

THE IMPACT OF THE JULY 15 COUP ATTEMPT ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN TÜRKİYE: AN ASSESSMENT FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION'S PERSPECTIVE*

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Introduction

After the First World War, military coups became a common phenomenon, especially in developing countries. Social scientists have analyzed this process not only as a development problem but also in terms of the role of the military in nation-building and the relationship between the military and politics (Fidel 1970). Türkiye has also been affected by this global dynamic since the mid-20th century, experiencing military interventions in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. These coups not only led to changes in political power but also profoundly shaped Türkiye's development and social structure. One significant consequence was the weakening of political parties, which lacked strong social roots and long-standing traditions (BTI 2018).

On the night of July 15, 2016, a coup attempt occurred in Türkiye when a group of officers within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to overthrow the government. The coup was quickly suppressed within 22 hours due to the resistance of the people, intervention by security forces, and the decisive stance of political leaders. While this was seen as a "victory for democracy" in Türkiye, the EU condemned the coup but expressed concern over the sweeping measures taken afterward, such as arrests, dismissals from public institutions, and the closure of universities and media outlets. EU officials emphasized the importance of the rule of law and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms in their statements.

The EU has as one of its main objectives the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law on the European continent. In this context, it has long recognized and supported the role of civil society as an important element.



The EU is increasingly engaging with civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, human rights defenders, and other independent actors in Member States to strengthen democratic processes. In particular, it develops various financial support mechanisms and cooperation programs to increase public participation, promote transparency, and give a voice to disadvantaged groups. It also pioneers projects to strengthen the capacity of civil society in candidate countries and neighboring countries, aiming to build a more inclusive and resilient democratic structure across Europe.

Since Türkiye started negotiations with the EU in 2005, empirical studies on the interactions between the EU, the Turkish state, and civil society have increased. However, these studies focus on different dimensions of this trilateral relationship and vary in terms of the types of CSOs they examine (Sönmez 2019). This study aims to analyze the impact of the failed coup attempt in Türkiye on July 15, 2016, on civil society from an EU perspective. In particular, it examines how the EU's progress reports on Türkiye address the repercussions of the coup attempt on civil society and the role played by the EU in this process.

In this context, the progress reports on Türkiye between 2014 and 2024 are comprehensively analyzed, and the negative effects of the coup attempt on the civil society structure and the role of the EU in the process of eliminating these effects are evaluated. The study analyzes how the civil sphere has been shaped in post-coup Türkiye and how the legal and institutional framework has been transformed within the framework of Türkiye's top policy document, the Twelfth Development Plan (2024–2028), and aims to reveal the impact of the EU in this process. Thus, it reveals the long-term effects of the July 15 coup attempt on civil society and how the EU's emphasis on democratization and the rule of law in this context has led to a transformation.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze the impact of the 15 July 2016 coup attempt on CSOs in Türkiye and to analyze the EU's perspective and criticisms of this process. Contributing to the understanding of the complex relationship between civil society and democracy in the aftermath of a major political upheaval in Türkiye, this study aims to reveal the role of the EU in this process.

The main research question of the study is: Following the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, what is the EU's impact on the normalization process of civil society, which came under pressure after the coup attempt? In order to answer this question, a document analysis methodology was used, and in particular, the progress reports on Türkiye published by the EU between 2014 and 2024 and the Twelfth Development Plan (2024–2028), which sets Türkiye's development goals, were analyzed in detail.

This research focuses on identifying key trends and changes in civil society in the aftermath of the coup attempt by systematically analyzing textual data from EU progress reports and the development plan. While the EU progress reports assess Türkiye's progress in the EU accession process, the Twelfth Development Plan provides insights into how Türkiye is shaping the role of civil society in line with its long-term development goals.

The study adopts a comparative analysis approach to understand the state of civil society in the aftermath of the coup attempt. This approach aims to reveal the patterns of change, continuity, and differentiation observed in the field of civil society by comparing different progress reports published during the period under review.

This research is based on secondary data sources (EU progress reports and development plan) and recognizes that textual data may involve the risk of subjective interpretation. However, rigorous data analysis techniques will be applied to minimize these limitations, and the findings will be critically evaluated.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of the EU's impact on civil society in Türkiye in the context of the post-coup attempt period and offers a comprehensive assessment of the transformation of the civic space. It aims to make an important contribution to the literature by providing valuable insights into how the EU's policies on democracy, rule of law, and civil society have been received in Türkiye.

Civil Society in the EU: Democracy, Participation, and Enlargement

Civil society has traditionally been regarded as one of the fundamental pillars of modern democracies. Defined as "an arena outside the family, state, and market," civil society takes shape through organizations and institutions established by individuals and collective actors to advance common interests (Subotić 2024).

In the context of the EU, civil society has emerged as a potential solution to bridge the gap between supranational governance and citizens (Heidbreder 2012).

In the first decades of EU integration, the role of civil society remained largely absent from the research agenda (Heidbreder 2012). However, in recent years, the EU has shown greater interest in civil society (Garcia 2015). In particular, the issue of civil society participation has gained increasing importance in both academic discourse and policy-making processes since the formal establishment of the EU in 1993 (Heidbreder, 2012). Today, CSOs are at the center of many significant debates in contemporary European politics. The most recent studies in this field focus on CSOs' participation in European policymaking and their democratic potential, especially within the framework of new governance models (Salgado 2014).

The EU's mechanisms for supporting civil society have been linked to incentives that encourage CSOs to concentrate on lobbying activities within EU institutions rather than fostering a grassroots European civil society or public sphere (Warleigh,



2001). However, the relationship between EU membership and democratization is more complex than it appears. It is widely accepted that the EU's influence on democratization in neighboring countries operates through conditionality, socialization, or a combination of both (Mungiu-Pippidi 2005). In this context, the EU has developed relationships with organized civil society as a proxy, assuming certain democratic functions while supporting civil society (Greenwood 2011).

Strengthening civil society as a safeguard against democratic backsliding has been a cornerstone of the EU enlargement process (Wunsch 2019). Enlargement has been a fundamental aspect of the EU's DNA since the first expansion in 1973 (Balfour–Stratulat 2012). However, since the last enlargement in 2013, enlargement policy has ceased to be a priority for the Union. Nonetheless, CSOs have long focused their attention on enlargement policy and aimed to fully realize its potential (Subotić 2024). Within the framework of the EU's enlargement policy, countries must undertake conceptual and technical improvements to effectively address their democratization challenges and foster civil society development (Bostic 2011).

Summary of Literature on Türkiye-EU Relations

During World War II, Türkiye pursued a policy of staying away from international conflicts, but after the war, it tended to establish close relations with European institutions (Müftüler–Bac 1998). The Cold War period offered an important opportunity for Türkiye to integrate into the Western bloc and gain European status, and the country became a critical element of Western security (Bilgin 2004; Müftüler–Bac 1998).

The end of the Cold War brought about a change in Türkiye-EU relations and necessitated a redefinition of Türkiye's position in Europe (Capan–Onursal 2007). Türkiye's relations with European institutions were considered as a strategic tool for both reinforcing its Western identity and protecting its national security and interests (Bilgin 2004). While Türkiye played a significant role in the Cold War balance, the collapse of this balance necessitated a reevaluation of Türkiye's role (Capan–Onursal 2007). However, the changing international system after the Cold War relatively diminished Türkiye's strategic importance and weakened the main justifications for European integration (Müftüler–Bac 1998).

There are divergent views within Europe on Türkiye's EU membership. While some see Türkiye's membership as a security risk, others see it as a security opportunity (Desai 2005). Moreover, the debate over Türkiye's European identity complicates the accession process (Müftüler–Bac 1998).

Türkiye-EU relations can be divided into three main periods. The first period starts with the application for associate membership to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 and extends until the application for full membership in 1987. The second period covers the post-Cold War reshaping of identities and interests in the 1990s. The third period includes the period of optimism between

2001 and 2005, followed by a period of stagnation until today (Aydın-Düzgüt-Tocci 2015). Türkiye's 1959 application for associate membership was accepted in 1963, and the Ankara Agreement was signed. However, Türkiye's application for full membership was not realized until 1987 (Hoekman-Togan 2005). In 1989, the European Commission rejected Türkiye's application due to the EU's lack of enlargement priorities and the transformations in the international system (Capan-Onursal 2007). Türkiye's exclusion from the full membership process created disappointment in Türkiye-EU relations and led to the stagnation of relations (Kütük 2006).

Türkiye-EU relations lacked an effective political dialogue until the 1999 Helsinki Summit. Türkiye's acceptance as a candidate country marked a significant turning point in its relations with the EU, indicating that the discourse based on civilizational differences was shifting (Bilgin 2004). This decision was considered the first concrete step towards EU membership, 40 years after Türkiye's EEC membership application in 1959 (Kaya-Kentel 2005). Türkiye's opening of negotiations in 2005 reinforced its position as a democratic country integrated into the European order (Müftüler-Baç 2016). Paradoxically, however, with the start of negotiations, the momentum of the accession process was lost, and the process became uncertain (Camyar-Tagma 2010; Tocci 2014). The stalemate in 2006 led to a divergence in the political goals of Türkiye and the EU (Cengiz-Hoffmann 2013).

Türkiye's EU membership is considered to be one of the most controversial issues in the Union's enlargement policy (Schimmelfennig 2009). Türkiye's membership is treated in different ways depending on how the EU is defined. Viewing the EU as a political and military power supports Türkiye's inclusion as a strategic imperative, while defining it based on the rule of law, democracy, and human rights implies that Türkiye's membership is contingent on its compliance with the set criteria. Approaches that define the EU as a religious-based union advocate Türkiye's exclusion (Capan-Onursal 2007). Although Türkiye's accession process faced resistance from many European governments and public opinion, the opening of negotiations in 2005 shows that this resistance was partially overcome (Font 2006; Nas 2008).

Much of the opposition to Türkiye's EU membership is based on debates over the country's European and Islamic identity. However, some studies emphasize Türkiye's Western orientation and its contribution to European security, arguing that full membership would be a strategic gain for the EU (Redmond 2007; Schimmelfennig 2009). The difficulty of Türkiye's accession process is supported by the contradictions in the EU's enlargement policies and the need to keep Türkiye's economic, geographical, and political importance on the agenda (Buzan-Diez 1999; Diez 2005).

Türkiye's relations with the EU have historically fluctuated and evolved from a full membership perspective to a strategic partnership (Yalman-Göksel 2017). It is emphasized that this process has been fraught with uncertainties, and the distance between the parties has increased, including the risks of competition and potential conflict (Tocci 2014). However, Türkiye remains committed to its EU

membership goal and argues that a complete rupture is unlikely due to the deep historical ties (Aydın-Düzgüt-Tocci 2015; Camyar-Tagma 2010).

Military Interventions before July 15 in the Context of Türkiye-EU Relations

Türkiye has experienced four major military interventions since 1960 (Heper, 2005). These interventions were carried out with the claim of ensuring political stability. In 1960, 1971, and 1980, the military directly took control of the government, while in 1997, it intervened indirectly by forcing the government to resign. The coup attempt on July 15, 2016, displayed a different dynamic, with civilian elements playing a prominent role (Kakişim-Erdoğan 2018).

Türkiye's 1959 application for an association agreement with the EEC faced a serious setback with the 1960 coup. Although the EEC's reaction was limited (Akdoğan, 2017), the execution of three Democratic Party members in 1961 led to a two-year freeze in relations (Özer 2009). Nevertheless, negotiations resumed in 1962, and the Ankara Agreement was signed in 1963 (Riemer 1999; Denk 2016). This showed that the coup did not completely sever ties but rather led to a more gradual integration process (Bardakçı Tosun 2019).

The 1971 memorandum delayed the implementation of the Additional Protocol signed in 1970 (Kakişim-Erdoğan 2018). The EEC's reaction was milder compared to its response to the coup in Greece (Çakır 2016).

The 1980 coup was initially welcomed in the West for restoring stability, but later, human rights violations led to criticism from the EEC (Erdem 2015; Hale 2003). In 1982, certain provisions of the Ankara Agreement were suspended (Erdem 2015). The European Parliament (EP) called for democratic institutions to be restored within two months, or the agreement would be suspended (Tekeli & İlkin, 2000). The EP also highlighted human rights violations and made financial aid conditional on democratic progress (Hale 2003). In 1982, the EP suspended the agreement, although economic relations continued (Bardakçı Tosun 2019). Compared to its stance on Greece, the EEC took a more moderate approach toward military coups in Türkiye (Çakır 2016).

The 1980 coup caused deep and long-term damage to Türkiye-EEC relations (Erdem, 2015). Democratic reforms in Türkiye were largely driven by European pressure (Erdem 2015). Turkey's 1987 application for full membership was rejected due to democratic shortcomings (Çayhan 2003). However, relations were never entirely severed. In 1986, efforts to revive relations began, and Türkiye formally applied for full membership in 1987 (Tekeli-İlkin 2000).

In summary, military interventions in Türkiye had varying impacts on its relations with the EEC. The 1960 coup slowed down the process but did not break ties entirely. The 1971 and 1980 coups caused further tensions, with the 1980 coup having the most significant impact on Türkiye-EEC relations.

The Impact of Pre-July 15 Coups on CSOs in Türkiye

Globally, CSOs operate within a legal framework established by national legislation for philanthropic purposes. In Türkiye, CSOs function under five different legal structures: associations, foundations, trade unions, cooperatives, and chambers of commerce/industry and commodity exchanges (Ayhan, 2020). However, military coups in Türkiye have significantly influenced civil society, with some CSOs supporting military rule while others faced repression.

The May 27, 1960 coup reshaped Türkiye's political landscape and elicited mixed reactions from civil society. Some CSOs, such as the Turkish National Youth Organization (TNYO) and the National Turkish Student Union, celebrated the coup, sending telegrams to the National Unity Committee and the Armed Forces Command in support. The executive board of the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş) also backed the coup. Additionally, journalists issued a Press Declaration on June 1, referring to the event as a "revolution" and discouraging negative reporting (Tunç 1998).

The 1960 coup marked a turning point for Turkish trade unionism, leading to rapid growth in labor organizations (Çeçen 1973). The decade following the coup, extending until the March 12, 1971 coup, symbolized a new era for labor organization, bringing valuable experiences and achievements. Trade unions became recognized as essential components of democracy. The 1961 Constitution was significantly more liberal than the 1924 Constitution and introduced personal and collective rights and freedoms that Türkiye had not previously recognized. These included labor rights such as collective bargaining, the right to strike, and unionization (Güzel 1996).

During the March 12, 1971 memorandum, youth organizations, professional associations, and trade unions again supported military intervention, seeing it as a means to maintain public order. TNYO and other groups endorsed the memorandum, while leftist organizations, including Dev-Genç and the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Türkiye (CRTU), viewed it as an opportunity to push for socialist reforms (Karataş 2019; Tunç 1998). This demonstrated how different ideological groups used military interventions to advance their political agendas.

The September 12, 1980 coup imposed severe restrictions on CSOs and labor unions, suspending collective bargaining and the right to strike. Over 20,000 CSOs were shut down, and leaders of organizations like CRTU were arrested (Güzel, 1996). Despite this repression, civil society revived in the late 1980s, and by the 1990s, the number of CSOs had grown to 61,000, surpassing pre-coup figures (Şimşek 2004; Tunç 1998).

Understanding the development of civil society in Türkiye requires distinguishing the post-1980 period from traditional association structures (İçduygu, 2011; Kuzmanovic, 2012). After the 1980s, civil society became more dynamic and gained recognition as an autonomous policymaking actor. However, historically, CSOs had limited political access and were restricted from acting independently of the state (Mardin 1973).



On February 28, 1997, the Turkish General Staff issued a memorandum against the government of the Welfare Party and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan. Unlike previous interventions, CSOs played a more active role, with organizations such as CRTU, the Atatürkist Thought Association, and the Confederation of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen opposing the government through public demonstrations. Trade unions and business groups collected six million signatures supporting the National Security Council's decisions (Işık 2023). This period revealed a shift in civil society's role, as some CSOs aligned with military narratives while others opposed interventions. The February 28 process demonstrated that civil society could act as an opposition force against the government while also being influenced by military power (Işık 2023; Tunç 1998).

The 2000s marked a turning point for civil society, driven by the EU accession process and the Helsinki decision, which increased CSO mobilization and participation (Rumelili-Boşnak 2015). As Türkiye entered EU negotiations, discussions on its alignment with EU values intensified, leading to greater EU interest in Turkish civil society and encouragement for CSO involvement (Zihnioğlu 2013).

Historically, Turkish civil society has been weak because the central government has always been powerful. In the early years of the Republic, civil society was largely supported by the state and used as a tool to spread the state ideology. After the 1980s, the activities of CSOs diversified, focusing on areas such as human rights, minorities, and women's rights. Türkiye's EU accession process in 1999 provided a renewed momentum for the development of civil society and led to a shift in societal perceptions. However, the state still views opposition CSOs as a threat. Anti-terror laws and other legal regulations allow the government to exert pressure on these organizations (BTI 2022).

The Impact of July 15 from the EU Perspective on Civil Society in Türkiye

Although the EU is not a homogeneous entity, there are differing views among member states and the EP regarding relations with Türkiye. In particular, coups and coup attempts in Türkiye have led to significant political, economic, and social ruptures in EU-Türkiye relations. A similar process unfolded after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, during which EU officials unconditionally condemned the attempt but later expressed concerns about the emergency measures taken in its aftermath. These concerns are not limited to the EU; numerous reports highlight similar issues.

The coup shocked both Türkiye and the world with its brutality, but the subsequent crackdown extended far beyond those directly linked to the event. Repression affected all aspects of Turkish society, including civil society. The ruling party used the coup attempt to justify a large-scale purge, leading to 40,000 arrests, the dismissal or suspension of 140,000 individuals, the closure of 1,500 civil society organizations, and the shutdown of over 150 media outlets. Despite this crackdown and widespread uncertainty, Turkish civil society remains active (BTI 2018;

Center for American Progress 2017; OSAC 2024). However, post-coup measures signaled growing authoritarianism. Using emergency powers, the government suspended over 370 civil society organizations, including groups focused on child rights, human rights, women's rights, and humanitarian aid (Human Rights Watch 2017).

This latest military coup attempt in Turkish democratic history caused social, political, and economic trauma in EU-Türkiye relations (Kakişim-Erdoğan 2018). Immediately after the coup attempt, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, issued a joint statement from the Asia-Europe Summit in Mongolia. In their statement, they emphasized that Türkiye was a key partner for the EU and declared their support for the democratically elected government and the rule of law. However, measures such as the arrest of thousands of individuals, the dismissal of public officials, and the closure of media outlets following the coup attempt raised serious concerns within the EU regarding democracy and human rights (European Commission 2016). This situation led the EU to adopt a cautious and distanced approach toward Türkiye.

Unlike the EU's top officials, the EP took a more critical stance by recommending the suspension of Türkiye's accession process. Following the July 15 events, the EP, for the first time, called for freezing negotiations with a candidate country (Duman 2018), although this decision was not adopted by the European Council. A similar trend was observed after the 1980 coup. While Europe continued its relations with Türkiye after each coup, the accession process slowed down. The periodic political fluctuations and deviations from the path of democracy in Türkiye have continuously strained EU relations and hindered the political commitment of both parties (Akdoğan 2017).

The EU is not only an economic power but also a globally influential actor through its strategic use of political instruments. Its widely accepted authority among member and candidate countries creates a perception of legitimacy regarding its decision-making processes and political interventions (Özdemir 2012). However, the EU lacks a direct mechanism to legally compel candidate countries to comply with specific rules. Instead, one of the European Commission's most powerful tools is exerting pressure on candidate countries within the accession process to adopt the EU *acquis* and implement institutional reforms (Börzel 2010). Within this framework, countries seeking EU membership can monitor their progress in the accession process through the European Commission's annual country reports. The prospect of membership serves as a crucial incentive for democratic and economic reforms in candidate countries, making these reports a key evaluation tool (Casier 2008). The European Commission plays a central role in overseeing and assessing EU membership applications through these reports, which analyze the political, institutional, and economic conditions of candidate countries (McCormick 2020). EU reports provide detailed assessments of the legislative and



administrative changes related to civil society in Türkiye, as well as the challenges faced by civil society organizations.

When examining Türkiye's progress reports, it is observed that the documents, previously called "Progress Reports" until 2016, were renamed as "Türkiye Reports" as of 2016. In the EU's assessments of Türkiye, the issue of civil society was addressed in a fragmented manner between 2005 and 2013. However, starting in 2013, it was incorporated into a more systematic framework under the heading "Democracy and the Rule of Law." In the 2015 report, these concepts were separated into distinct sections, emphasizing that civil society is a fundamental element of the democratic system. This approach continued in subsequent reports and was further reinforced in the 2023 report with the following statement: "A free, empowered, and diverse civil society is considered a fundamental element of every democratic system" (MFA 2023). This study examines the reports from 2014 to 2024.

CSOs play a significant role as key stakeholders in shaping the EU's Türkiye reports. Their statements and evaluations directly influence the EU's perception of Türkiye and its policy recommendations, thereby contributing to the adoption of a participatory approach in the enlargement process (Köse et al. 2024). This situation highlights the EU's positioning of civil society as a critical actor in its efforts to promote democratic reforms in candidate countries.

Table 1 evaluates the state of civil society in Türkiye between 2014 and 2024, particularly based on EU reports. The assessment is divided into two periods: before and after the coup attempt.

Pre-Coup Attempt Period (2014–2015): In the EU Türkiye reports, it is emphasized that civil society development was supported, consultation processes with key actors continued, and dialogue was encouraged. As of 2015, civil society was described as active and effective, with progress made in enhancing cooperation. This period stands out as a time when CSOs could work in collaboration with the government and international actors, and freedom of expression was considered within a broader framework.



Table 1. Assessment of the July 18 Coup Attempt's Impact on Civil Society in EU Türkiye Reports

	Report Year(s)	European Commission Evaluations	Important Developments
Pre-Coup Attempt Period	2014	The development of civil society is being supported.	Consultations with civil society actors are being conducted, and dialogue programs continue.
	2015	Civil society is active and effective.	Progress is being made towards enhancing cooperation.
Post-Coup Attempt Period	2016	Civil society is under pressure.	Many organizations are being shut down, and representatives are being detained.
	2018	Pressure on civil society is increasing.	Arrests, bans, and restrictions on rights are occurring.
	2019	The space for civil society is shrinking.	Seizures of rights-based organizations continue.
	2020	The regression in civil society continues.	Arrests persist, while stigmatization and bans increase.
	2021	Pressure on civil society continues.	Freedom of expression and association is being restricted.
	2022	Civil society is experiencing significant regression.	Restrictions are increasing, and judicial investigations and lawsuits are intensifying.
	2023	Pressure on civil society continues to increase.	Restrictions and human rights violations are on the rise.
	2024	Civil society is operating in a challenging environment.	Pressures continue, but civil society remains active.

Post-Coup Attempt Period (2016–2024): Following the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, EU reports indicate that pressures on civil society increased. During this period, notable developments included the closure of CSOs, the detention of representatives, and restrictions on freedom of association. Between 2016 and 2018, pressures on civil society intensified, with increasing bans, arrests, and human rights violations. In the 2019–2021 period, the civil society space further narrowed, pressures on rights-based organizations escalated, and severe restrictions were imposed on freedom of expression. According to EU reports from 2022–2023, civil society experienced a significant decline, with increasing restrictions, intensified judicial investigations, and a rise in human rights violations. As of 2024, civil society continues to operate in a challenging environment, with reports highlighting that despite the pressures, it remains active.



The 2016 report noted that the Turkish government, with the full support of the Turkish political arena and society, successfully overcame the military coup attempt in July. Following the coup attempt, significant changes were made to the legal framework of civil-military relations, in addition to measures taken against individuals suspected of participating in the coup, including numerous dismissals and arrests. As a positive development, the powers of civilian institutions over the military were significantly increased, thereby strengthening civilian oversight of the armed forces.

As seen in *Table 1*, the year 2016 marks a turning point for developments in civil society. While positive developments regarding civil society were reported before the coup attempt, from 2016 onwards, civil society remained under significant pressure until 2024. The 2024 report contains less content on civil society compared to previous reports. While the 2016–2023 reports criticized the measures taken under the state of emergency, the 2024 report notably does not mention the state of emergency at all. However, despite ongoing pressures on civil society, the 2024 report suggests the beginning of a normalization process. This normalization is also reflected in the Twelfth Development Plan (2024–2028) through the goals and policies established for civil society.

Following the July 15 coup attempt, criticisms regarding the increasing pressures on civil society in Türkiye have been consistently highlighted in EU reports, emphasizing the country’s need for reforms in democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. The extent to which the Turkish government has taken these criticisms into account can be assessed by examining the reforms and objectives outlined in the Twelfth Development Plan (2024–2028), which serves as the country’s top policy document. *Table 2* analyzes this development plan in terms of the EU’s normative influence and guiding impact on Türkiye’s civil society policies.

Table 2. Civil Society Goals and Policies/Measures in the Twelfth Development Plan

Headings	Policy/Measures
Strengthening Civil Society	– The legislation will be updated.
	– Regulations will be made for a democratic, participatory, pluralistic, transparent, and accountable organized civil society.
	– The internal and external auditing processes of CSOs will be made transparent.
	– The participation of CSOs in decision-making, policy-making, monitoring, and oversight processes will be increased.
	– A roadmap will be prepared for the participation of civil society in consultation processes.
	– New structures in the civil society field will be supported through digitalization.

Strengthening the Institutional and Financial Capacity of CSOs	– Strategic planning, project preparation, and fundraising training for CSOs will be widely promoted. – CSOs' budget and activity reports will be published transparently. – Internal audit systems will be strengthened, and guidance will be provided. – International organization and collaborations will be increased. – Public support will be linked to transparent and objective criteria. – Regulations will be made to ensure the financial sustainability of CSOs. – Digitalization in CSOs will be encouraged. – Large CSOs will support mentoring activities for small CSOs.
Transparency and Compliance of CSO Data	– Data on CSOs collected by public institutions will be aligned with international standards. – A database containing CSO capacities will be created. – CSOs will be recognized as a professional field of work and included in official statistics. – The economic and social impacts of CSOs will be measured.
Strengthening the Capacity of Institutions Serving Civil Society	– Public policies, programs, and services for CSOs will be made holistic. – Public–CSO cooperation, volunteerism, and fundraising visibility will be increased. – Primary and secondary school curricula will be developed to encourage CSO participation. – Civil society units will be established and supported in universities. – The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) will provide research support for civil society initiatives. – A higher unit will be established to ensure the integration of public services in the civil society field.

Table 2. includes the objectives set for civil society in the Twelfth Development Plan as well as the policies and measures envisioned to achieve these objectives. Addressed under the Civil Society section, this plan serves as a comprehensive high-level policy document focused on strengthening a participatory, democratic, and accountable civil society structure. The primary goals of the plan include ensuring the active participation of CSOs in policymaking processes, increasing transparency, and enhancing their institutional and financial capacities.

When compared to the Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023), the Twelfth Development Plan appears broader in scope and more closely aligned with the EU's post-2016 criticisms of Türkiye's civil society environment. Some elements that were absent in the previous plan have now been introduced as policies and measures in the new plan.



Within this framework, efforts are planned to strengthen the legal framework to enable CSOs to participate more effectively in decision-making, policymaking, monitoring, and oversight processes. Additionally, the plan aims to enhance consultation mechanisms and increase civil society's involvement in decision-making structures.

When analyzing the data in *Table 2.* alongside *Table 1.* it becomes evident that the issues raised in the EU's Türkiye Reports regarding civil society after the July 15 coup attempt have been considered in the Twelfth Development Plan. These two tables provide two different perspectives on the development and challenges of civil society in Türkiye. For instance:

- EU reports highlight increased pressure on civil society, particularly after 2016, whereas the development plan presents comprehensive policy goals aimed at strengthening civil society.
- EU reports emphasize state oppression and the shrinking space for civil society, while the development plan seeks to enhance state-CSO cooperation.
- EU reports indicate that CSOs face financial constraints and pressures, whereas the development plan prioritizes financial sustainability for CSOs.

This reveals a clear duality in Türkiye's civil society landscape. While the official development plan sets out policies to empower CSOs, EU reports suggest that civil society remains under significant pressure in practice. To achieve genuine progress, it is crucial to strengthen the legal framework, ensure the implementation of reforms, and reduce restrictions on civil society.

Results

The EU's stance on military interventions in Türkiye has not been to immediately terminate the process, as might have been expected. However, shifts in political counterparts within the EU have led to difficulties in maintaining stable relations. Although Türkiye has struggled to meet the membership criteria—especially during the periods of instability following military interventions—this has never resulted in a complete rupture of Türkiye-EU relations. There has always been a mutual will to sustain the membership process, yet this will has not prevented the stagnation or cooling of relations. This cooling effect was particularly evident in Türkiye-EU relations following the July 15 coup attempt. The EU's response to the 1980 military intervention was strikingly similar to its stance after July 15.

Despite many negative developments, a complex dynamic has prevented the complete breakdown of Türkiye-EU relations. Although various military coups and interventions in Turkish political history have weakened ties between the two sides at times, they have never entirely severed them. Generally, a pragmatic and level-headed approach has prevailed. However, following such military interventions, civil society has often struggled to operate and has been negatively affected by the resulting environment.

The key question of this study is whether the EU has played a driving role in helping civil society recover and continue its activities after periods of stagnation. This study examines the restrictive policies imposed on civil society following the July 15 coup attempt from the EU's perspective and seeks to understand the EU's influence in the normalization of civil society activities during this period.

Türkiye's EU accession process has been long and complex, shaped by political instability, economic challenges, military interventions, and issues like human rights and the Cyprus dispute. Since the 1963 Association Agreement, Türkiye has made efforts to meet membership criteria, but various obstacles have slowed progress (Zihnioğlu 2020). Political and economic instability, evident since the 1960 military intervention, has been a key factor in straining Türkiye-EU relations (Çalış 2016). Today, concerns persist over Türkiye's democratic performance, human rights record, and economic stability. This study highlights that Türkiye's civil society has struggled to recover following the July 15 coup attempt, raising further concerns within the EU.

The rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration reform, and economic stability are key requirements for EU membership, with progress in these areas being crucial (Reianu 2024). Strengthening civil society and its participation in decision-making is vital in this context. The EU uses non-military tools to influence international politics, encouraging countries to align with its norms and values (Kutlay 2018). Viewing the EU as a normative power extends beyond traditional civil and military power concepts (Manners 2002). In the enlargement process, EU country reports guide political and legal reforms in candidate countries, highlighting areas for improvement and emphasizing the importance of civil society for sustainable reforms.

The EU's progress reports serve as key references by documenting in detail the challenges faced by civil society in Türkiye after the July 15 coup attempt. These reports repeatedly emphasize that CSOs faced restrictions and a shrinking space during the state of emergency declared after 2016. The EU has consistently criticized these pressures in its reports, underscoring the need to preserve a freer civil space within the framework of democratic values and the rule of law (Köse et al. 2024).

Following both the 1980 coup and the July 15 coup attempt, the EP advocated for suspending Türkiye's membership process, while high-ranking EU officials emphasized Türkiye's strategic importance and supported the continuation of dialogue. After each coup or coup attempt, the EU expressed concerns about democracy, human rights, and institutional freedoms, yet never completely severed ties with Türkiye. While the EP adopted a stricter and more distant stance during these periods, EU leaders prioritized maintaining relations.

Table 1. illustrates the evolution of the EU's assessment of civil society in Türkiye over time. While civil society received significant support during the 2014–2015 period, reports indicate a rapid contraction of civil space and growing pressures following the 2016 coup attempt.



According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), before 2016, democratic institutions in Türkiye functioned relatively well, with political decisions being made and reviewed by the constitution. However, after the failed coup and the subsequent state of emergency, government measures became increasingly severe (BTI 2018). Independent CSOs have been largely excluded from legislative processes, while pro-government organizations have gained greater influence. As a result, civil society has significantly weakened, and since 2016, autocratization has further marginalized CSOs from Türkiye's political landscape (BTI 2022). This analysis highlights that civil society restrictions continue to be a key area of critique in the EU's assessments of Türkiye, with strong evaluations focused on democracy, freedom of expression, and the rule of law.

The Turkish civil society, which was negatively affected by the July 15 coup attempt, has entered a process in which its normalization has been increasingly recognized, compared to previous military interventions. This shift has been driven by the EU's progress reports, which have more effectively criticized and guided the Turkish government regarding the necessity of civil society's recovery. This conclusion can be drawn from the measures and policies outlined in the Twelfth Development Plan, analyzed in this study.

In line with the objectives set out in the Twelfth Development Plan, which was guided by the EU Türkiye Reports, it is evident that efforts have been made to strengthen civil society and mitigate the damage caused by the July 15 coup attempt. Although the reports and the Development Plan present two different perspectives, the EU's determination to improve the situation of civil society in Türkiye seems to have yielded results. The persistent concerns highlighted in the reports have been effectively addressed in the Development Plan. When comparing the key issues raised in EU reports with the policy objectives proposed in the Development Plan, the most prominent areas include public-CSO relations and cooperation, financial sustainability, and legal and administrative matters.

The EU Türkiye reports and the international assessments considered in these reports clearly emphasize that, particularly after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, pressure on civil society increased, and civil society activities significantly narrowed. In contrast, the Twelfth Development Plan sets forth comprehensive policy objectives aimed at strengthening civil society. This contrast highlights a clear discrepancy between Türkiye's official policy discourse and international assessments regarding the state of civil society.

EU and international reports, particularly those covering the post-2016 period, provide detailed accounts of the closure of CSOs, the detention of activists, various bans, and restrictions on rights. Conversely, the Twelfth Development Plan aims to support civil society through objectives such as transparency, accountability, enhanced public-CSO cooperation, and financial sustainability. This stark contrast clearly illustrates the gap between official discourse and actual practices in Türkiye.



Conclusions

This study conducts an analysis of Türkiye's progress reports from 2014 to 2024, examining the impact of the July 15 coup attempt on civil society and the role of the EU in addressing these effects. Furthermore, it evaluates the extent to which the EU's findings on the challenges faced by civil society, as outlined in its progress reports, align with Türkiye's key policy document, the Twelfth Development Plan.

Following the July 15 coup attempt, the EU explicitly highlighted the increasing pressure on civil society in Türkiye in its reports, pointing to declines in fundamental democratic principles such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, and the right to association. The state of emergency period saw the closure of CSOs, restrictions on their activities, and financial pressures, all of which were frequently addressed in EU reports. Through its progress reports, the EU has drawn attention to the restrictions on civil society in Türkiye and emphasized the need for democratic reforms.

The EU progress reports highlight that, following the July 15 coup attempt, the civic space has shrunk and pressure on CSOs has increased, while Türkiye's Twelfth Development Plan includes policy objectives aimed at strengthening civil society. This situation demonstrates a significant contradiction between the official policy discourse in Türkiye and international assessments. However, despite these differing perspectives, both the EU reports and the Development Plan acknowledge the necessity of strengthening civil society in Türkiye.

The issues raised in EU progress reports about civil society after the July 15 coup attempt are reflected in the policy objectives of Türkiye's Twelfth Development Plan. The EU has played a crucial role in countering Türkiye's democratic backsliding. Ensuring civil society's resilience, continuing reforms, and the EU's role in promoting democratic values will be key to Türkiye's long-term democratization.

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