

## Civil society under siege in Turkey: authoritarianism, polarisation and counterstrategies

**Ülker Sözen** • Postdoctoral research fellow at the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter Strategies in Berlin

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Turkey is, like Russia, a striking illustration of the shrinking of civic space as a result of authoritarian policies. The author paints a picture of the trends and practices at work in this strategic country from all points of view while underlining the internal dynamics and incredible courage of Turkish civil society.

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The worldwide rise of authoritarianism and illiberal populism in the last decade has resulted in a trend of shrinking civic space. This trend is characterised by the surge in State controls over civil society organisations (CSOs), especially those operating in the field of human rights, in order to silence their critical voices and restrict their access to international support and justice mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> Accompanying this, there is the criminalisation of CSOs and their depiction as foreign agents and threats to national sovereignty due to their international ties and the assistance they receive from foreign donors. Recently, such measures are clearly observed in countries like Russia, Kazakhstan, Egypt and Hungary.

Nevertheless, authoritarianism and the shrinking of civic space are not only found in failing democracies or illiberal regimes. These trends are also present in liberal democracies of Europe and the Global North, which are driven by securitisation, the anti-migration agenda, the rise of the alt-right<sup>2</sup> and anti-gender movements, and the growing role of corporate interests in shaping the civic space.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the pronounced cases of shrinking civic space in Global South contexts take place within the framework of global power relations and foreign interests that are still affected by colonialism, extractivism and the neoliberal restructuring of economic and social life.<sup>4</sup> That is to say that the restriction of civil liberties and oppression of rights defending associations in authoritarian countries

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Toepler et al., "The changing space for NGOs: Civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes", *Voluntas*, vol. 31, no. 4, April 2020, pp. 649–662.

<sup>2</sup> An abbreviation of "alternative right", a term designating a part of the American extreme right fighting for white supremacy and against feminism and multiculturalism [Editor's note].

<sup>3</sup> Giada Negri and Filip Pazderski, *Mapping shrinking civic space in Europe*, Civitates, 2021, <https://civitates-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Mapping-shrinking-civic-space-in-Europe-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> David Sogge, "Is civic space really shrinking, and if so who's to blame?", *Open Democracy*, 22 September 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/is-civic-space-really-shrinking-and-if-so-whos-to-blame>

stem from the growing border security concerns and anti-terrorism politics of the Global North States. The austerity politics and repression of trade union action are in line with the measures imposed by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank or the interests of extractive industries in conjunction with local political elites.

Turkey is a prominent example to observe this phenomenon. Political polarisation and social conflict chiefly along the religious-secular divide and the Kurdish issue have deepened beneath the swell of authoritarian governance, populism and the securitisation of politics after the failed coup against the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) government in 2016.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, following the Syrian civil war and the growing waves of migration from war-struck countries such as Afghanistan, xenophobia in -Turkish society has risen to alarming levels. On top of all this, the severe economic crisis with plummeting currency and record-high inflation rates has exacerbated the anti-migrant sentiments and social conflicts in recent years.

The European Union (EU) authorities have been voicing criticisms towards the AKP government about human rights violations and infringements of freedoms. However, these denunciations, such as the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in favour of the activists whose rights are violated, no longer produce any substantial effects to change the government's behaviour since the EU accession was dropped from the political agenda. Despite the criticisms, the EU's cooperation with the AKP government persists regarding the issues of border security and the containment of millions of refugees from Syria and -other countries. Some activists, for instance labour union representatives opposed to the dismissal of more than 150,000 public servants for political reasons after the coup attempt, express the opinion that the EU shies away from taking an active stance and more persuasive measures due to these security concerns.<sup>6</sup>

### Pressures on and criminalisation of civil society in Turkey

As of 2021, Turkey has been ranked among the most repressive countries towards civil society.<sup>7</sup> However, during the 2000s, civil society in Turkey had flourished under the favourable circumstances of the EU accession process through the availability of accession funds and the harmonisation reforms entailing the relaxation of state surveillance and

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<sup>5</sup> Murat Somer, "Old and new polarizations and failed democratizations in Turkey" in Güneş Murat Tezcür (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 295–318.

<sup>6</sup> Ülker Sözen, "How to achieve transnational solidarity in the age of neoliberal authoritarianism and border securitization?", International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-strategies, 2021, <https://irgac.org/2021/1053>

<sup>7</sup> Civicus, "11 countries downgraded in new global report on civic freedoms", 8 December 2020, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/4787-11-countries-downgraded-in-new-global-report-on-civic-freedoms>

controls over the CSOs.<sup>8</sup> This positive environment changed after the Gezi Park protests in 2013 when citizen groups defending urban and environmental justice and human rights came to the forefront with their demands challenging the AKP government's agenda. As part of the government's punitive measures, there were attempts to disrupt several CSOs through extensive and additional auditing, fiscal penalties and even police raids.<sup>9</sup>

The closing of civic space intensified following the end of the peace negotiations in 2015 between the Turkish State and the Kurdish movement and then the coup attempt in 2016. During the state of emergency rule declared after the failed coup, hundreds of CSOs and media outlets were shut down by statutory decrees, and many lawsuits were filed against activists, politicians, journalists and academics accused of supporting terrorism. Thousands of politicians and activists associated with the pro-Kurdish left-wing party HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – Peoples' Democratic Party) are still imprisoned with terrorism charges including the then co-leader of the party Selahattin Demirtaş. In Kurdish cities, CSOs and rights defenders have come under more intense pressure and are commonly subjected to their activities being banned, terrorism charges, arbitrary detentions and prison sentences. The pandemic has also been used as a reason to further restrict activities carried out by rights defending organisations leading to efforts to obstruct public meetings, press releases and protests all over the country.

The CSOs and their activists have been targeted through several court cases leading, for example, to the Büyükada and the Gezi trials. In Büyükada, an island near Istanbul, ten activists from various rights organisations including Amnesty International and Helsinki Citizens Assembly Turkey were taken into custody during a training workshop on digital security in 2017. They were charged with terrorism offences while in the media they were accused of espionage and contributing to the coup attempt. In the final court hearing in 2020, four of the rights advocates on trial were sentenced to prison.<sup>10</sup>

The Gezi trial has been a more poignant case which was actively pursued by the government and the president -Recep -Tayyip Erdoğan to suppress political opposition and criminalise civil society activism. Several activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and artists were trialled with the main accusation of attempting to stage a coup against the government and organising the protests for that purpose. The indictment involved further allegations such as conspiring with foreign States and using violent means to overthrow the constitutional order and the government. In the verdict declared on 25 April 2022, Osman Kavala, a philanthropist and the leading promoter of civil society and human rights activism in Turkey since the 1990s, who has been imprisoned since 2017, was given an "aggravated" (no prospect of early release) life sentence. Seven other defendants were sentenced to eighteen years and sent to

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<sup>8</sup> Özge Zihnioğlu, "Continuity and change in Turkish civil society", in Ebru Canan Sokullu (ed.) *Turkey in Transition: Politics, Society and Foreign Policy*, Peter Lang, 2020, pp. 121–136.

<sup>9</sup> Bilge Yabancı, "Turkey's tamed civil society: Containment and appropriation under a competitive authoritarian regime", *Journal of Civil Society*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2019, pp. 285–306.

<sup>10</sup> "Büyükada trial: Constitutional Court rules that rights advocate Eser's arrest was unlawful", *BIA News*, 9 June 2021, <https://bianet.org/english/other/245418-buyukada-trial-constitutional-court-rules-that-rights-advocate-eser-s-arrest-was-unlawful>

prison. The verdict was described as a “travesty of justice” and “a politically motivated charade” by Amnesty International.<sup>11</sup>

Amendments to the laws regulating the rights to peaceful assembly and protest, the misuses and exploitation of -anti-terror laws have been the main legal means in the government’s attempts to intimidate civil society activists.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in late 2020, a legislative change was issued that increased the controls over CSOs, allowing the State to replace the leaders of organisations who face terrorism charges and to seek restrictions on their activities in court.<sup>13</sup> This reform also allows for annual government inspections of associations, specifically those with international ties. It has been accompanied by an increase in criminalising discourses by government officials and pro-government media targeting the dissident CSOs that receive foreign funding and portraying them as enemies of the nation. The media campaigns have been built on the government’s strategy of escalating political polarisation around the themes of defending religious values and national security against Kurdish “terrorism” and Western “enemies”.

In recent years, especially following the government’s declaration of its intent to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention<sup>14</sup> in 2019, LGBT and women’s organisations have been specifically targeted (ban on women’s rights and Pride marches, police attacks on demonstrations). Despite strong public reaction and challenges by feminist organisations, the government pulled out of the convention in 2021. Pro-government discourse against the convention centred around the threat of homosexuality and the need to protect the family. Nevertheless, the LGBT and feminist movements have managed to generate remarkable social awareness and influence in the last decade, especially for mobilising different sections of society against femicide and in favour of visibility for non-conforming gender identities. In order to circumvent the progressive politicisation around gender identities, the government has increased pressure on LGBT and feminist organisations. Most recently, there has been a lawsuit to shut down the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, which is one of the most influential feminist organisations in Turkey.

### A proven civil society

Given the circumstances described above, civil society activists and rights defenders in contemporary Turkey are facing a heavy emotional burden. In the interviews and field research

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Safi and Sami Kent, “A travesty in Turkey: the Gezi Park trials”, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2022/may/23/a-travesty-in-turkey-the-gezi-park-trials>

<sup>12</sup> Banu Tuna et al., *Keep the volume up: Intimidation policies against rights defenders 2015-2021*, Truth Justice Memory Center, 2022, <https://www.sessizkalma.org/en/document/keep-volume-intimidation-policies-against-rights-defenders-2015-2021>

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House, “Turkey: Passage of NGO law strips away fundamental rights and freedoms”, press release, 4 January 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/turkey-passage-ngo-law-strips-away-fundamental-rights-and-freedoms>

<sup>14</sup> The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence which entered into force on 1 August 2014.

I have been conducting since November 2019, I observed that they express feelings of stress, burnout and at times hopelessness. As part of their work, many activists experience the emotional toll of monitoring and documenting rights abuses and witnessing many fellow activists having to deal with lawsuits and prison sentences even if they are not personally subjected to these.

Moreover, structural problems within the civil society field in Turkey and the -project-based mode of operation aggravate the stress of activism. These problems include short project lead times, the need for non-stop fund raising to keep the organisations alive and continue activities, uncertain labour relations and non-democratic decision-making practices and hierarchies within the organisations.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there is the inability to reach out to and establish ties with wider sections of society and overcome polarisation lines. This predicament affects the majority of rights defending CSOs, with the exceptions of women's rights, LGBT and Kurdish organisations, which manage to overcome the secular-conservative divide to some extent, even if only with respect to the social groups that they aim to represent or address. The complications regarding overcoming political and cultural boundaries contribute to the feelings of loneliness and hopelessness among the civil society activists.

Yet it would be unfair to stop at this bleak picture considering their devoted efforts to the cause of raising democratic and egalitarian values. Positive feelings of hope and empowerment are found in the scenes of collective action such as demonstrations or when practising solidarity with and assisting the victims of political violence. For instance, one LGBT activist shared in a meeting that took place in late 2021 on the political repertoires of feminist and LGBT movements in Turkey: "People still come to women's rights and Pride marches while knowing that they will be beaten or detained. They still want to cheer the slogans together and find some courage in the presence of one another."

Hope is again sought with reference to the universal ideals of freedom, equality and democracy. One activist volunteering at a human rights organisation in a Kurdish city emphasised the importance of keeping hope under difficult and despairing circumstances during our interview in early 2020:

"Civil society activism is like the labours of Sisyphus. We will carry that stone every day to the top of the mountain. I may be gone tomorrow but others will continue the endeavour. People deserve to live as equal citizens under humane conditions in this country. I believe that much of political pressure [over civil society] results in some consolidation in our front too. Things will not continue as they are. We are here and we will do our best. Is this a rational analysis, maybe not, but I am still hopeful. Hope is contagious like bravery. And seeing things that way is how we fend off the climate of fear falling upon us."

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<sup>15</sup> Ülker Sözen, "Production of activism under authoritarianism: Insights from the rights-based civil society in Turkey?" in Börries Nehe (ed.), *Global Authoritarianism. Perspectives and Contestations from the South*, Columbia University Press, 2022.

Here hope emerges as an emotion that is actively nurtured despite the adverse conditions, even though it seems irrational. One way to grow hope is being able to practise and materialise ideals, even in smaller settings such as self-organised citizen groups. This is an important means of improving the emotional well-being of civil society activists trying to continue activism in an environment where the erosion of democratic norms and institutions are being normalised.

### Counterstrategies at the domestic and international levels

Building on this energy, a few avenues for counterstrategies at the national and international levels could help fuel Turkish civil society activism.

At the domestic level, these may involve:

- developing strategies to connect with broader sections of society to overcome social polarisation;
- improving ties with the labour movement and workers' rights initiatives and incorporating the struggles for social and economic rights into human rights activism;
- reforming hierarchical relationships and undemocratic decision-making in CSOs;
- improving dialogue, cooperation and solidarity between CSOs working in diverse fields;
- creating mechanisms to cope with the emotional burden of activism in an authoritarian context.

At the transnational level, more effective counterstrategies may benefit from:

- developing better knowledge of and stronger links to transnational advocacy networks and hold donor agencies and justice mechanisms linked to the EU and other international bodies accountable for achieving change;
- establishing stronger ties with grassroots political actors overseas;
- improving ties with other Global South civil society actors to put pressure on transnational human rights networks and mechanisms in order to implement effective policies to sanction authoritarian States.

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### Biography • Ülker Sözen

A postdoctoral research fellow at the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter Strategies in Berlin. Ülker is also a visiting scholar at Alice Salomon Hochschule in Berlin. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Turkey. She has conducted research on memory and identity politics, Kurdish studies and feminist struggles in Turkey. She is a member of the Birarada Association, founded by the Academics for Peace group in Turkey for the defence of academic freedoms in Turkey, and AĞ-DA, the gender equality solidarity network. Her recent research focuses on activism led by civil society organisations and transnational solidarity against authoritarianism.

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