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Riot police use tear gas to disperse demonstrators during a protest against the destruction of trees in Gezi Park in May 2013.

When people send their children to a university in another city, they still feel the need to remind them not to take part in any demonstrations and only concentrate on their studies, says **TÜSEV** head, pointing the negative approach to 'getting organized' under a civil society organization in Turkey

## REPORT: CIVIL SOCIETY HAS DWINDLING FREEDOMS, FACES RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN TURKEY

Civil society organizations have gradually had their freedoms narrowed down as they have been subjected to various obstructions in their activities, according to a recently released report by the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (**TÜSEV**).

**TÜSEV**, a foundation working toward a more powerful and effective civil society, recently issued the "Civil Society Watch Report 2013-2014."

**TÜSEV** President Basak Ersen, who spoke to Sunday's Zaman about the details of the report, said Turks traditionally have a negative approach to "getting organized" under a civil society organization and that this is based on the fact that it was generally the members of civil society organizations and the organizations themselves that were first subjected to legal action during the country's military coups.

Ersen said when people send their children to a university in another city, they still feel the need to remind them not to take part in any demonstrations and only concentrate on their studies.

Recalling the killing of dozens of peace activists in terrorist attacks in Suruç, a town in Sanliurfa province, in July and in Ankara in October, Ersen said: "We must not disregard these. These are examples of how civil freedoms are being narrowed down in Turkey and what can happen to people who seek peace. After these incidents, could parents now ask their children to do something for the country's [festive] Southeast [where there are ongoing clashes between the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and security forces, which have led to the killings of civilians]?"

A suicide bombing organized by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants on July 20 outside a cultural center in Suruç, near the Turkey-Syria border, killed 32 people and wounded 104. The explosion occurred while a large number of Socialist Youth Association (SGDF) members, who had traveled from Ankara, Diyarbakir, Istanbul and Izmir, were making a press statement regarding the reconstruction of the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobani.

The twin suicide attack in Ankara on Oct. 10, also carried out by ISIL militants, was the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of Turkey, with 102 dead. It targeted a group of pro-Kurdish and leftist activists who were gathering near

Ankara's central train station ahead of a peace rally.

According to Ersen, legal restrictions in Turkey have made it hard for people to become members of civil society organizations. Citing a survey conducted by the Konda polling company during the Gezi Park protests, which were sparked in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 against government plans to demolish Gezi Park and went nationwide, Ersen said around 85 percent of the activists who took part in the protest were not affiliated with any civil society organization; they were members of neither an association nor a foundation.

"We definitely want civil society to develop, but we want it to develop on a larger scale, like federations or confederations, not just as foundations or associations. But there is a large group of people who do not want to be restricted to these models. People want to move more freely. They do not want to deal with paperwork and difficulties brought forward by regulations. So they find other ways to come together, like neighborhood initiatives and platforms," Ersen said.

Civil society organizations' calls for financial support from people most of the time fall on deaf ears because people make most of their donations to mosques in their neighborhood, Ersen explained.

She noted even foundations such as the Compassion Association (Sekat-Der), which provides a home to dozens of homeless people and is transparent in all its dealings, cannot get sufficient support because people prefer to donate to people they know or to mosque foundations in their neighborhood, rather than a foundation they do not know closely.

### Some organizations remarkably successful

Despite the obstacles and difficulties they face, some civil society organizations have made great achievements in their work and receive lots of praise from society.

Ersen cites The Platform to Stop Domestic Violence, Oy ve Ötesi (Vote and Beyond), a civil society initiative that mobilized thousands of people to monitor the vote counting process in an effort to prevent fraud in the elections held last year, and Community Volunteers Association (TOG) as examples of successful civil society organizations, noting that these organizations bring to-

gether people from various views and beliefs together.

Talking about **TÜSEV**'s goal to expand the space of civil society, Ersen said **TÜSEV** is working to increase the effectiveness of civil society organizations and for the formation of an environment that is legally and financially more appropriate for them to work in.

"Democracy does not serve the interests of the state. This is also valid for developed countries. The aim of establishing a state is to protect the status quo. It is civil society that will bend it," she said.

According to **TÜSEV**'s report, around 13 percent of Turkey's population is involved in a civil society organization and there is one civil society organization for every 747 people in the country.

In Turkey, 1.5 percent of the associations work in the field of the promotion of human rights and freedoms while this number is 0.5 percent for foundations.

The report also shows that there is not a single public institution in Turkey that is responsible for developing relations between public agencies and civil society organizations.

Instead of encouraging the transfer of local financial resources to civil society organizations through tax incentives, Turkey makes the financing of civil society organizations more difficult through mostly disproportionate accounting practices. **Istanbul**  
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