to attack the moderately Islamic party in power, the Justice and Development party (*Adayet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, AKP). Subsequently, the campaign took the proposed reforms as evidence of how the AKP's true colours as an Islamic party were blocking progress on women's rights. This approach alienated Islamic women's NGOs from the campaign, because they agreed that the proposed reforms were inadequate, but disagreed strongly with the way in which this critique was framed. In the end, this campaign fizzled out with little impact on the reforms.

I mention these campaigning examples to illustrate the point that we mustn't think that Turkish NGOs operate in a vacuum, unaffected by the socio-political and historical dynamics that govern Turkish society. As the examples above illustrate, the secular and Islamic women's NGOs operate (at least) on two levels, where they come together to challenge the Turkish state on its gender policy in one instance, yet also separate in order to support particular secular and religious interpretations of the state in another. Seen from this perspective, it is no longer quite so simple to describe NGOs as a bulwark against the state.

My intention is not to argue against EU funding of NGOs in Turkey, far from it. NGOs can be an important ingredient of democratic change as well as a useful vehicle for establishing dialogue between the EU and Turkey. However, NGOs are neither a magic bullet nor a panacea that delivers planned outcomes at the whim of EU policymakers. Conflicts, disagreements and adversarial relations are very much part of the terrain of civil society where NGOs operate and we need to remain sensitive to the challenges as well as opportunities presented by civil society-based democracy promotion programmes. Do continue funding NGOs; do continue to support human rights; but don't expect shortcuts.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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