NGOization, Politicization and Polarization of Roma Civil Society in Turkey

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Abstract

Roma is one of the most marginalized and discriminated-against groups in Turkey. In the last decade, however, a new trend has been observed: the institutionalization of Roma civil society. Roma civil society has moved from no registered organizations in 2004 to having 336 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as of 2020. While analysing the reasons for this significant increase, the paper problematizes their effectiveness and argue that blurred state-civil society relations, as well as the polarization in Turkish society, impact Roma NGOs and cause their politicization and polarization. After identifying the numbers, locations and activity areas of Roma NGOs, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with those who have experience within Roma NGOs. The article not only contributes to the analysis of the political and civil participation of Roma but also to the analysis of civil society in Turkey more broadly.

Introduction

> … we will celebrate Roma Day once the politicians start to act on the basis of equal citizenship rather than remembering Roma neighbourhoods during the election times only (Roman Medya 2021).

This is how 100 Roma university students from Turkey ended the statement they published on the occasion of Roma Day on April 8. The statement reflects their frustration with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and politicians and it is this problematic that constitutes the basis of this research. The scope and effectiveness of Roma NGOs in Turkey are shaped by both the socio-economic conditions of Roma people in Turkey as well as the broader political opportunity structure. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how limited resources, blurred state-civil society relations, as well as polarization in Turkish society have impacted the Roma NGOs. By doing do, the paper argues that the emergence of Roma civil society organizations in Turkey is followed by their NGOization, politicization, and polarization.

The Roma is one of the most marginalized and discriminated-against groups in Turkey. Roma in Turkey, as is the case in many countries, has not only been socio-economically disadvantaged but also politically underrepresented. One of the most important components of political representation is political participation, which is essential for the functioning of democracy (Verba et al. 1978). Theoretical discussions of political participation have evolved over time and while previous work focused on voting as the fundamental indicator of political participation, later studies highlighted the importance of various forms of community activity that aims to affect the behaviour of governments (Verba 2001). More recent literature emphasizes the importance of electoral as well as non-electoral actions taken to influence not just the government but all potential decision-makers as forms of political participation (Teorell et al. 2007). When it comes to the political participation of minority groups, a specific emphasis

is put on 'effective participation', meaning a 'guaranteed presence, voice and influence in political decision-making processes, especially when decisions affect them directly', since otherwise they are bound to be outnumbered in all decision-making processes (McGarry and Agarin 2014). In cases where the opportunities for minorities to find adequate political representation are limited, civil society is one of the key ways to develop such a sphere of influence (Bačlija and Haček 2012). From this perspective, the rapid increase in the number of Roma NGOs in Turkey can be interpreted as a positive trend toward increasing political participation.

Several studies, focused mainly on Central and Eastern Europe, have emphasized the role of civil society organizations as a method of Roma political participation. Political participation is both a condition and a consequence of citizens' ability to take an equal place in society, however, Roma, who are 'victimized by violence, segregated in settlements, deprived of education, healthcare, and jobs, and routinely denied their rights as citizens… [are] excluded from the political arena where they could attempt to address these problems' (Pajic n.d., 1). Within this context, Roma civil society has been theorized in a number of ways ranging from 'a site of emancipation and resistance (following the classic liberal or recent "dissident" understandings of civil society) or a sphere of economic competition, cultural hegemony, and physical oppression (following the Marxist or Gramscian conceptions)' (Rostas, Rövid, and Szilvâsi 2015, 8).

The first organized efforts on the part of Roma in Europe to raise their voice against the multiple injustices they face goes back to 1879 and the 'National Conference of Gypsies', which was held in Kisfalu, Hungary. The increasingly codified discrimination against Roma triggered numerous organized protests (Kenrick 2007). The blatant atrocities and genocide that the Roma faced during the Second World War created additional momentum to organize against systematic racism (Özateşler 2013). The organization of the First World Romani Congress in 1971 and the establishment of the International Romani Union in 1978 at the Second World Romani Congress mark major milestones (Akgül 2010). Social activism around Roma issues has been increasing since the 1980s throughout Europe. Yet, studies on Roma NGOs in European countries also highlight certain limitations and obstacles that come from the lack of membership-driven initiatives, which results in a disconnect between NGOs and Roma populations and a lack of clear goals and strategies in shaping policy decisions (Pajic n.d.). For instance, Denton (2003) suggested that while the bourgeoning number of Roma NGOs helped alleviate the conditions of Roma in Bulgaria, 'the lack of focused agenda' and 'corruption' limit their effectiveness. Thus, the changes that the increasing NGOization of Roma civil activities in Europe create on the ground are still a matter of debate.

Such developments in civil society were not seen in Turkey until 2004. Since then, a new trend has been observed in the Turkish context: the emergence and institutionalization of Roma NGOs. Roma civil society has moved from having no organizations in 2004 to 336 NGOs of 2020. Yet, the realities on the ground illustrate that these initiatives have not necessarily translated into venues of effective political participation for Roma. This article aims to explain the causes behind the rapid expansion of Roma NGOs in Turkey, their characteristics, and the consequences of this proliferation. Such an analysis would not be complete without situating Roma NGOs within the broader framework of civil society and state-civil society relations in Turkey. For this reason, while shedding light on the Roma NGOs in Turkey specifically, this study both benefits from and contributes to the broader civil society literature in Turkey.

The analysis draws on a mixed methodology. The first step was to lay out the scope and development of Roma NGOs, which we have done through a survey of the online NGO database of the Ministry of Interior. Using this database, we identified the numbers, locations, and activity areas of the Roma NGOs. After mapping Roma NGOs, we focused on understanding how effective these NGOs are by conducting interviews with those who are active within Roma NGOs. We contacted twenty individuals and although all of them agreed to be interviewed, six of the interviews could not be conducted because of conflicting schedules. In total, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with activists, NGO workers, and NGO leaders. During the interviews, one of the questions was about "the most successful Roma NGOs". Only four NGOs were named as successful by more than two individuals. We paid special attention to include those who have an experience at working at the "most successful Roma NGOs". One of the authors' personal experience working with Roma NGOs for six years, including giving volunteer support, attending and facilitating meetings, organizing and giving trainings, building networks, and monitoring rights violations allowed us further access and additional insights into these organizations.

The article starts with a critical discussion on the history of civil society in Turkey, with a particular emphasis on how blurred state-society relations and polarization have shaped the strength and the role of civil society. In the second section, we present the historical evolution of the social, political, and economic conditions surrounding the lives of Roma in Turkey. It is against this backdrop that in the rest of the paper we discuss the NGOization, polarization, and politicization of Roma NGOs in Turkey.

A Critical Look at Civil Society

Liberal approach that was dominant in the early 1990s literature perceived civil society as independent of the state and as a unified field composed of selfless actors that contributes to democracy promotion (Diamond 1994). Later studies, however, started to question both assumptions about civil societies. With the questioning of approaches that accept democracy as a precondition for the existence of civil society, the fact that civil societies can exist in non-democratic societies or in societies that have not completed their democratic transformation has become increasingly accepted (Kay 2000; Teets 2014; Jacobsson 2015). Additionally, the studies that did not take civil society as a selfless and a unified field provided further insights into the inner functioning of civil societies.

Five of those insights are important to highlight for the purpose of this study. First, civil society is not necessarily a non-hierarchical structure and as such some organizations play more of a central and active role and hold a gatekeeper position, while others remain at the periphery of civil society interactions (Joachim 2007; Wong 2012; Mertus 2009; Carpenter et al. 2014). Second, although working for the benefit of society is their main goal, civil society organizations are also actors with not only moral but also strategic concerns (Bloodgood 2011). Here, the strategic calculations of organizations are shaped by their beliefs about the paths needed to be followed to achieve their main goals, as well as their need to maintain their organizational existence, strength, and values (Garilao 1987; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Yanaopulos 2005; Rauh 2010). This need heightens for NGOs that have to operate in polarized societies, where state influence over NGO practices is felt closely and has a visible impact on their behaviour. Third, the above mentioned differentiation in combination with strategic calculations of civil society organizations might lead to resource and domain competition among civil society actors as well as causing resource waste and civil society's overall ineffectiveness (Igoe 2003; Shawki 2010; Duygulu-Elcim 2015).

Fourth, the differentiation between civil society organizations is shaped not only by their internal dynamics but also their relations with actors in the state and private sector and their access to funding (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Rooy 1998; Igoe 2003; Challand 2008). Although civil society organizations are generally supported by membership fees and individual donations, they also continue their activities with resources from funding providers (such as states, the private sector, large foundations, international organizations, and diplomatic missions). This involvement of fund providers causes the NGOization of civil society (Chacim and Prakash 2014; Trehan 2009; Jad 2004), which is defined by Lang (2013, 63–4) as 'the process by which social movements professionalize, institutionalize, and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy-outcome-oriented organizations that focus on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services.'

Fifth is the observations about the non-democratic functions that civil society can play. Critical studies have observed that the expansion of civil society can lead to the strengthening of state power through increasing its ability to 'monitor collective action' as a means of regime survival (Wiktorowicz 2000; Cavatorta and Durac 2011; Yom 2005). Civil society expansion can also be tailored by the state through the support given to 'state friendly' NGOs (Abdelrahman 2004). The use of civil society organizations as 'charitable service-providers and actors contributing to authoritarian regimes' output legitimacy' is also underlined in the literature (Yabancı 2019, 5). As Yabancı (2019, 6) suggests 'civil society can cultivate consent for an undemocratic political regime by ideologically preparing society to willingly concede inequalities and discrimination within the existing system of governance.' Thus, civil society can be used to serve the state's interests particularly in contexts where civil society, for legal, political, and social reasons, cannot preserve its independence from the state.

While the above explained insights are crucial in studying civil societies, it should also be acknowledged that civil society organisations inevitably reflect the realities of the socio-political environment they are born in. In other words, they function as a 'mirror' that reflects the context in which they were developed (Cavatorta and Durac 2011). The opportunities and constraints that political structures present play a significant role in shaping whether civil efforts can play an effective role in influencing decision-making processes (Davis et al. 2005; Hooghe 2008). For that reason, the following section dicusses the conditions that shape the policy opportunity structure for the civil society in Turkey.

The Political Opportunity Structure for NGOs in Turkey

The political opportunity structure for NGOs in Turkey is framed by two factors: the blurred state-civil society distinction, resulting from a strong state tradition, and political polarization. Although the history of civil society in Turkey precedes the Republic era, NGOs increased both in number as well as effectiveness during the 20th century (Kahraman 2014; Eker Karadağ 2011; Soyer Zeyrek 2007, Çaha 1994, Mardin 1969). Starting with the late 1990s, Turkey witnessed a further burgeoning of NGOs, particularly due to the influence of the EU. Yet all these developments occurred against the backdrop of a blurred state-civil society distinction, where the state remains present at the centre of the society through its 'assertive bureaucratic tradition' (Fındık 2007, 20).

The Legacy of the Strong State

During the early years of the Republic, civil society was perceived as an instrument and treated as 'an ideological tool to be utilized in the consolidation' of the new system (STEP 2011, 55).

However, as Mardin puts it, 'Turkish political culture has an intrinsic, fierce enmity towards the concept of opposition' (Mardin 1991, 180). This culture, which can be seen as an extension of the strong state tradition, left very little room for a liberal type of civil society to flourish and act as a check and balance mechanism against the state (Alpay 1991; Tosun 2001; Heper and Yıldırım 2011). This approach led the state to support organized civil life insofar as it consolidated the existing system while suppressing any organization that might go against the state's agenda (Toprak 1996). The transition to a multi-party system created a more flexible arena for organized civil society, supported by the urbanization and industrialization processes that took place at the same time. Nevertheless, while legal limitations were loosened, governments retained the practice of supporting those that align with their political ideologies and agendas and suppressing those that did not (Toksöz 1983; TÜSEV 2006; STEP 2011).

The military coups took a toll on civil society and introduced security as another reason for civic activity to be limited by the state (TÜSEV 2006; STEP 2011). The 1961 Constitution envisaged a more liberal political and civil life with expanded rights and freedoms, yet the political turmoil that followed brought an end to this period and the state returned to its controlling attitude (Özbudun 1994; Hazama 1999). The 1982 Constitution replicated this approach and placed several limitations on civil liberties as well as on civil society (STEP 2011). Throughout all these changes, one constant was the 'strong state' tradition that the Republic inherited from the Ottoman Empire, which 'hinder[ed] the making of effective civil society' (Heper 1992).

The 1990s saw 'transitioning to free market based and export-oriented industrialization; ethnic and religious identity-based demands in political and cultural life; and dynamics of globalization' (STEP 2011, 57), which led to a burgeoning civil society. The realization of the instrumental value that civil society could play in the political and economic development of Turkey was important in changing the state elite's approach (Keyman and Öniş 2007). However, while legal structures and political attitudes evolved during the late 1990s and early 2000s to make more room for civil society, the impact of the historically strong state is still visible. This can be seen in (a) the ways in which civil society operates, (b) how different civil society organizations interact with each other; and (c) how they interact with the state. Clientelism, populism, and a lack of pluralism remain key features of civil society in Turkey (Heper and Yıldırım 2011).

Turkey's aspirations for EU membership also played an important role in the expansion of civil society (Keyman and İçduygu 2005; Rumford 2001; Diez et al. 2005). The EU, through facilitating reforms, contributed to the expansion of the legal and institutional sphere regarding freedom of association (Grigoriadis 2009) and also 'provided credibility and legitimacy to the demands of civil societal actors' (Heper and Yıldırım 2011, 7). The EU has also contributed to civil society in Turkey through funding and the opportunities it has created for civil society to build alliances with other international actors (Rumelili and Boşnak 2015; Ertan 2020).

The involvement of the EU (together with other donors) also led to the NGOization of civil society in Turkey. However, as later studies as well as the case study discussed in this article illustrate, the EU's involvement has neither led to a fundamental alteration of state-civil society relations in Turkey nor had the intended positive impact on civil society. Moreover, the influence of the EU in the domestic affairs of Turkey has drastically decreased in recent years.

This process has been conceptualized as 'de-Europeanization'[1] and it has created a fertile environment for the strong state tradition to resume its limiting role on civil society.

Political Polarization

Several studies have highlighted the fact that the political polarization that divides Turkish society also led to the polarization of civil society (Somer 2019; Doyle 2016; İlgü Özler and Obach 2018; Yabanci 2016; Yabancı 2019).[2] The lack of interpersonal trust between different segments of society makes it difficult to agree on the 'common good' (Şimşek 2004; Kalaycıoğlu 2002; Heper and Yıldırım 2011) and makes it difficult for people to get together in efforts to reach that goal. This lack of consensus further exacerbates civil society's inability to act independently of the state. Furthermore, autocratization in Turkey led to increasing de jure and de facto limitations on the right to assembly and peaceful protest, resulting in the shrinking civil space, a growing fear of involvement in civil activities, and further polarization of civil society (Kaya and Öğünç 2019, 9). Particularly after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, many NGOs have been shut down with emergency decrees and a few notable civil rights defenders have been sent to court or jailed.

Political polarization coupled with a strong state leads the state to '[turn] a deaf ear to those groups that it does not favor. It responds on a selective basis, it does not favor' (Karaman and Aras 2000, 43). While "who is favored" has changed, the selective approach remained the same. This institutional structure has also shaped civil society organizations' interactions with the state as well as among each other. As Kentel (2003) notes, networks between civil society actors in Turkey are weak primarily due to their inability and unwillingness to share information and experiences. Research conducted by STEP (2006) highlights that networking between NGOs is mostly shaped by informal forms of cooperation and visits. Özman and Fındık (2008) further suggest that low interpersonal trust also contributes to weak networking between NGOs. Both differences in organizational focus (Alelaiwi 2017, Çakmaklı 2016) and ideology (Akdemir 2006) play a role in this low level of trust. While a number of issue specific networks have been flourishing in recent years, the polarization that is still embedded in the society remains to impact the scope and effectiveness of these networks.

Within this context of autocratization and polarization, Doyle (2016, 9) claims the state uses three methods to shape civil society: '(1) the creation by the state of seemingly civic organizations (often referred to in the literature as GONGOs) to influence the realm of civil society in a way that directly supports state power; (2) collaboration with organizations […] to control them; and (3) through repressive actions which have limited and disempowered CSOs.' Recent studies illustrate how these mechanisms work in the fields of human rights, women's rights, business, and environmental civil society organizations (İlgü Özler 2018; İlgü Özler and Sarkissian 2011; İlgü Özler and Obach 2018). NGOs' ability to 'market' their visions and activities are also shaped by political polarization as evidenced by the impact of their political stance on the amount of media coverage their activities get (Akboğa and Arık 2019).

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[1] See the contributions in the special issue edited by Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber (2016) for further discussion of de-Europeanization.

[2] However, it needs to be noted that increased political polarization in the 1970s contributed to the widening of the NGO sector. This was partially a result of the global political momentum demanding that citizens have a greater say in politics and partly because of political parties' support for such organizations (as long as they are in line with their political views), in the hopes that they would help the political parties reach out to the public.

As the analysis of this paper illustrates, the dynamics and historical trajectory that have shaped civil society in Turkey have also had a crucial impact on the development of Roma NGOs. To better explain the conditions under which Roma NGOs developed, the below historical account outlines the situation of Roma in Turkey.

A Historical Account of the Situation of Roma in Turkey and the Delayed Birth of Roma NGOs

Discrimination against Roma in Turkey goes back to the Ottoman era. In official documents, they were differentiated as Kıbti Muslim and Kıbti Christian, and Muslim Roma were expected to pay the same taxes as non-muslims in the Ottoman Empire (Şanlıer 2014; Özateşler 2014; Akkan 2018). When transitioning to the Republic, Roma was recognized as part of the Muslim community – recognized not as a minority but marked as "Kıbti Muslims" in their identity cards (Marsh and Strand 2005; Akkan 2018). Law on Settlement (1934), until it was amended in 2006, explicitly stated that 'itinerant Gypsies' were one of the groups not allowed as migrants (Article 4), and the right to determine the settlement and relocation of those 'itinerant Gypsies' who were already living in Turkey was given to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was tasked with dispersing them across towns, keeping track of their potential spying activities, and deporting those who do not fit into the Turkish culture (Article 9).

Because of the official attitude toward Roma, one of the struggles for these populations was to prove that they were 'Muslim enough' and 'Turkish enough' citizens (Akkan 2018, 12). This attitude, as well as severe socio-economic problems, led Roma civil society to focus primarily on socio-economic issues and charity-based efforts rather than rights-based efforts. Urban transformation projects led to large-scale displacement that uprooted Roma populations from neighbourhoods that they have been living in for generations. The displacement led Roma to seek temporary self-made shelters, making them vulnerable not only to further displacement and potential physical danger but also preventing them from having proper access to education, healthcare, and other social services (Alakoç-Pirpir et al. 2017). The latest moves made by the state in the name of 'urban transformation projects' led to growth in neighbourhood-based civil society efforts (Akkan 2018).

While discrimination towards Roma is a widespread phenomenon, it needs to be noted that social-economic discrimination, poverty, and lack of access to services and education is felt even more severely by women (Alakoç-Pirpir et al. 2017). Roma women's integration into the (mostly informal) workforce largely falls short of alleviating the economic hardships they face and instead reinforces discrimination (Çelik and Yüce-Tar 2016).

Until recently, it was not possible for Roma to establish NGOs that carry the name 'Roma' or 'Gypsy' in the title. Article 5 of the Associations Law of 1983 forbade the establishment of NGOs that might endanger or destroy the existence of the Turkish Republic through differences of language, race, class, religion, and sect. According to Akgül (2010), there was an attempt to establish the 'Roma Charity and Solidarity Association' [Romanlar Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği] in 1996, but the association was closed because of the use of 'Roma' in the name. Another attempt was made to establish the 'Gypsies Charity and Solidarity Association' [Çingeneler Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği] in Izmir, but this was also rejected. In 2000, the attempt to establish the 'Researching and Developing the Gypsy Culture, Charity and Solidarity Association' [Çingene Kültürünü Araştırma, Geliştirme, Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği] in Ankara failed because of the name (Akgül 2010).

The dynamics discussed above that expanded the room for civil society in Turkey eventually facilitated the establishment of Roma NGOs. In 2004, it became possible to use 'Roma' or 'Gypsy' in organisation names, and the Edirne Gypsy Association for Cultural Research, Solidarity and Development [Edirne Çingene Kültürünü Araştırma, Geliştirme, Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği], later renamed the Edirne Roma Association [Edirne Roma Derneği], became the first established Roma NGO. It was followed by a number of local NGOs established in different parts of the country. Within this context, the First International Romani Symposium, held in Edirne in 2005, brought visibility to issues faced by Roma (Akgül 2010).

As a reflection of Turkey's move towards EU membership at the time, the 'Roma Initiative' was initiated by the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - Justice and Development Party) government in 2010. This was a part of the reforms made in the context of the EU accession process. As the EU has the 'social inclusion' of Roma as a priority, this also became a condition for candidates. The situation of Roma has been closely monitored by the European Commission and mentioned repeatedly in progress and visa liberalization reports. In 2016, a National Roman Strategy Action Plan 2016–2021 was published, and the EU-financed 'Technical Assistance for Promoting Social Inclusion in Densely Roman Populated Areas Project', with a budget of €11.5 million, was implemented between 2016 and 2018.

Thus, until the 2000s, Roma was mostly absent from the state's agenda. They remained marginalized and this marginalization was normalized to such a degree that it was not a matter of audible public or political debate. Turkey's aspirations to become an EU member both created space for Roma NGOs to flourish and also pushed the state to lend an ear to their demands and concerns. This led to momentum in which the number of Roma NGOs increased significantly in a short period with funding from the EU and its member states. However, as the below analysis illustrates, the development of Roma NGOs did not necessarily lead to its desired impact.

NGOization of Roma Civil Society

Before discussing their role and effectiveness, it is important to situate Roma NGOs within the broader civil society context. While Roma NGOs have only been active in Turkey for the last fifteen years, there has been a significant increase in the number of Roma NGOs. When Akgül was writing in 2010, there were 87 associations and five federations. As of July 2020, the number of the NGOs that have 'Roma' or 'Dom' in their name is 336 across 34 cities, of a total of 113,208 NGOs across 81 cities. Among these 336 NGOs, two have 'Dom' and one has both 'Roma' and 'Dom' in the name.[3] Both NGOs that have 'Roma' and 'Dom' in the name are located in the Southeast Anatolia Region. Although targeting solely Roma, some NGOs prefer to not use it in the name; either because they have plans to extend their activities beyond Roma or they believe that using 'Roma' in the name would lead to their stigmatization or deter people from participation in their activities. Two of those that do not have "Roma" and "Dom" in the title are identified among the most successful Roma NGOs by the interviewees. Therefore, we have conducted interviews with their representatives as well.

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[3] The European Union uses 'Roma' as the umbrella term for many different groups. However in Turkey, 'Roma' mainly refers to 'Rom'. Other than Rom, there are 'Dom', 'Lom', and 'Abdal' groups that differ in terms of geography, language, culture, sect, and lifestyle. It is rare for Lom, Dom, and Abdal groups to self-identify as 'Roma'; however, in recent years, Dom groups have been more involved in NGO activities, sometimes with Rom groups. This research includes mostly those who self-identify as Roma.

Overall, 42 per cent of the cities in Turkey have Roma NGOs. While all cities in the Aegean Region have Roma NGOs, none of the cities in the East Anatolian Region has. The distribution per cities based on this research's findings is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Distribution of Roma NGOs across Turkey

Although the largest number of Roma NGOs are located in İstanbul, İzmir, and Edirne, when the ratio of Roma NGOs to population is compared, the highest ratios are in Edirne, Çanakkale, and Yalova. The geographical distribution of Roma NGOs might give clues about the geographical distribution of the population of Roma. The actual number of Roma in Turkey is not known, as Turkey does not gather population data based on ethnicity, but it is estimated there are as many as five million and many are assumed to live in the coastal regions (Foggo et al. 2013). The geographic distribution of Roma NGOs seems to be in parallel with these assumptions; however, other factors cannot be disregarded, at least within the scope of this research: it is also possible that Roma in other regions do not identify as 'Roma' (Foggo et al. 2013), do not identify as 'Roma' openly, do not have any willingness to establish NGOs, or do not have any means to establish NGOs.

As shown in Table 1, out of 336 NGOs, there are 31 federations in 11 cities and three confederations in three cities. Seven cities have more than one federation. To form a federation, at least five associations must come together whereas to form a confederation at least three federations must come together. These numbers signal the fragmented nature of the Roma NGOs as they seem to prefer to establish new federations and confederations instead of joining existing ones.

Table 1: Number of Federations and Confederations

Cities	Number of Federations	Number of Confederations
Aydın	2	0
Balıkesir	1	0
Çanakkale	3	1
Edirne	5	0
Hatay (Dom)	1	0
İstanbul	3	0
İzmir	4	1
Kocaeli	4	1
Mersin	1	0
Samsun	3	0
Yalova	1	0
Total	**31**	**3**

Table 2 shows the self-declared activity areas of the Roma NGOs. Most focus on the topics of 'Culture, Arts, and Tourism' and 'Professional and Solidarity'. There are only four rights-based organizations, all of which are women's rights organizations. The interviews and the researchers' experience suggest that despite their self-declared activity areas, most of the Roma NGOs are doing charity and trying to solve local problems, including the women's organizations. Almost all of them operate at the neighbourhood, or at most at the district or city level. Only a few Roma NGOs are known to focus on rights advocacy and/or operate country-wide. Among them, even the 'Roma Rights Association' [Roman Haklari Derneği] is registered as a Professional and Solidarity association.

Table 2: Activity Areas of Roma NGOs

Area	City	Number
Culture, Arts and Tourism Associations	36	139
Professional and Solidarity Associations	44	131
Associations for Fostering Societal Values	15	28
Sports and Sports Related Associations	9	10
Humanitarian Aid Associations	7	8
Associations for Rights and Advocacy	3	4
Associations on the Basis of Thought	3	3
Associations for Disabled	1	3
Associations for Education Research	2	3
Associations for the Solidarity with Turks Abroad	2	2
Associations in the Area of Health	1	2
Personal Doctrine and Societal Development Associations	2	2
Associations for Nature, Natural Life and Protection of the Animals	1	1

The mapping out of Roma NGOs demonstrate the significant increase in the numbers. To understand the reasons behind the increase as well as the role and effectiveness of Roma NGOs.

We have conducted interviews with Roma civil society actors and the analysis of the interviews revealed three reasons for the NGOization of Roma civil society:

1. The belief among the civil society actors in the existence of large amounts of available funding and, more importantly, the belief that the funding is mismanaged by the existing NGOs;
2. The belief among the civil society actors that leading an NGO brings social status and eventually economic and/or political opportunities;
3. The inability to find opportunities for involvement in the activities of existing NGOs.

The first reason is directly linked to the limited resources and limited improvements in the problems that Roma face. In line with other countries, the main problems of Roma in Turkey are seen as discrimination, education, and unemployment (Ministry of Family and Social Policy, Republic of Turkey 2016). Roma NGOs try to find solutions to these problems with limited resources. The resources available are donations, memberships fees, state aid, or foreign funding. Membership fees and donations have been insufficient for Roma NGOs, therefore one resource that they rely on is foreign funding. The expectation of receiving large funding from foreign donors is one of the reasons for establishing a new NGO rather than joining an existing one.

The liberal development model that almost all of the donors adopt requires certain types of civil society organizations to be established to receive funding. This necessitates high levels of professionalism, human resources, and the capacity for reporting and budgeting. Therefore, the ability of many organizations to receive funding is fundamentally limited. Considering the socio-economic disadvantages of Roma, few of the organizations have this capacity. So, they turn to the only remaining resource: state institutions, local governments (municipality and/or district governorships) or political parties. In the current context of Turkish politics, receiving aid from state institutions and local governments is usually dependent on personal relations with the political parties.

The demand for a high level of professionalism reinforces the existing power and inequality relations within the associations. As underlined by Altan-Olcay and İçduygu, 'the competition is likely to structure an oligopolistic CSO field, biased towards larger and more professionalised organisations with a capacity for dealing with large bureaucracies' (Altan-Olcay and İçduygu 2012, 169). Therefore, it is common for the same Roma NGOs and non-Roma organizations with sufficient capacity to receive funding. This situation creates hostility towards these organizations, particularly when the initial belief about receiving large funding is not fulfilled. The large organizations are criticized for monopolizing the field and blocking the way for others. They are perceived to be favoured by the donors. Some of the interviewees claimed:

> Donors look at the networking, not the actual work. When we apply, they reject us on the basis of insufficient capacity but then they call the associations they know and invite them to do a project. They do not give us any chance (Interview 4, 2020).

> Some donors only give funds to well-established NGOs with large budgets. We applied but we knew we could not make it [although we implemented successful projects before]. They are looking for higher budgets. (Interview 5, 2020).

This leads to a trap where the 'patron-client' relationship, built between donors and policymakers on the one hand and Roma NGOs on the other, ends up strengthening the civil

society actors in their ability to provide for the Roma, rather than empowering the Roma population itself (Rostas, Rövid, and Szilvâsi 2015, 8). The nature of the relationship between NGOs and policymakers/funders creates a dilemma that, while it leads Roma to not trust NGOs' ability to represent their interests, also creates an incentive to take part in them as they 'may provide a crucial source of income and open channels of upward social mobility' (Rostas, Rövid, and Szilvâsi 2015, 9). Şimşek (2020) also found that the proliferation of Roma NGOs is not necessarily perceived positively by the members of the community. On the contrary, the proliferation was perceived to lead to mission creep and a loss of sense of direction.

The second reason is that some NGO presidents consider leading an NGO as a status symbol. It is assumed that leadership status would bring political and economic opportunities. Particularly after the election of Özcan Purçu from Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party - CHP), as the first openly Roma member of the parliament from İzmir in 2015, and then with the election of Cemal Bekle from AKP from İzmir 2018, NGO leadership is seen as a prerequisite for connection to the political parties. On the other hand, there is also a hostile discourse against 'NGO presidents' fuelled both by ideological and resource-related reasons. An interviewee underlines how partisan support of NGO presidents to the political parties cause a polarization among pro-AKP and pro-CHP organizations:

> They confuse civil society with politics. They want to be in politics. They market themselves as 'Presidents' to be able to be in the management position. There is a serious polarization [among pro-AKP and pro-CHP NGOs]. They are so far away from the problems of the citizens. And if someone from the other party does a good job, they ignore them (Interview 7, 2020).

This is linked to the third reason; particularly the youth think their ways are blocked in the existing NGOs. Although there are well-educated and motivated Roma youth who are willing to contribute to their communities through NGOs, they cannot always find a space to involve. The clinge of power of some NGO leaders prevent them to open up spaces for the new-comers. This exclusion lead some of the youth to either withdraw from civil society activities or establishing their own NGOs.

> The youth in my home city wanted to take over the passive NGOs but they failed, although there are presidents who do not know the names of their associations. I tried to mediate but it did not work. They see it as an advantage to call themselves 'NGO President'. I highly doubt it brings any benefits but as they think it might bring benefits, they do not let it go (Interview 3, 2020).

> There were 32 associations in our city back then. We visited all of them to ask them to involve us. They did not let us. Otherwise, we did not have any aim to establish an NGO. When they did not accept us, we established our own (Interview 4, 2020).

Earlier studies found concerns among Roma regarding leadership. For instance, Kolukırık and Toktaş found in their study of Tarlabaşı, İzmir that the issue of 'who would chair the association' appears to be a source of discouragement that affects the level of civic activities (Kolukırık and Toktaş 2007, 766). As they further report 'The position of chair represents political power and therefore is prestigious in the eyes of the respondents and what family the chair comes from, in this regard, is considered important. As a result, the Roma hesitate to agree on a possible name and decline to support possible candidates belonging to families other than their own extended families' (2007, 767). This finding echoes the case study conducted by

Eroğlu-Utku and Yazgan (2016, 107) in Edirne, in which they also found that 'being a leader of an effective NGO is the first step to political participation and representation.'

Therefore, many of the NGOs are trying to perform two functions: providing basic services that the state is supposed to provide, and providing a mechanism for the political participation of Roma as the other methods of political participation are not likely for them. The underlying reason for both functions are socio-economic disadvantages, as underlined by interviewees:

> Civil society is a bourgeois matter. But there are not too many with a stable job who see this as a secondary activity. Many are unemployed. Almost all of them are men. They have a responsibility to provide for their families (Interview 12, 2020).

> It is really difficult. Turkey is not an easy place for civil society. Especially for different communities. As Roma always struggle for survival, they are used. They cannot be 'civil'. I understand as I know the reasons: it is poverty (Interview 9, 2020).

Within this context, despite their increasing numbers, only a few Roma NGOs are perceived as 'successful' by the interviewees. The perception of their success is either defined by the ability of NGOs to attract funds or to assist their communities. Despite implementing projects that produce beneficial results for their communities, many NGOs have been struggling to continue their activities due to a lack of resources. Only a few of them are able to secure sustainable funding. An activist explains:

> On the one hand, some organizations have access to the resources. They can use funds. But they focus on their sustainability. On the other hand, some organizations do a great job in the short term but they cannot sustain their activities (Interview 12, 2020).

The Politicization and Polarization of Roma NGOs

The divisiveness that shapes civil society in Turkey is also present among Roma NGOs. The initial, pre-political phase of Roma NGOs are remembered nostalgically by the Roma civil society actors. An activist describes it as:

> When I first started, the tension between associations was almost non-existent. Between 2000 and 2010, it was on a voluntary basis. They were trying to focus on youth and put youth front. There was more cooperation. More innocent. It all changed with the politics. Otherwise, there was a potential (Interview 3, 2020).

It is important to underline that by 'politicization', we mean representatives of NGOs giving open support to a political party, as it is understood by the interviewees. Within that context, polarization refers to the divisions between NGOs that give open support to either AKP or CHP. Several factors led to the politicization and polarization of Roma NGOs. First, when forced by the EU to initiate a social inclusion process for Roma, the state used Roma NGOs to establish a dialogue instead of talking to people directly. Second, once they realized that the state listens to NGOs rather than individuals, Roma started to use their NGOs to be taken seriously by state institutions and pass on their demands. Therefore, Roma NGOs became mediums to connect with the Roma neighbourhoods as Roma mostly live in segregated and closed communities. However, as NGO presidents and workers are overwhelmingly male, it is not clear how much the demands or problems of women are heard or passed to the authorities. Third, interacting with state institutions and local governments opened the way for Roma to be involved in

political decision-making through political parties. Two major parties, the AKP and CHP, openly rely on Roma NGOs to enter Roma neighbourhoods and attract votes in exchange for services or employment opportunities. Many Roma communities experience severe socio-economic problems therefore, demanded services (such as introducing transportation lines to the Roma neighbourhoods, fixing infrastructure problems, or not cutting down electricity of unemployed residents) are supposed to be provided by state institutions and local governments in the first place. However, political parties use 'targeted rewards', which is discussed in the literature as a method of vote buying by primarily targeting relatively poor segments of the society (Brusco et al. 2004; Dixit and Londregan 1996). Interviewees express their frustration with this ongoing trend among Roma NGOs. In their understanding, Roma NGOs have to be non-partisan, professional, participatory and rights-based:

> The EU accession initiated the process and introduced funds. Roma NGOs were created to receive funds and to make projects. But the structure in Turkey harms Roma NGOs. They are so politicized and polarized that they cannot come together. Only a few of them act on the basis of an understanding of civil society (Interview 8, 2020).

> Roma civil society is politicized. There are the EU funds, local funds but if they cannot access the funds, at least they are heard by the local governments during the elections. In this way, they think they have power. But this is not the civil society mentality. The process is not rights-based, not participatory. It is political and based on political interests (Interview 12, 2020).

> Roma NGOs do not work like NGOs. Their numbers are increasing every single day. They focus on funds, and then run after political parties. They do not have capacities. They do not know what civil society is. They act like they are the state. They create this perception in the eyes of the people. As if they can solve the problems. But in reality, NGOs are not supposed to solve these kinds of problems, they should have put pressure on the state to solve them. But the politicians are using them (Interview 2, 2019).

The partisan polarization deepened after the election of Özcan Purçu and Cemal Bekle. Both MPs came from NGOs and this raised hopes for other civil society actors to have a career in politics or at least receive services or employment through political party connections. In September 2020, a political party named the 'Güzel Party' (Beautiful Party) was established by Roma. The founders of the political party also come from NGOs. One activist claims that the election of Roma members to the parliament harmed the Roma NGOs:

> We now have two parliamentarians but it was not the right time. These parliamentarians led successful civil society workers/activists to put political goals for themselves. It would be better for civil society if they were elected later (Interview 3, 2020).

The politicization and polarization of Roma NGOs hinders cooperation and fosters tensions within Roma civil society, which in turn makes it harder to formulate coherent demands or consider rights-based activism. As the interviewees explain:

> If we can unite, we can use our power to put pressure [on politicians]. But we cannot. Politicians use us. They come during elections and then never call again (Interview 5, 2020).

> NGOs are only used for solving problems with the municipalities or governor's office. The state is using them to have an access to the neighbourhoods. The problems are not solved, they did not even make it into the agenda (Interview 1, 2019).

However, it is worth underlining that the open support to the political parties is directly linked to the socio-economic conditions of Roma and the structural limitations for political participation or attracting other kinds of financial support. As getting into politics in Turkey necessitates material and cultural capital that many lack, mobilizing a community behind an NGO is seen as a way for their demands to be taken into consideration. Particularly considering many Roma NGOs focus on finding solutions to severe socio-economic problems, it is clear why support to a political party in exchange for resources and services seem like a viable strategy to many. In fact, some of the interviewees think it is useful when used wisely:

> Sometimes, politicization may work well. It is harmful in the long run but politicians listen to them now once they are organized. It is much harmful when it is turned to blind support but it is useful when used wisely (Interview 12, 2020).

> The politicians use Roma. I do not think they are genuine. The relationships are based on interests. On the other hand, I sometimes think, maybe it is a good thing. It is valuable for Roma to show themselves in different fields, or have a word. It was surprising for me to see Roma in active politics (Interview 11, 2020).

Thus, the increasing number of Roma NGOs has not necessarily improved the conditions of Roma. Because of their politicization and polarization, which reflects the overall divisions within Turkish society, Roma NGOs cannot maintain a united front to advocate for a comprehensive policy to target their problems.

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of Roma NGOs within the last 15 years was the starting point of this research. While trying to understand why Roma – one of the most marginalized groups in Turkey – has established 336 NGOs including 31 federations and 3 confederations within 15 years, the research concluded that three factors led to this rapid expansion: the belief about the existence of funds, the assumption that social status and opportunities that would accompany NGO leadership, and the inability to find opportunities within existing organizations.

Unable to attract resources from donors, donations, or fees, many Roma NGOs turn their faces to the state institutions, local governments, and political parties, while political parties started to use NGOs to attract votes in Roma neighbourhoods. Therefore, instead of targeting Roma directly and implementing structural policies to overcome the socio-economic problems that they face, the major political parties (AKP and CHP) use Roma NGOs to their own ends and hinder possible cooperation between them. Hence, the NGOization of Roma civil society in Turkey is coupled with its politicization and polarization. The result is a fragmented Roma civil society that lacks coherence in demands and action, limited changes to the daily experiences of Roma people, and a lack of proper integration of Roma concerns into state policies and practices. Within this context, many Roma NGOs function as service providers and a mechanism for political participation.

This research shows the limitations of NGOs that are formed by a vulnerable group deprived of basic needs in an increasingly autocratic state ruling over a deeply polarized society. The

existing literature warns us to be cautious about our expectations from civil society organizations to be a unified group of selfless actors acting in harmony. In addition to having diverging perspectives and goals, the power imbalances within the civil society coupled with concerns about organizational survival lead to rivalry among these actors. While these realities do not devalue civil society either as a field of study or as a for-public-profit sector, it nonetheless, encourages a sober evaluation of its functioning. In depth analysis of cases in non liberal contexts, such as detailed in this study, helps us better understand how these limitations get further exacerbated in less than ideal conditions.

Interview 1, NGO worker, Mersin, 2019.

Interview 2, Volunteer, Edirne, 2019.

Interview 3, Volunteer, Tekirdağ, 2020.

Interview 4, NGO Worker, Edirne, 2020.

Interview 5, Volunteer, İzmir, 2020.

Interview 6, Volunteer, İstanbul, 2020.

Interview 7, NGO President, İzmir, 2020.

Interview 8, NGO Worker, Gaziantep, 2020.

Interview 9, Volunteer, İstanbul, 2020.

Interview 10, NGO President, Bandırma, 2020.

Interview 11, Volunteer, İzmir, 2020.

Interview 12, NGO President, İstanbul, 2020.

Interview 13, Volunteer, Ankara, 2020.

Interview 14, Volunteer, İstanbul, 2020.

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