Swedish Civil Society Support to Turkey in Times of Social Polarization and
Shrinking Civil Space

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The size, scale and capacity of civil society has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. Its role in democratic processes has received increasing attention, capturing the hopes of a global community which dreams of active citizen involvement for more democratic societies.[1] Meanwhile, civil society faces unprecedented levels of restriction and challenging the power has become increasingly dangerous, with civic space being constrained in 106 countries.[2] In the world of development cooperation, donor countries channel government funding through civil society organizations (henceforth CSOs) in the so-called developing countries as key actors to help promote democracy and the rule of law.

Sweden is no exception and gives bilateral aid to Turkey within a regional strategy for reform cooperation with Eastern Europe, Western Balkans and

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[1] Billing, Annika, Support to Civil Society Within Swedish Development Cooperation, *Perspectives,* no. 20, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, 2011, p. 4.

[2] CIVICUS, State of Civil society report 2017, p. 7 (retrieved 03/05/2018)

Turkey[3], having made commitment to support civil society as a central actor for democratization. The underlying assumption is that a strong civil society in developing countries is a prerequisite for developing democracy and that CSOs in donor countries can help to strengthen civil society through cooperation. This assumption has today a strong positive connotation which is increasingly questioned.

From a civil society perspective, the Turkish case is interesting. The country is said in most national and international NGO reports to be suffering from shrinking space for civil society and strong social polarization. This is part of a global trend[4] but is particularly engaging to examine in Turkey because of its historical and cultural context. In this paper I will investigate how civil society's role is expressed in the Swedish policies containing the guidelines for aid allocation with specific focus on Turkey. In doing so, some of the underlying assumptions about civil society's role in democratic processes will be presented and discussed.

A deductive approach: theories as tools for analysis

I will analyze, in the following order, the Support material for the strategy to support civil society in developing countries 2016-2019 (henceforth the support material), the actual Strategy for support via Swedish organization in the civil society, 2016-2022 (henceforth the CSO strategy) and finally the regional Results strategy for Sweden's reform cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey for the period 2014-2020 (henceforth the regional results strategy).

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[3] Utrikesdepartementet, UD 14:013, 13/03/2014, Results strategy for Sweden's reform cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey for the period 2014–2020.

[4] See Amnesty, Turkey report 2018 *Weathering the storm,* 28/04/2018 (retrieved 29/04/2018) & Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center, and Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2017, *Trends in Turkish Civil Society* (retrieved 27/03/2018) & CIVICUS, State of Civil society report 2017, p.7 (retrieved 03/05/2018).

The empirical material is approached with a qualitative text analysis, which Peter Esaiasson describes as "extracting the essential content by carefully reading the parts of the text, the whole and the context in which it is included". [5] Specifically, I use deductive content analysis, which is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge.[6] As Göran Ahrne and Peter Svensson argue, theory can be a great help in the analysis, ordering, sorting and comprehension of material and can be used as a tool for analysis, as I will do in this study.[7]

This approach is considered to be very flexible, allowing the researcher's judgement to determine which variations are most appropriate depending on the particular research question.[8] I follow the steps indicated by Satu Elo & Helvi Kyngäs, represented as three main phases: preparation, organizing and reporting.[9] The first phase consists of selecting the unit of analysis. Next in the analytic process, the researcher strives to make sense of the data and obtain a sense of whole through an immersion in the data, and analysis is conducted using the deductive approach. The following step is to develop a categorization matrix which I present and explain underneath. After that, the data should be coded for correspondence with or exemplification of the categories which have been developed.[10]

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[5] Esaiasson, Peter, et al. *Metodpraktikan: konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. Stockholm: Wolters Kluwer, 2017, p. 237 (my own translation).

[6] Ibid. p.109.

[7] Ahrne, Göran, & Svensson, Peter.. *Handbok i kvalitativa metoder*, Malmö: Liber, 2011p. 182.

[8] Elo, Satu & Kyngäs, Helvi.. The qualitative content analysis process, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, 2008, no. 1, p. 113.

[9] Ibid. p. 109.

[10] Ibid. p. 111.

Civil society's multi-dimensionality

A superficial research overview is enough to understand that there are different understandings of the concept of civil society to be considered. These - at least the ones I have assessed as central - will constitute a theoretical framework for my research, since the concept's complexity left me unsatisfied with trying to understand civil society from a single perspective. This is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the idea of civil society but rather a tool to theoretically systematize and analyze the material. I will hereby summarize the key aspects of civil society that can help me explain the conceptualization of the term:

1. Civil society as a *third sector.*
2. Civil society as an actor for the promotion and enhancement of *human rights.*
3. Civil society as a promoter of *pluralism* in views, voices and interests.
4. Civil society as a *disseminator of information* and a *forum for dialogue.*
5. The emergence of civil society as an inherently *positive phenomenon* – or not?

The literature review has shown these five aspects to be central. In regard to the first aspect, civil society is often referred to as a separate sphere, an intermediary entity between the state and the private. It is either completely disconnected from the political realm of the state or in alliance with it but without having the political society as primary venue of activity.[11] The idea of the third sector derives from the modern need of civil society to function and coexist with capitalist structures in a neo-liberal system. Within this third sector, CSOs function like the market and exercise certain functions which

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[11] Diamond, Larry.. "Toward democratic consolidation", *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3, 1994, p. 17.

are characteristic of the state.[12] Markus Ketola describes it as the space outside of the state and the market.[13] The separation from politics is, for many, the very essence of the idea of civil society.

In regard to the second aspect, civil society is considered to be one of the arenas with the biggest potential for the promotion, protection and advancement of human rights. The human rights perspective has been central in understanding civil society and seeing it as a mechanism for the social empowerment of those groups who have traditionally been excluded or marginalized.[14]

This aspect is closely connected to the third one, with the assumption that a pluralistic and independent civil society has the potential to contribute to the monitoring of democracies or work for the democratization of authoritarian governments. The pluralism of views, interests and experiences is seen as a pre-requisite for democracy. Also, civil society is considered to be a school when it comes to democratic skills, because citizens learn and exercise values such as tolerance, diversity and respect for differing opinions.[15] Part of this idea of civil society as a 'school' is its role as a disseminator of information and a forum for dialogue, as the fourth aspect emphasizes. Sharing information about rights, duties and democratic processes is said to increase the involvement of citizens, which in turn will engage positively with the state.[16] Finally, in regard to the fifth aspect, the emergence or the

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[12] Mühlenhoff, Hanna.. Funding Democracy, Funding Social Services? The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights in the Context of Competing Narratives in Turkey. J*ournal of Balkan & Near Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1, 2014, p. 104.

[13] Ketola, Markus.. Europeanization and Civil Society. Turkish NGOs as Instruments of Change. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 19.

[14] Billing, 2011, p. 7.

[15] Diamond, 1994, p. 8.

[16] Boussard, Caroline.. *En studie över biståndets roll i framväxten av civila samhällen i syd: kriterier för urval av ramorganisationer.* Stockholm: Sida, Avdelningen för samverkan med enskilda organisationer och humanitärt bistånd, 2001, p. 14; Diamond, 1994, p. 11.

strengthening of civil society is prevalently portrayed as a positive phenomenon, while some scholars do warn for normative assumptions.[17]

Civil society as a *third sector*

In the analyzed documents civil society is represented as a separate sphere. When looking at the *support material* within the result section, increased cooperation between civil society and governments is encouraged, but only "as long as it takes place with respect for civil society's independence".[18] This tells us that politics and institutions should not compromise civil society's autonomy.

In regard to relations with the political sphere, the state is often mentioned. The introduction of the *support material* states that space and resources for civil society have shrunk in recent years although civil society's role for a sustainable and including development is today recognized globally. The text mentions that it is often states themselves that adopt legislation, rules and practices which limit the ability of civil society to act.[19] It means that even though civil society is supposed to be a separate sphere, its space of action can still be limited by an authoritarian state. Claire Mercer argues in her work that liberal democratic theory sees "a strong state and a strong civil society as separate from, yet essential complements to, one another".[20] On a similar line, CSOs are expected to offer community services when the state fails to do so.[21] This is a function that could be defined as complementary or supportive of the state.

The *CSO strategy*, in the same fashion, addresses civil society as a third sector and emphasizes functions such as monitoring the situation and

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[17] Boussard, 2001. p. 1. & Ketola, 2013, p. 20.

[18] Sida, 15/000809, 30/09/2015. Underlag för strategi för stödet till civila samhället i utvecklingsländer, CSO-strategin, 2016-2019, p. 7.

[19] Ibid. p.1.

[20] Mercer, Claire. 2002. NGOs, civil society and democratization: a critical review of the literature. *Progress in Development Studies* , no. 1, p. 7.

[21] Sida, 2015, p. 1.

claiming accountability. Moreover, when addressing the issue of CSOs' capacity building, the objectives of this contribution are, among others, the capacity to conduct a qualified dialogue with governments and other relevant actors.[22] Larry Diamond reflects on the possibility of alliances between civil society networks and political actors. His opinion is that civic organizations and social movements that try to change the nature of the state may be considered as parts of civil society only if they are acting for the common good and not for the desire to occupy a hegemonic position with the group they are representing. Otherwise, they lose the ability to perform mediating and democracy-building functions.[23]

The *regional reform strategy* is also aligned with the idea of civil society as a third sector, since civil society is portrayed as in opposition with those who hold political power.[24] Diamond warns for this eighteenth-century revival of the idea of civil society as in opposition to the state, which he sees as dangerous if taken too far.[25] Finally, as discussed by Hannah Mühlenhoff, many donors assume that civil society opposes the state but there is evidence that third sector organizations and the state might instead be mutual supporters. She means that civil society will not oppose the state if the support is given to a neo-liberal form of civil society, one that is a neutral and depoliticized mediator. On the contrary, she sees civil society and the state as internally divided by ideological cleavages which cannot be ignored.[26]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Diamond, 1994, p. 6.

[24] Utrikesdepartementet, 2014, p.1 7.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Mühlenhoff, 2014, p. 105.

Civil society as an actor for the promotion and enhancement of *human rights*

Civil society's potential contribution to human rights is mentioned several times throughout the empirical material. In the *support material*, three roles can be identified: the first one is touching upon the awareness-raising function, the second one is related to the capacity building function for citizens to demand their rights, and the third one refers to the potential to contribute to the actual realization of human rights. In the introduction, CSOs are said to be able to increase awareness about individual rights, mobilize people and strengthen their capacity to claim their rights, but also themselves offering community services when the state fails to do so.[27] There is a clear link to the idea of civil society as a mechanism for the social empowerment of marginalized group which leads to the realization of human rights, as described by Annika Billing.[28] Furthermore, the *support material* emphasizes a rights-based approach as the central feature of all activities carried out by civil society.[29]

Strengthening CSOs is seen as an important step since there are several organizations in developing countries which lack internal democracy and ability to include target groups. Lack of capacity is here framed as a relevant obstacle to the realization of human rights, and low capacity is still a central problem for CSO support in Turkey as confirmed by the strategy report from 2017.[30] Nevertheless, Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) claims the importance of holding CSOs accountable only for the results that are under their control, meaning that the ultimate responsibility

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[27] Sida, 2015, p. 1.

[28] Billing, 2011, p. 7.

[29] Sida, 2015, p. 1 & p. 3,

[30] Sida, 18/000531, Strategy Report for Turkey implementing the Results Strategy for Sweden's Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey2014-2020, p. 10.

for the realization of human rights lies with the state.[31] This reminds us of what Diamond calls the "civic civil society", which seeks in nonpartisan fashion to improve the political system and make it more democratic through human rights monitoring, voter education and mobilization, and anticorruption efforts.[32]

The *CSO strategy* also emphasizes the importance of the rights-perspective permeating CSOs' activities. However, this does not imply that the state can renounce its responsibility to fulfill its obligations vis-à-vis its citizens.[33]

The *regional reform strategy* tries to address the challenges Turkey faces in reaching the human rights standards required for EU membership, and civil society is considered to play an important role in this process.[34] The document also mentions 'responsibility' in regard to human rights fulfillment which appears to be a combined one involving public administration, judicial system and civil society.[35]

As Neera Chandhoke discusses, the relationship between state and civil society does not need to be only one of opposition, since CSOs need the state for different purposes within human rights work such as institutions, resources and management. This is why she claims that the state frames the limits of civil society.[36] This becomes extremely relevant in Turkey where, as explained in the Strategy report from 2017, the state of emergency instated after the coup attempt in 2016 has severely limited civil society's arena.[37]

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[31] Ibid. p. 2

[32] Diamond, 1994, p. 6.

[33] Utrikesdepartementet, 2016, unpaged.

[34] Utrikesdepartementet, 2014, p. 17.

[35] Ibid. p. 5.

[36] Chandhoke, Neera in Elliott, Carolyn M.. *Civil Society and Democracy: a Reader.* New Delhi & Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003p. 245-246.

[37] Sida, 2018, p. 2.

Civil society as a promoter of *pluralism* in views, voices and interests

Pluralism and diversity are recurrent words throughout the *support document*. The very objective of civil society support is expressed as follows: "the purpose of the support for civil society organizations is the achievement of a viable and pluralistic civil society in developing countries".[38] In order for civil society to give voice to the people, many organizations and different voices must be heard.[39] This is also related to the need to provide a different story from the 'official' one. The problem of competing ideological narratives is particularly relevant in Turkey where, as both Mühlenhoff and Özge Zihnioğlu explain, there is an ongoing ideological struggle between a Kemalist/secular and a pro-Islam narrative.[40] Therefore, the need to provide alternatives to hegemonic narratives becomes urgent.

The *capacity* area targets an increased diversity within civil society in developing countries. This is achieved by providing support to a multitude of Swedish organizations, which in turn collaborate with a multitude of organizations in developing countries.[41] The second area targeted by the support document is a *favorable social atmosphere* and touches upon, among others, the importance of civil society's diversity. This approach also characterizes the *CSO strategy*, which aims to promote the participation of a breadth of organizations, in relation to its thematic competence, identity and issues.[42]

An increased pluralism is also among the objectives of the *regional results strategy,* which claims the importance of including those groups who have

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[38] Sida, 2015 p. 2.

[39] Ibid. p. 3.

[40] Mühlenhoff, 2014, p. 110; Zihnioğlu, Özge.. The 'Civil Society Policy' of the European Union for Promoting Democracy in Turkey: Golden Goose or Dead Duck? *Journal of Southeast European & Black Sea Studies* 13, no. 3, 2013, p. 383.

[41] Sida, 2015, p. 5.

[42] Utrikesdepartementet, 2016, unpaged.

been marginalized. [43] The relevance of pluralism within civil society is very much celebrated throughout the empirical material, in accordance with scholars such as Diamond:

> …the more pluralistic civil society can become without fragmenting;
> the more democracy will benefit. Some degree of pluralism is necessary
> by definition for civil society. Pluralism helps groups in civil society
> survive and encourages them to learn to cooperate and negotiate with
> one another. [44]

Mercer agrees that pluralizing the institutional arena helps more voices and interests to be heard and prevents polarization within society. [45] Moreover, Diamond sees a wide thematic perspective within civil society as a possibility to associate people in "a modern type of citizenship that transcends historic divisions" [46], and setting aside religious or ethnic distinctions. This is a reflection that is very relevant in the Turkish context. The Strategy report from 2017 highlights that the political polarization in the country along political, religious and ethnic lines strongly affects civil society. [47]

Civil society as a disseminator of information and a forum for dialogue

In the *support material* within the result area focusing on *capacity,* civil society is portrayed as a crucial actor for the spread of information, both regarding human rights, the international system and democratic processes. Therefore, it is considered an important target for capacity building, since it will, in turn, increase the capacity and knowledge of their activities' targets.

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[43] Utrikesdepartementet, 2014, p. 5.

[44] Diamond, 1994, p. 12.

[45] Mercer, 2002, p. 8.

[46] Diamond, 1994, p. 9.

[47] Sida, 2018, p. 10.

Diamond is well aware of this function and argues that civil society encompasses the "ideological marketplace" and the flow of information. He refers to, among others, independent mass media, think tanks, publishing houses, theaters and artistic networks.[48] Without being well-informed civil society cannot be effective in contesting government policies or defending interests. In accordance, the *support material* refers to the people targeted by the CSOs and views CSOs as important actors in contributing to that people living in poverty have increased awareness, commitment and knowledge to work with democracy and human rights.[49]

Civil society as a forum for dialogue is also a central idea throughout the documents, and partnerships within civil society but also with other actors are considered as one of the necessary conditions for a sustainable democratic development.[50] This is closely connected to the spread of information since dialogue is described by Ketola to be "a two-way dissemination of information".[51] In regard to partnerships, Sida argues that there is a need for increased cooperation both within civil society and between civil society and other actors. As pointed out in a recent study commissioned by The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), civil society is not uncommonly dominated by actors who rather contribute to anti-democratic development by fighting conflicts, both in civil society and between civil society and the state. In those cases, support is also needed for bridge builders.[52]

The *CSO strategy* also recommends that more focus should be placed on creating arenas and processes for dialogue between CSOs in partner countries to strengthen civil society in itself rather than individual organizations.[53] The

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[48] Diamond, 1994, p. 6.
[49] Sida, 2015, p. 5.
[50] Ibid. p. 6.
[51] Ketola, 2013, p. 55.
[52] Sida, 2015, p. 6.
[53] Utrikesdepartementet, 2016, unpaged.

regional results strategy mentions specifically the importance of civil society as a forum for dialogue, debate and communication.[54]

The emergence of civil society as an inherently *positive phenomenon* – or not?

Civil society is, throughout the texts here examined, mentioned as a positive phenomenon, or at least as a phenomenon with a *particular potential* to contribute positively to democratization processes.[55] The beginning of the *support material* is aligned with this positive note, claiming civil society's importance and recognition within a global framework.[56] This way of addressing civil society is discussed by Caroline Boussard, who sees it as problematic when the term is used as an analytical category while based on implicit normative performances about the positive effects of civil society.[57] In a similar fashion, Mercer writes:

> Much work on NGOs weaves a normative narrative, imagining future scenarios for the potential contribution of NGOs to democratic development given more favourable conditions (or donor funding), which usually involves decrying the forces of neoliberalism that have pushed NGOs towards becoming public service contractors.[58]

Mercer further discusses how this normative ideal is a liberal democratic one and that civil society should be conceptualized as a more problematic idea of competing interests and voices.[59] This risk seems to be particularly topical in Turkey, as excellently explained by Fuat Keyman and Ahmet Icduygu through what they call the *boundary problem*. Turkish civil society is

[54] Utrikesdepartementet, 2014, p. 9.

[55] Sida, 2015, p. 2.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Boussard, 2001, p. 1.

[58] Mercer, 2002, p. 10.

[59] Ibid. p. 11.

characterized by numerous CSOs working with different issues such as human rights, democratization, environment and broader societal visions such as Westernization, Atatürkism, nationalism, and Islamization.

For this reason, it functions both as a necessary condition for democratization and a strategic arena for non-democratic forces to voice their essentialist identity claims, being a discursive space.[60] The source of the boundary problem is historical because it is based on the Kemalist civic-republican understanding of citizenship, where the citizen puts national identity and public good before difference and individual interest.[61] Therefore, the scholars look at Turkey as an illuminating case study since the crisis of the old notion of citizenship has given rise to the elevation of civil society. Attributing only positivity to this rise is problematic. All the previously excluded identities have started to challenge the idea of monolithic citizenship in Turkey, leading to the social polarization which characterizes the country today.

Both the *CSO strategy* and the *regional reform strategy* are coherent with the positive attitude towards civil society, with the regional one focusing on the role civil society can play in the process towards EU membership.[62]

Staying critical

The analysis shows that the three examined Sida-documents clearly present elements which fit into all five categories. Sida addresses civil society as a third sphere which is separate from the state and the market, but which is supposed to exercise functions which are supportive or integrative of the state. Moreover, civil society is framed as key partner in the process towards human rights fulfillment. Nevertheless, the responsibility for it lies within the state.

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[60] E. Fuat Keyman & Ahmet Icduygu. 2003. Globalization, Civil Society and Citizenship in Turkey: Actors, Boundaries and Discourses, *Citizenship Studies 7*, no. 2, p. 221.

[61] Ibid. p. 231.

[62] Utrikesdepartementet, 2014, p. 17.

Thirdly, civil society is supposed to give voice to a plurality of groups, issues and interests in order to positively contribute to the democratic process.

Diversifying civil society and including groups which traditionally have been marginalized is seen as essential. Furthermore, civil society has an important function as a disseminator of information, which is why a specific area of the CSO strategy is targeting CSOs' capacity. The expectation is that CSOs, in turn, will develop and strengthen the capacity of their target groups. Civil society's role as a forum for dialogue is mentioned in all three documents; specifically, the importance of bridge builders within civil society is acknowledged. Finally, the emergence and strengthening of civil society is portrayed as an inherently positive phenomenon, even though the possibility of anti-democratic developments is also recognized in the *support document*, which we have seen is particularly relevant to acknowledge in the Turkish context.

Since my categorization matrix was inspired by what can be defined as the "mainstream research" within the field, I believe it deserves some critical reflection. Firstly, the idea of civil society as a third sector is not unproblematic. As showed in the analysis, Sida seems to expect that CSOs offer community services when the state fails to do so, a function criticized by Mühlenhoff. She argues that the third sector functions like the market but has also tasks formerly intrinsic to the state, due to the underlying neo-liberal ideology where the responsibilities of the state need to be reduced and privatized, with increased responsibility for CSOs.[63]

Civil society's separation from party politics is another aspect worth reflecting on. Voices like those of Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers talk about "the mirage of apolitical engagement", arguing that donors assume that by fostering nonpartisan civic advocacy they can affect the political development of recipient countries without intervening in politics.[64] Because

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[63] Mühlenhoff, 2014, p. 104.

[64] Ottaway, Marina and Carothers, Thomas.. *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion.* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000, p. 296.

of the aforementioned competing ideological narratives within Turkish civil society, this critique deserves serious evaluation.

Civil society's role as a disseminator of information can also be problematic. As we have observed, capacity building is framed as a central objective of civil society support. Mühlenhoff sees capacity building as a transfer of responsibility for democratization to the domestic civil society. Furthermore, she argues that capacity building aims also to transform CSOs into economic actors which have to be efficient in terms of costs, self-responsible and accountable, which goes back to the previously mentioned critique of neoliberal democracies.

The current negative development and the fast-changing situation in Turkey, confirmed by the strategy report from 2017, makes it necessary to continuously evaluate and discuss civil society support. Understanding it theoretically and comparing the Turkish case to other historical experiences might be a step in this direction. We could also start reflecting on what kind of sustainable and democratic development can be achieved by focusing on civil society without dialoguing with the state. Anyhow, the current political situation in Turkey poses political challenges which are not to underestimate, where alleviating civil society's burden in times of shrinking civil space could be seen as a short-term objective in a much broader and long-term support plan to not abandon Turkish civil society.

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