

Politics of Civil Society: the Early Impact of EU funding on Turkish civil society organisations

Markus Ketola
PhD Candidate
London School of Economics
Department of Social Policy
Centre for Civil Society

Introduction

What exactly can donor agencies hope to achieve by funding civil society organisations? In rhetoric, at least, donors hope to make a contribution to strengthening civil society and in so doing induce democratisation. To what extent can external support from donors, such as the European Union (EU) in the case of Turkey, make a contribution towards achieving democratisation? By focusing on the recent experience of the women's movement in Turkey, this paper will attempt an answer to this question.

The paper has been structured as follows. First the arguments that have been made in criticising the donor approach to civil society support will be considered. Donors neglect the political nature of civil society, and in so doing devise policies that do not take into account the close relationship that often exists between state and civil society. This is followed by an examination of the way in which EU civil society support programme fares against this criticism, focusing on projects that have been carried out in Turkey. Having touched upon the policy environment, the paper moves onto tracing, first, the history and development of civil society and second the evolution of the women's movement in Turkey. In the final section, these dynamics are then explored through five examples that illustrate the complex nature of the relationships between women's groups in Turkey.

This paper proposes that much of political civil society activism is motivated by identity-based claims that are framed in uncompromising, essentialist terms. This is evidenced by the women's movement in Turkey, which, apart from two highly successful campaigns to realise a set of legal reforms, finds cooperation difficult. The movement is polarised between the different identity-based groups that exist within it. We should therefore question the appropriateness of the EU funding framework, as far as it aims to fund NGOs in order to strengthen democracy. The behaviour of civil society organisations (CSO) in Turkey does not fit the model of civil society building that EU has in mind and we should cast aside the expectation that increased civil society activism will naturally make a positive contribution to democratisation.

1 State-Civil Society Relations in Donor Policy

The concept of civil society, since its resurgence in the 1980s, has been a victim of its own success. The popularity and malleability of civil society have gradually chiselled away at its analytical rigour. Gordon White, for one, has lamented that the concept had been "dusted off and deodorized to suit a variety of ideological, intellectual and practical needs" (1994: 370). Similarly, Neera Chandoke has pointed out how civil society has become a consensual concept, and argues that "it is time to worry, for if groups who should otherwise be disagreeing on the concept come to agree on it, the

concept must have *flattened* out to such an alarming extent that it loses its credibility” (2001: 1). One issue where such developments are evident and also falls under the scope of this paper, is the tendency to impose certain normative criteria on what civil society ought to be. This normative criteria originates from the West where the concept can trace its historical roots, and is based on a liberal democratic understanding of state-society relations. Civil society is seen as a bulwark against the excesses of the state. The problem is that the dominance of one such (Western) interpretation of state-civil society relations undervalues the local, already existing civil society where it does not fit the liberal democratic mould (Mercer 2002: 5). There is a case for claiming back some of that missing analytical rigour by being more nuanced in how we apply theoretical assumptions.

Donor agencies, EU included, have a tendency to translate such normative approach into policy objectives. Support for civil society is envisaged as an instrument of democratic development and the mechanisms through which this support is provided are standardised. The result is a system of financial assistance delivered through short-term projects to CSOs. Howell and Pearce have labelled these developments as the “Americanization of the debate”, arguing that despite a rich and varied experiences around the globe, the view of the United States and its donor agencies has grown dominant in civil society discourse (2001: 39-40). This is particularly true where the relationship between civil society and democracy is concerned. The donors see their aims to constitute a neutral, value free approach, forming a template ready for use in any context. They see CSOs as functionaries of democracy, increasing citizen participation in activities that hold the state to account. What is more, these organisations are also seen to be bipartisan advocates of neutral discussion, moving away from traditional boundaries of political ideology (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). In this way civil society and the state are treated as separate, playing for opposite teams. Does this accurately describe the reality of state-civil society relations in countries outside of western liberal democracies?

The reality of state-civil society relations in countries such as Turkey often finds the two – state and civil society – closely knit. The closer together they are, less pluralist the space within which civil societal voices exist, and thus narrower the scope of claims that can be made through civil society (Seckinelgin 2006: 748). Gramsci described the mutually reinforcing relationship between state and civil society as “statolatry”, which ensured that by controlling civil society, a weak state could establish and retain a hegemonic position. In other words, by defining the kinds of claims and actions that are acceptable within civil society, even a weak state can establish new norms that reinforce its own existence (Gramsci 2001). We should pay greater heed to the political role played by civil society in legitimating certain societal voices over others, and be aware of the struggles that take place in this legitimating process. When donors fund civil society groups, how likely is it that this will lead to democratisation? Is it not likely that the organisations thus strengthened simply channel their new abilities to the partisan struggles they are engaged in? State and civil society are therefore not situated in a zero-sum opposition. In reality the relationship between political society and civil society is much more complex and multilayered.

2 EU Approach: Strategy, Policy and Projects

The following section looks more closely at the approach the EU has adopted in engaging Turkish civil society. This will cover specific policy documents and the

language of particular project rationales in order to identify the nature of the assumptions on which EU has based its work on developing Turkish civil society. The purpose of this overview is to assess where EU policy sits, at least in terms of its rhetoric. Does EU policy purport a view of civil society as an opposing force to the state, as a bipartisan and neutral source of democracy? Or does EU consider the political nature of civil society, recognizing the potentially complex relationship between civil society and state?

There are two primary ways in which EU support affects CSOs in Turkey. First, the EU has contributed to civil society development through legal and structural reform. There is a strong correlation between the various documents through which the EU prefers to make its demands (such as the annual progress reports produced by the European Commission), and the reforms that have subsequently taken place (Tocci 2005). Although these demands for reform made by EU were not necessarily devised with civil society or the women's movement directly in mind, indirectly they have provided a window of opportunity for CSOs to step in and successfully make their claims heard. Second, CSOs have been engaged through direct financial support in the form of project funding. It is to the assumptions as to what this direct funding is expected to achieve that the discussion turns to next.

The expectations behind direct funding to CSOs are best illustrated by tracing the way in which the role of civil society is described across the different levels of decision-making. At the broadest of level, the aims of EU policy towards civil society are couched in the overall EU pre-accession strategy for Turkey. This strategy has three stated objectives: meeting the political element of the Copenhagen Criteria (full-fledged democracy), implementing the *acquis communautaire* (i.e. EU law), and supporting a "Civil Society Dialogue" between Europe and Turkey. Development of civil society features heavily in its own right in the policy documents that map the outline of the pre-accession process. The financial spending plan for pre-accession funding towards Turkey affirms the role of Civil Society Dialogue as a central policy and states that "in meeting the Copenhagen political criteria...a priority will be support for the continued development of civil society organisations" (European Commission 2007). The "Accession Partnership Document", on the other hand sports to "further strengthen the domestic development of civil society and its involvement in shaping of public policies" as well as to "facilitate and encourage open communication and cooperation between all sectors of Turkish civil society and European partners" (European Council 2008). These comments within policy documents indicate that the development of Turkish civil society is seen as an avenue leading to greater democratisation of Turkish society. There are significant expectations on civil society to create that democracy-inducing environment.

A similar tone is found in the policy documents that describe the EU policy towards civil society in more detail. The 2005 communication from the European Commission titled "Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries"¹ (European Union 2005). The missed opportunity, the document argues, of the previous round of EU enlargement, was in the area of civil society involvement. It argued that "any future enlargement ... needs to be supported by a strong, deep and sustained dialogue [where] *civil society should play the most important role in this dialogue*" (italics in original). Civil society organisations are seen as the means through which a greater communication between the various actors can be facilitated.

¹ Interestingly this document, despite referring to candidate countries in general, was in fact written with Turkey specifically in mind (from a personal communication, EU Commission Delegation to Turkey).

In this example the role envisaged for civil society is non-political and limited to providing a communication link between the different sides. Furthermore this dialogue, by increasing the participation of civil society in political, cultural and economic life, contributes to a “lively and vibrant civil society ... which is key to the consolidation of human rights and democracy, in line with the political criteria for accession” (European Union 2005: 4).

In practice such support takes the form of project funding, and similar assumptions about what civil society can achieve in Turkey can be found in the rationales that accompany each project description. One such rationale, argues that the “further development of a lively and vibrant civil society in Turkey ... is key to the consolidation of human rights and democracy” (European Commission 2004). In another project document it is argued that “civil society participation in policy-making enhances political pluralism” and “*strengthening* civil society will contribute to the development of democracy in Turkey” (European Commission 2003). Judging by these comments, it seems clear there are distinct assumptions informing EU policy making in Turkey, which see civil society support directly contributing to the democratisation process. The suggestion is that better CSOs or more CSOs will help to advance democracy in Turkey. Funding civil society groups on short-term bases underlies a further assumption: that these groups are so well established they can incorporate the demands of short-term projects in their overall aims without being overly burdened by its demands or overly dependent on it for survival.

At least in its rhetoric, the EU support for civil society aligns with the views held by donor agencies in general. It fits together with a view of the relationship between democracy and civil society that is based on liberal democratic ideas. Civil society is seen more as a depoliticised, neutral agent that is able to balance the state and hold the state into account. By now returning to the context of Turkish civil society and the women’s movement in Turkey, it is possible to look back on these assumptions while reflecting on the realities of the case of Turkish civil society. Does the funding framework remain relevant to the dynamics of civil society activism in Turkey?

3 Civil Society and the State in Turkey

The burgeoning growth of civil society in Turkey cannot be ignored. The official limitations to civil society activity have been largely eliminated in recent years, and more pluralistic civil society has developed since the 1980s. However, whether the developments towards pluralism translate to more democratic practices is another question. The new voices of civil society tend to frame their activism in essentialist terms, suggesting that compromise between the competing ideas would not be sufficient. The tendency to see issues in “either-or” terms has not abated, marking what is essentially a secular-Islamic boundary within civil society. NGOs on the two sides of this fault line are active in criticising and politicising each other’s actions. Subsequently, relations between state and civil society as well as within civil society are marked by frequent tension.

Turkish state tradition has been one of disregarding the role of civil society in decision-making. Social change in the Turkish republic has had very little faith in organic processes. Instead, the elite opted for “project-based social engineering” (Mardin 1997) to carry out social reforms that took little notice of the voices or cultural practices that were trying to make themselves heard from within civil society. Second, where civil societal voices have been listened to, this has been rather

selective. There has been a conscious effort to support particular voices (progressive, secular, modern) at the expense of others (conservative, traditional, Islamic) (Keyman 2000). Invariably these voices were those that best aligned with the views of the state. Nilüfer Göle, for example, in her analysis of civil society in Turkey problematizes the interpretation of the secularizing and modernizing efforts of the state as “liberalizing”. Secularization was not a means to achieve liberal democratic system as such: the modernizing sweep in fact suppressed leftist, Islamist and minority voices. It was an “either-or” scenario in that plurality in civil society was accepted only as far as it was not deemed undermining the modern, secular vision of the Turkish state (1994). Third, this process of co-opting civil society was legitimized through a rhetoric of nationalism. Even today nationalism remains the *raison d'être* of the state (Seufert 2000). The notion of nationality, Turkishness, was not an expression of an existing national consciousness but rather part of a top-down project intent on the development of a new consciousness that was non-religious and non-ethnic in character. As Seufert asserts, “nation and state, in this way, have been made to coincide, leaving little room for differing interests of divergent but likewise legitimate societal forces and associations” (2000: 29).

Throughout the 1980s and beyond, however, this organic and homogeneous vision has gradually been crumbling. The political culture in Turkey has become increasingly fragmented, where politics of identity and difference have been claiming centre stage (Keyman and Öniş 2007: 280). The debate has shifted from imposing cultural homogeneity to emphasising particular cultural identities. In this context, civil society has been drawn into the political struggle that wages primarily (but not only) between the secular, Kurdish and Islamic identities, and where the Islamic resurgence in particular is perceived as a threat to the secular foundation of the Turkish Republic. The description of civil society in Turkey by Binnaz Toprak is a case in point. Toprak sees civil society as having a pivotal role in supporting the authoritarian secularization mission of the state, and unreservedly accepts this. For her, an ideological resonance with the principles of secularism that enforced a particular cultural and nationalistic project become the critical criteria for membership in Turkish civil society (1995). Civil society actors, The way in which these dynamics play out in practice has been described as a “socio-cultural reflex” (Seckinelgin, 2004). The socio-cultural reflex contracts in response to the secular system being threatened by a different political identity.

The juxtaposition of expanding civil society activity with the limitations on the role that civil society has been allowed to play has led others to conclude that civil society in Turkey exists in “quantity but not in quality” (Kalaycioğlu 2004; Simsek 2004; Keyman and Öniş 2007). The lack of quality can also be understood to originate in the essentialist nature of the claims that are being made within civil society; the ideals informing the activities of civil society groups are deemed to be superior and should be adapted by all of society, leaving no room for compromise. The struggle among civil society groups to define Turkey’s future through either a secular or an Islamic vision leads to constant tensions in the relationships between CSOs. The fact that civil society activism continues to be informed by identity-based claims is seen as part of the problem, a characteristic that reduces the quality of civil society activism.

3.1 The Last Decade

So far, the dynamic of civil society have been described as one where nationalist-secularist state tradition is juxtaposed with structural and legal reform that has led to a numerical increase in the number of CSOs, but not necessarily a qualitative change. The following section discusses two important events that illustrate these dynamics further and identify what changes have – and not have – taken place. The events in question are the post-modern coup of 1997 and the series of demonstration held in the spring of 2007 in protest of Abdullah Gül's nomination to become the next president of Turkey.

The 28 February process, also dubbed as the “post modern coup”, originated in the unprecedented electoral success of the Islamist Welfare Party in the December 1996 elections and the subsequent tug-of-war between the government and the military. In early 1997, on February 28th the National Security Council (NSC) issued a statement, which, among several other recommendations, called for restrictions in religious activism and educational establishments run by religious entities (such as Imam Hatip schools). The government refused to act upon these recommendations and was eventually forced to resign. In January 1998 the Welfare Party was shut down and its operations deemed illegal (Karaman and Aras 2000). The most interesting aspect of this process for the current discussion was the interaction between the NSC and civil society. From May 1997 onwards, trade unions, professional groups and women's NGOs joined in what was coined as “battle” to save secularism and democracy, and to protect the Turkish nation along with its Atatürkian heritage (Seufert 2000). What is more, the generals actively solicited this support. In other words, the secular civil society actors were being utilized in a process that aimed to legitimize the authoritarian measures imposed by military in order to curb religiously motivated political activity. Civil society actors were roped in to give support to the state in its efforts to retain the hegemonic position in society. This example illustrates the bifurcated nature of civil society, where only certain actors adhering to a particular ideological framework are recognized as part of the official civil society. The secular/nationalistic bases for the state are being reflected in the way Islamic NGOs were sidelined from the official civil society.

A decade later, on Sunday May 13th, 2007, the third mass demonstration in six weeks was arranged, this time in the city of Izmir where a staggering 1,5 million people gathered to demonstrate. The two previous demonstrations in Ankara and Istanbul has attracted similar crowds. An opinion piece ran in the *Turkish Daily News* (TDN) newspaper three days later which claimed the demonstration showed how the “Turkish nation [...] will not give up pursuing the principles of Atatürk. Turkey is a whole and unity is its fundamental characteristic. [...] the nation demands to claim secularism and democracy” (Kilercioğlu 2007). The governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) had chosen Abdullah Gül as their nominee for the upcoming presidential election. With AKP enjoying an overall majority in parliament, and the parliament being responsible for electing the president in Turkey, Gül's presidency was virtually guaranteed.

Why such vociferous opposition? The demonstrations protested against the nomination of a man with an Islamist background to become the next president, a position whose incumbent has embodied the secular state since it was first occupied by Atatürk himself. The above quotation is interesting as it links the demonstrations with ideas of “nation”, “whole” and “unity”. To what extent do these demonstrations represent the whole nation, or the whole of civil society? As Köker opines, the

argument put forth was paradoxical: the Turkish republic, consisting of its citizenry, is actually being threatened by this same citizenry. The only way not to see a paradox within this logic is to redefine “citizen” to include only like-minded (secular) individuals and to exclude those that one considers enemies (2007). It serves as an example of an essentialist claim made through civil society.

There are many parallels between the two events. Civil society actors were mobilized to defend the republic against the threat being posed by elements that are deemed non-secular and undemocratic. On both instances, the “socio-cultural reflex” contracts in an effort to preserve the secular way of life (Seckinelgin 2004). Since these voices are expressed within the realm of civil society, it is possible to claim that the demands being made express the democratic wish of the citizens.

4 The Women’s Movement and Civil Society in Turkey

The development of the women’s movement has been largely state controlled, as was the case with civil society overall. Over the past two decades, however, the women’s movement in particular has established itself as a significant advocacy group, in Turkish civil society, successfully challenging the state to make changes to the constitution. Perhaps the EU approach to engaging with Turkish civil society is the right one after all. This section will first take a brief look at the history of the women’s movement in Turkey. The more recent development within the women’s movement will then be outlined, lastly focusing on the successful campaigns to reform the Civil Code and Penal Code of the Turkish constitution.

In the 1930s, the issues dealt with by feminist movement in Turkey were limited to concerns in the public sphere. Whilst women had the right vote and the right to stand for office, family structures and traditions were left untouched. Despite the limitations in gender equality in the private sphere, women were expected to be satisfied with the reforms that had taken place and refrain from demanding more (Tekeli 1997). The fact that women were given the right to vote at such an early stage, in 1936, may ironically have hampered the cause of the women’s movement. This strengthened the argument that gender equality was dealt with, and took the wind out of the sail of further progress. Feminist ideology became overlapped with the Kemalist state ideology, espousing a strict separation of state and religion, as well as an aspiration for a modern republic in the image of the West. In other words, the feminist discourse was dominated by “state feminism” (White 2003) where feminism became equated with public and legal equality, setting aside the patriarchy of the private realm (Ayata and Tütüncü 2008). The dominant voice within the women’s movement focused on these public expressions, leaving the issues facing women in the private sphere outside its immediate agenda.

This national/secular dominance of civil society has been gradually changing since the 1980 military coup. Although the coup brought in a regime that was initially both militaristic and undemocratic, it also did away with the institutional barriers which had prevented women from organizing beyond the limits of state feminism (Tekeli 1997). In this post-1980 era political parties were banned from having formal relations with CSOs. In fact, the military intervention consciously tried to depoliticise society and go as far as creating a system where political parties had minimal contact with society outside of elections. Removing political parties from society opened up a new platform for dialogue among the various social groups, which were previously kept apart by political boundaries (Ayata and Tütüncü 2008). This, “opened the Kemalist Pandora’s box out of which have emerged multiple identities making

references to the different sects of Islam and the Kurds” (Kadioglu 1996: 192). Thus, during the last decade the balance of power between the different voices within civil society and the women’s movement has gradually shifted. This has been the case in particular since 2002, when AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), the political party with an Islamic genealogy gained a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections and have governed since. With the rise of moderate, political Islam an increasing number of women’s group have begun to merge the feminist and Islamist ideas, followed by an increasingly nuanced and refined rhetoric. The Islamist women’s groups have rephrased their claims to wear the headscarf in public places, such as universities, as a universal human right. It not claimed as a religious right, but framed as infringing their right to education instead. Yet, the relationship between the secular state and civil society has remained relevant, preserving a relatively narrow space for societal debate and discussion. Together this has meant that the question of what kinds of interests can be legitimately claimed through the civil societal space has been spiced with constant tension. It is at this junction of Islamist and secular women’s activism that the relationships within the women’s movement reveal a significant fault line.

By the end of the 1990s, the movement had diversified to at least three strands of organisations: Kemalist, Islamist and Feminist (Esim and Cindoglu 1999). Esim and Cindoglu identified Kemalist organisations as the largest group, pursuing a strictly nationalist and secularist agenda. The thinking behind the Kemalists aligns with state feminism, with emphasis on women participating in the public sphere under the rules of Kemalism. With only a limited grassroots reach, these organisations are more focused on work at the central level with the state, and conduct some work in the poor neighbourhoods on converting women to nationalist and secularist ideas. Islamic women’s organisations, on the other hand, focus their activities on religious education as well as on welfare programmes. They work closely with municipal governments in areas where the Islamic party is in power, and have a well-organised grassroots apparatus sustaining wide-reaching programmes. Their services cater largely for the religious community, and provide assistance to women while ensuring that this does not detach them from the traditional family context of being a wife and a mother. Finally feminist organisations, named as such because they take gender as their fundamental organising principle. They are the smallest group of organisations, and make women’s needs the ultimate priority in their work. The key services they provide are shelters for women that suffer from domestic violence as well as child care centres.

In the last decade significant legal reforms have been realised which have paved the way towards gender equality. The women’s movement has played an important role in campaigning for these reforms. The new Turkish Civil Code, adopted in 2001, abolished the position of man as the legally recognized head of the family and provided women with new legal rights. Spurred on by the success of the campaign to reform the civil code, women’s movement regrouped behind another campaign to reform the Turkish Penal Code. Following three years of campaigning, a new Penal Code was adopted, representing a major improvement in gender equality. Sexual violence is now regarded as a crime against the individual, not against society; rape within marriage now constitutes a crime; rapist can no longer marry their victim as a means to avoid punishment. In all, over thirty recommendations made by the women’s campaign were included in the final document (Anıl, Arun et al. 2005).

The experience of the two campaigns mentioned above seem to contradict the claims made earlier about state dominance of the women’s agenda, and about barriers

existing between women's groups. These campaigns did indeed express a remarkable solidarity between all of the groups that participated where ideological and political differences between the participants were cast aside for the purpose of achieving lasting structural change. Three factors, at least, were behind this success. First was the urgency of the issue. The parliamentary discussions regarding the Penal and Civil Codes took place over a limited time frame, after which the window of opportunity to have an impact would pass. The awareness among women's groups that success would require a short, high impact campaign brought many of them together for the first time. Second factor was the universal nature of the issues that the women were demanding, which made it relatively easy for all to agree on the demands of the campaigns. In addition, these demands were not developed simply for the sake of this campaign; they had existed for a long time and had been internalised within the movement at large. Finally, the campaigns were directed by a relatively small number of women. This meant there were fewer differences to reconcile between the most active participants, whilst others were happier to follow in their slipstream. These factors seem to suggest that the Penal and Civil Code campaigns were conducted under exceptional circumstances that may not reflect the true state of civil society.

It is important to recognize the successes of the women's movement in recent years. The organisations have gradually removed themselves from the yoke of the state, and developed an independent, well-organised movement that has been able to challenge the hegemony of the state. There is indeed some evidence to argue that in this area the development of civil society does follow the liberal democratic model, and the financial support given to CSOs by the European Union has been well spent. Yet, when concentrating on one campaign conducted by civil society groups in one area of civil society, we need to be careful not to be chasing a red herring; there may have been good reasons for the successes of the campaign that were independent of the development of vibrant civil society. The next section will attempt to investigate the relationships between women's groups further.

5 Politics of the Women's Movement:

As we widen the scope and look more closely at the different dynamics of the women's movement, a more colourful and complicated scenario begins to emerge. Outside of the realm of focused and narrow campaigns, women's NGOs find it quite difficult to work together. There have been disagreements over who can do what in the name of the women's movement. The most significant of these fault lines are ideological in nature – for example, debates between secular and religious, or nationalist and Kurdish groups. This section brings together a selection of five examples of situations where the activities between women's groups have been seasoned with tension.

The first example recalls the experience of one activist attending a series of annual conferences organized by one of the pioneering women's organizations in Turkey. The first conference was named after the group that organized the event. It was then agreed that the name would be changed, so as to be more representative of the entire network of women's groups that participated. The name remained unchanged, however, continuing to carry the name of the organization that managed the event. As she recalled, this began to raise questions among the conference participants. "...some people started to think, 'Am I really here? Am I an outsider, or an insider? Am I a guest or an owner?'". The participants felt the conference was not reflective of the movement as a whole, where all could share equally in its ownership,

and that this was a problem. They felt the movement was being appropriated for the purpose of promoting one organisation. “This then leads to discussions about problems between women’s NGOs, so when we met we had no chance to talk about the real issues of the conference”. It is quite telling that the participants had such strong feelings about the name of the conference that this became more prominent than the actual issues for which the conference had been organised. On one hand it is a display of solidarity among the women’s groups, where no single group should rise above the others. On the other hand, the resistance to recognize one organisation over others, and the magnitude of this resistance in overshadowing purpose of the conference, exemplifies the central role that internal politics of the movement play.

The second example is a specific instance from the conference discussed above. In the conference held in 2008, a group of Kurdish women’s organizations wanted to organize a meeting to discuss state violence against Kurdish women. An argument broke out between the Kurdish and Kemalist women’s organizations, and the latter would not allow the meeting to take place. The situation escalated to the point where police were called to intervene and stop the meeting from taking place. In the end the Kurdish women’s organizations did hold their meeting, but the conference was irreparably damaged by these events. The differences within the movement took over the agenda. What this reveals are the strong ideological and political differences within the women’s movement as well as the tendency for the “state feminists” (i.e. Kemalist women’s groups) to strive for ideological hegemony within the movement.

Whilst the above examples are indicative of the differences of opinion that exist within the Turkish women’s movement, the *idée fixe* of these differences arises from the affray between secular and Islamic women. The third example accounts and experience from the campaign to reform the penal code, where a member of an Islamic women’s group, took part in an online discussion through a mailing list on what the campaign should aim for. A lawyer by training, her suggestions on the legal reforms were well received by the online group of activists. However, as it was impossible to tell from her online persona that she was wearing a headscarf, it came as a surprise to the other participants when they met in person for the first time. Subsequently, once these differences surfaced, the working relationship became much more difficult to manage. This example highlights the importance of identity – particularly secular and Islamic – as a boundary within the women’s movement that is very difficult to overcome.

The differences between the secular and religious groups surfaced again later on during the campaign on amending the penal code. There were certain issues that were included within the campaign where the two sides could not agree on the way forward. For example, the demand to remove all references to concepts such as “morality”, “chastity” or “honour” from the penal code was one such issue. In other words, the Islamic women’s groups did not wish to lobby against some of the laws that curbed women’s rights as this would have contradicted their religious vision. They expressed this disagreement by choosing not to attend meetings when such aspects of the campaign were discussed, and not to partake in related lobbying activities. This experience was framed by one activist as “deception”. This example further illustrates the difficulties in reconciling the priorities of the secular and religious women, even within the most successful campaign women’s groups have organized to date.

Finally, a campaign organized last year by women’s organizations around a new issue, a government proposal for social security reform, further elucidates some of the fault lines. The government’s proposal for how social security was to be

reformed did not satisfy many of the demands women activists had made, and as part of the campaign to push through a more progressive social reform package a series of protest marches were organized. However, at least one Islamic female activist felt that the mood of the campaign was not entirely inclusive. The comments she made illustrate this well:

I personally wanted to attend some street protests about this law, but they are shouting things like ‘this AKP government and this parliament are backward’. They are swearing at them because they are Muslim. I really feel that this new law is a problem, but I cannot attend these protests. They are swearing at us, so we cannot be together.

The campaign was framed simultaneously as both promoting women’s rights and protesting against the current government. The insufficient reform was taken as evidence that the government adheres to a more conservative/religious understanding of social relations that is detrimental to progressive women’s rights. Subsequently the lobbying efforts moved away from universal women’s rights and shifted towards a more particular political agenda aimed at undermining the government. The secular face of the women’s movement claimed a hegemonic position within this campaign. It is very likely this ended up excluding groups that were not similarly inclined in political terms.

Although above examples emphasize the conflict-ridden and unconstructive relations among women’s groups this is not meant as a commentary on “what is wrong” with the women’s movement. Many of the activists interviewed acknowledged the conflicts that exist and felt a real sense of frustration for not being able to reconcile them, the headscarf issue in particular. They felt strongly that it was their responsibility to work together as secular and Islamic activists, take ownership of the agenda, and work towards a solution. Yet, these problematic issues continue to exist, and should be part of any analysis and description of what Turkish civil society is like. One cannot ignore the energy that exists within the movement, and perhaps what is needed is a rethink of how we perceive of successful civil society activism. The activism is vibrant, only not in the democracy-inducing way that donor organizations in particular have come to think of civil society.

6 Discussion

The paper began by asking whether the strategy adopted by the EU for civil society funding in Turkey has been the right one. The answer put forward here argues that this strategy is both right and wrong. It has been the right decision to for EU to provide financial support to CSOs in Turkey. Under the auspices of the EU pre-accession process, women’s groups undertook an unprecedented campaign to push through a set of legal reforms that have fundamentally changed the structure of gender relations in Turkey. The women’s movement itself has evolved from a home of state feminism to a more diverse set of groups. These have been important developments in the direction of a civil society that is plural, active and independent from the state. From this point of view, supporting civil society groups financially, and framing this support as development of vibrant civil society should be regarded as both appropriate and successful.

However, the evidence from within the women’s movement suggests that civil society in Turkey is somewhat different. Despite positive developments, further

funding for women's groups is likely to reinforce the differences between the groups, as funding strengthens the organizational capacity of groups that are ideologically polarized. The fact that groups oppose each other in this way is not in itself a problem, but it does mean that the aims of EU policy for civil society support are misconceived. In other words, whilst civil society is indeed vibrant, we should look more carefully at the nature of this vibrancy, for there is no direct correlation with strengthened democracy.

Women activists, when discussing examples of tension within the women's movement, tended to frame the tension as a problem. It was perceived as a negative characteristic and as something to be sorted out. There was a feeling that even if politicians cannot find a way to reconcile the fundamental differences between secular and religious outlook on life, and the issues such as the debate surrounding headscarves that arise from this, women themselves should be able to find a common position. Before considering whether this is possible, I wonder whether this is even desirable at the moment. When civil society groups cannot agree a common position on an issue naturally, pushing for such a position forcefully will only result in the dominant voices within civil society drowning the debate.

At the beginning of the paper the thoughts of White and Chandoke were evoked, to serve as a reminder of the tendency civil society has of becoming a stale concept meaning everything to everyone. In making the conceptual link that "vibrant civil society" leads to a "strengthened democracy", the EU policy documents have been guilty of this tendency. EU has reduced the idea of civil society to a group organizations that behave in a certain, democracy enhancing way. This is certainly not the case. In order to avoid such misleading simplifications, we may do well to move away from thinking that consensus is always the natural outcome of civil society activity. Politicized, factionalized and contentious relations between civil society groups is the more likely end result for external support, at least in the case of Turkey. When referring to "vibrant civil society", let's think of vibrancy in terms of difference of opinions and to the energetic arguments these differences generate.

The lack of consensus and overabundance of arguments should not be framed as a problem that can be solved by encouraging a different kind behavior within civil society. We simply need to be more realistic, move away from the normative assumptions that tend to inform decision-making, and stop looking for shortcuts to democratic development.

References

- Anıl, E., C. Arın, et al. (2005). Turkish Civil and Penal Code Reforms from a Gender Perspective: The Success of Two Nationwide Campaigns. Istanbul, WWHR - New Ways.
- Ayata, A. G. and F. Tütüncü (2008). "Party Politics of the AKP (2002-2007) and the Predicaments of Women at the Intersection of the Westernist, Islamist and Feminist Discourses in Turkey." British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 35(3): 363-384.
- Chandoke, N. (2001). "The 'Civil' and the 'Political' in Civil Society." Democratization 8(2): 1 - 24.
- Esim, S. and D. Cindoğlu (1999). "Women's organizations in 1990s in Turkey: predicaments and prospects." Middle Eastern studies 35: 178(11).

- European Commission (2003). Improving Co-Operation between the NGOs and the Public Sector and Strengthening the NGOs' democratic Participation Level. TR0301.03.
- European Commission (2004). Strengthening Freedom of Association for Further Development of Civil Society, TR 0401.04.
- European Commission (2007). Commission Decision on a Multi-annual Indicative Planning Document (MIPD) 2007-2009 for Turkey, C(2007)1835.
- European Council (2008). Council Decision of 18 February 2008 on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with the Republic of Turkey and repealing Decision 2006/35/EC.
- European Union (2005). Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries.
- Göle, N. (1994). Authoritarian Politics and Islamist Politics. Leiden, E.J. Brill.
- Gramsci, A. (2001). Further selections from the prison notebooks. D. Boothman. London, Electric Book Co.
- Howell, J. and J. Pearce (2001). Civil society & development : a critical exploration. Boulder, Colo., Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Kadioglu, A. (1996). "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity." Middle Eastern Studies 32(2): 177-193.
- Kalaycioğlu, E. (2004). State and Civil Society in Turkey: Democracy, Development and Process. Civil Society in the Muslim World; Contemporary Perspective. B. A. Sajoo. London, I.B. Tauris Publishers: 1-34.
- Karaman, M. L. and B. Aras (2000). "The Crisis of Civil Society in Turkey." Journal of Economic and Social Research 2(2): 39-58.
- Keyman, E. F. and Z. Öniş (2007). Turkish politics in a changing world : global dynamics and domestic transformations. Istanbul, Istanbul Bilgi University Press.
- Keyman, F. A. (2000). Global Modernity, Identity and Democracy: The Case of Turkey. Redefining the Nation State and Citizen. G. G. Özdoğan and G. Tokay. Istanbul, Eren: 69-89.
- Kilercioğlu, O. (2007). Turkey is a whole and unity is its fundamental characteristics. Turkish Daily News. Istanbul.
- Köker, L. (2007). How Civil, how Democratic? Today's Zaman. Istanbul.
- Mardin, S. (1997). Projects as a Methodology: Some Thoughts on Modern Turkish Social Science. Rethinking modernity and national identity in Turkey. S. Bozdoğan and R. Kasaba. Seattle, University of Washington Press: xi, 270 p.
- Mercer, C. (2002). "NGOs, civil society and democratization: a critical review of the literature." Progress in Development Studies 2(1): 5-22.
- Ottaway, M. and T. Carothers (2000). Funding Virtue. Washington, Brookings Institution Press.
- Seckinelgin, H. (2004). Contractions of a socio-cultural reflex: civil society in Turkey Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts. D. L. a. H. S. eds. M. Glasius. London, Routledge.
- Seckinelgin, H. (2006). "Civil society between the state and society: Turkish women with Muslim headscarves?" Critical Social Policy 26(4): 748-769.
- Seufert, G. (2000). The Impact of National Discourses on Civil Society. Civil Society in the Grip of Nationalism. S. Yerasimos, G. Seufert and K. Vorhoff, Orient-Institut.

- Simsek, S. (2004). "The Transformation of Civil Society in Turkey: From Quantity to Quality." Turkish Studies **5**(3): 46-74.
- Tekeli, S. (1997). Women in the Changing Political Associations of the 1980s. Rethinking modernity and national identity in Turkey. S. Bozdoğan and R. Kasaba. Seattle, University of Washington Press: xi, 270 p.
- Tocci, N. (2005). "Europeanization in Turkey: trigger or Anchor for Reform?" South European Society and Politics **10**(1): 73-83.
- Toprak, B. (1995). Civil Society in Turkey. Civil Society in the Middle East: vol.2. A. R. Norton. Leiden, E.J. Brill.
- White, G. (1994). "Civil Society, Democratization and Development: Clearing the Analytical Ground." Democratization **1**(3): 370-385.
- White, J. B. (2003). "State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republic Woman." National Women's Studies Association Journal **5**(3): 145-159.