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## **TRANSFORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN TURKEY**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the historical formation and contemporary development trends of civil society in Turkey. The study examines the waqf and guild systems of the Ottoman period, the centralized modernization policies of the Republican era, the liberalization processes after the 1980s, and the European Union integration stage through a comprehensive institutional approach. In the 21st century, digital platforms, youth and women's activism, and the increasing role of state regulation are explored as key factors shaping civil society. The findings indicate that civil society in Turkey has evolved into an "institutionally developed yet politically constrained model," reflecting both progress and structural limitations.

**Keywords:** Civil society, Turkey, liberalization, European Union, digital activism, democratic institutions.

### **Introduction.**

Civil society is widely regarded as a fundamental pillar of democratic development, functioning as a mediating sphere between the state and society. It encompasses voluntary associations, professional unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other social institutions that enable civic participation and public oversight. The trajectory of civil society development varies across countries depending on historical legacy, political structure, and external influences. In the case of Ottoman Empire, early forms of civic organization were embodied in waqfs (charitable foundations), artisan guilds (esnaf), and



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neighborhood (mahalle) institutions. Although not defined as “civil society” in the modern theoretical sense, these structures performed essential social, economic, and welfare functions. Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, a centralized and secular nation-state model was introduced. Subsequent liberalization reforms in the 1980s and the European Union integration process in the 1990s–2000s significantly influenced the restructuring and expansion of civil society institutions. The purpose of this study is to examine the historical transformation of civil society in Turkey and identify its defining characteristics in the contemporary period.

#### Materials and Methods

This study employs a multi-method approach to investigate the historical transformation and contemporary trends of civil society in Turkey. The methodological framework includes:

**Historical-Comparative Analysis:** This method is used to examine and compare different stages of civil society development, including the Ottoman period, the Republican era, the post-1980 liberalization phase, and the contemporary period. By tracing the evolution of social institutions, charitable foundations (waqfs), artisan guilds, and professional associations, the study identifies continuities and changes over time.

**Institutional Analysis:** This approach focuses on understanding the structural evolution of civil society organizations, including NGOs, trade unions, professional associations, and grassroots initiatives. It evaluates how these institutions have adapted to political, legal, and social transformations while assessing their internal governance, membership structures, and functional roles within society.

**Political-Legal Analysis:** This method examines the impact of state policies, legal reforms, and regulatory frameworks on civil society. Special attention is given to legislation related to freedom of association, expression, human rights,



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and international integration requirements, particularly in the context of European Union accession efforts.

**Content Analysis:** Academic literature, historical records, government documents, and international institutional reports were systematically analyzed to capture both qualitative and quantitative insights. This method allows for triangulation of sources and ensures a comprehensive understanding of civil society's development trajectory.

Primary and secondary sources—including scholarly publications, legal texts, archival documents, and reports from international organizations such as the EU, UN agencies, and global NGOs—were reviewed to ensure analytical rigor and to provide a holistic perspective on both historical and contemporary trends.

## **Results**

During the Ottoman Empire, civil society was not yet formally conceptualized, but proto-civic institutions played a critical role in social organization. **Waqfs** (charitable endowments) were established primarily on religious and philanthropic principles, funding education, healthcare, infrastructure development, and social welfare. These institutions operated with relative autonomy from the central Ottoman state, enabling local communities to manage social services and support vulnerable populations.

Similarly, **artisan guilds (esnaf)** functioned as structured professional associations. They regulated production standards, oversaw apprenticeship systems, maintained ethical trade practices, and protected the economic interests of their members. In addition, **neighborhoods** served as local self-governance units, where respected elders and religious scholars mediated disputes, coordinated communal activities, and enforced social norms. Together, these structures constituted the historical and institutional foundations of what would later evolve into formal civil society.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the newly founded state under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk implemented sweeping reforms aimed at secularization, nationalism, and modernization. Religious institutions, including



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waqfs, were substantially restricted, and civic initiatives were brought under strict state oversight.

Professional associations, cultural societies, and other civil organizations were allowed to operate, but only within tightly controlled frameworks emphasizing national unity and loyalty to the state. Although civil society's autonomy was limited, these institutional frameworks provided the basis for professional organization, cultural activities, and partial civic engagement. The Republican period thus represents a stage of **institutional consolidation under centralized governance**, balancing modernization goals with restrictions on independent civic activity.

The 1980 military intervention initially curtailed civil society activities to restore political stability. However, economic and political reforms during the late 1980s, particularly under the leadership of Turgut Ozal, facilitated a gradual resurgence of civic engagement.

Economic liberalization, promotion of market mechanisms, and encouragement of private sector development created opportunities for the growth of **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** and other civic actors. Human rights associations, environmental advocacy groups, women's organizations, and professional unions increasingly emerged as independent actors. Civil society organizations began to negotiate new forms of interaction with the state, including advocacy for legislative reforms, public awareness campaigns, and policy consultation.

During the 1990s–2000s, Turkey's candidacy for membership in the European Union played a crucial role in consolidating civil society institutions. Legislative reforms aligned with EU standards expanded freedom of expression, association, and minority rights. NGOs gained greater **legal protection**, enabling more effective engagement in governance, public monitoring, and advocacy.

International donors and transnational organizations provided technical and financial support, allowing Turkish civil society to integrate into global networks. This phase is often referred to as the “**Europeanization of civil society**”, reflecting institutional maturation, increased professionalism, and adoption of democratic norms in civic practice.



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In the 21st century, civil society in Turkey has entered a **pluralistic and networked phase**, driven by digital technologies and social mobilization. The Gezi Park protests exemplify the capacity of social media platforms to rapidly organize civic action, mobilize youth, and amplify public demands.

Women's activism, environmental campaigns, anti-corruption initiatives, and human rights advocacy constitute a dynamic segment of contemporary civil society. However, increased regulatory oversight, legal restrictions on associations, and concerns over political stability have created structural constraints. As a result, Turkish civil society is often characterized as “**active but constrained**”, balancing civic engagement with institutional and legal limitations.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of civil society in Turkey demonstrates that its development has been shaped by a combination of historical, political, and international factors.

**Historical Legacy:** Proto-civic institutions, such as waqfs, artisan guilds, and neighborhood (mahalle) organizations, established early mechanisms for social organization, mutual aid, and local governance. These structures fostered communal solidarity and created the foundational norms for civic engagement, even in periods of strong state centralization.

**State-Building Dynamics:** The Republican era under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced centralized governance, secularization, and modernization reforms. While these policies restricted independent civic activity, they simultaneously laid the institutional groundwork for professional and cultural associations. The balance between modernization and state control created a pattern of civil society that was organized, yet limited in autonomy.

**Post-1980 Liberalization:** Economic liberalization and political reforms initiated in the late 1980s provided opportunities for civil society resurgence. NGOs, trade unions, and advocacy groups expanded, particularly in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and gender equality. Civil society increasingly became a platform for negotiating with the state, indicating a shift toward pluralism and partial autonomy.



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International Integration: European Union candidacy and international donor support strengthened civil society's institutional capacity, legal protection, and global connectivity. These factors facilitated the adoption of democratic norms, participatory practices, and professional standards among civil society organizations. The "Europeanization phase" marked a critical period of institutional consolidation and international networking.

Contemporary Digital and Societal Dynamics: In the 21st century, social media and digital platforms have amplified civic engagement, enabling rapid mobilization, particularly among youth and women. Nevertheless, increased regulatory oversight, legal constraints, and political sensitivities continue to limit full autonomy. The resulting model is best described as "active but constrained", reflecting both the potential and limits of Turkish civil society in a complex political environment.

Overall, the Turkish experience illustrates that civil society development is not **linear** but shaped by the interplay between historical traditions, state structures, liberalization processes, and international influences. The resilience of civic institutions depends on legal frameworks, institutional autonomy, and the ability to adapt to emerging technologies and societal challenges.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the evolution of civil society in Turkey is deeply rooted in historical, political, and international contexts. Key findings include:

- Early religious, charitable, and communal institutions provided the foundational norms and mechanisms for civic participation.
- Republican centralization restricted civic autonomy while establishing modern professional and cultural associations.
- Post-1980 economic and political liberalization enabled the revival and expansion of civil society organizations.
- European Union integration and international support strengthened institutional capacity, legal protection, and global connectivity.
- In the contemporary era, digital technologies, youth activism, and gender-focused initiatives have enhanced civic engagement, but regulatory and political constraints continue to shape the operating environment.



The Turkish case underscores the importance of balance between state authority and civic autonomy, legal guarantees, and institutional pluralism for sustainable civil society development. Lessons from Turkey may offer valuable insights for other countries, including Uzbekistan, in promoting resilient, participatory, and globally connected civic institutions.

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