

Report

on the Freedom of Assembly and Association Rights, Collective Action and Human Solidarity Facing Existential Threat in Türkiye





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on the Freedom of Assembly and Association
Rights, Collective Action and Human Solidarity
Facing Existential Threat
in Türkiye**

submitted by
the Youth Organisations Forum (GoFor)
to
**the UN Special Rapporteur
on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**
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Introduction

1. This report is submitted to inform the forthcoming thematic report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, to be presented at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly. It aims to contribute country-specific insight on the existential threats facing youth-led mobilisation and civic space in Türkiye, with a focus on recent developments in 2025.
2. The year 2025 has marked a critical juncture for the global civil society landscape. With the unprecedented collapse of the international financial support architecture—driven by the abrupt withdrawal of key donors and a simultaneous redirection of aid to security and defence agendas—civil society actors across the world have faced existential threats. Nowhere has this collapse been more palpable than in the lived realities of young people in Türkiye. Confronted by a shrinking civic space, a deteriorating democratic order, and a state-led campaign of repression, youth in Türkiye have emerged as both the vanguard of democratic mobilisation and the primary targets of state violence and institutional suppression.
3. This report, submitted by the Youth Organisations Forum (GoFor), which is the National Youth Council of Türkiye, seeks to shed light on the rapidly deteriorating state of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in Türkiye, with a particular focus on the experiences and struggles of youth. Centring the mass youth-led protests following the arrest of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on 19 March 2025, the report explores how young people have mobilised in defence of democratic values and civil liberties in the face of increasing authoritarianism. It further examines how this mobilisation has been systematically stigmatised, criminalised, and violently repressed by the Turkish state, and how these developments intersect with broader structural issues—including the collapse of international funding streams, the intensification of securitisation policies, and the erosion of institutional mechanisms meant to guarantee youth participation.
4. Over the past decade, young people in Türkiye have been subjected to a multifaceted disenfranchisement: economically marginalised, politically silenced, and structurally excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. The closure of youth spaces, the appointment of government trustees to replace elected officials and university administrators, and the defunding of youth programmes reflect not only an assault on civil society, but a deliberate attempt to disempower the country's most politically conscious generation. These efforts have been bolstered by an increasingly repressive legal and policy framework that treats dissent, particularly when expressed by young people, as a threat to national security.
5. This submission situates the experience of Türkiye's youth within the broader context of global democratic backsliding and civic space erosion. Drawing on firsthand

documentation, field reports, and data collected from youth organisations across the country, it analyses the multi-layered impact of the financial, bureaucratic, and political pressures placed on youth-led organising. It also identifies emerging forms of resistance, collective strategies of survival, and international avenues for solidarity and protection.

6. At a time when youth across the globe are rising in defence of democracy, climate justice, gender equality, and social equity, the dismantling of youth organising infrastructure in Türkiye represents not only a national crisis, but a global warning. The future of democracy rests on the protection and empowerment of young people's collective action. In its 80th year, the United Nations must reaffirm its commitment to the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association—not as optional ideals, but as foundational principles underpinning all other human rights.

Political Context and Authoritarian Drift in Türkiye

7. The erosion of democratic institutions in Türkiye has accelerated significantly in the past decade, creating a highly restrictive and securitised environment for civic engagement—particularly for youth. Since the state of emergency declared in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish government has systematically restructured the institutional landscape to centralise executive power, dismantle checks and balances, and suppress dissent. The closure of over 1,500 civil society organisations during the emergency rule laid the groundwork for an increasingly authoritarian governance model, wherein any expression of opposition, especially by young people, is often framed as a threat to national security¹.
8. A key feature of this authoritarian drift has been the appointment of government trustees to replace elected mayors and university rectors. The use of Presidential Decree No. 703 (2018), which permanently revoked the authority of university senates to elect their own rectors, has transformed the higher education landscape into a site of political control. The rector appointment policy has not only undermined institutional autonomy but also triggered widespread protests on university campuses, particularly among student groups demanding participatory governance and academic freedom.
9. The centralisation of power has also gone hand-in-hand with the weakening of parliamentary mechanisms and oversight institutions. For instance, youth organisations report that proposals submitted to parliamentary commissions—particularly on youth rights, education, and civic participation—are

¹ Amnesty International. (July 18, 2018). The State of Emergency has ended but urgent measures are now needed to reverse the roll back of human rights.
https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/07/turkey-state-of-emergency-lifted/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

rarely taken into account². Budget allocations for youth development programmes have been consistently reduced in real terms, and what limited resources exist are often directed towards government-aligned associations (GONGOs), sidelining independent youth organisations that advocate for democratic values³.

10. This political context has had a direct and chilling effect on youth engagement in public affairs. A majority of youth CSOs indicate that their access to decision-making platforms has been completely severed, especially at the national level. The closure of local youth centres, denial of permits for events, and increasing bureaucratic requirements for maintaining legal status have pushed many youth-led initiatives into informal or precarious modes of operation⁴.
11. The situation is further compounded by a normative shift in state rhetoric. Young people mobilising around rights-based issues—such as gender equality, LGBTI+ inclusion, environmental justice, and democratic participation—are routinely accused of serving “foreign agendas” or “polarising society.” This narrative is deliberately employed to justify legal restrictions, surveillance, and criminal prosecution, and has created an atmosphere where public institutions actively discourage youth expression under the guise of preserving unity or national security⁵.
12. Together, these developments have rendered Türkiye’s youth not only politically marginalised but systematically targeted. The political environment has effectively closed down institutional routes for youth participation and channelled dissent into increasingly criminalised spaces. It is within this authoritarian configuration that the 19 March 2025 protests—and the subsequent state crackdown—must be understood: not as isolated incidents, but as a culmination of a deliberate policy to suppress the political agency of a generation demanding democracy, equity, and justice.

Youth-Led Mobilisation and State Repression

13. Youth in Türkiye have emerged as the primary defenders of democratic values and civil liberties amidst a climate of deepening authoritarianism. Over the past several years, young people have increasingly mobilised in response to systemic injustices, particularly around university autonomy, political representation, environmental degradation, and economic precarity. These mobilisations have frequently filled the vacuum left by dismantled institutional channels for participation. Yet, the state’s

² Youth Organisations Forum. (2025). The needs assessment of youth organisations in Türkiye. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20721/3/

³ Youth Organisations Forum. (2024). Gençlik ve Spor Bakanlığı 2025 Bütçesi hakkında bilgi notu [Policy brief on the budget of the Ministry of Youth and Sports for 2025]. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20321/3/

⁴ Youth Organisations Forum. (2025). The needs assessment of youth organisations in Türkiye. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20721/3/

⁵ Youth Organisations Forum. (2024). Stakeholder Report: 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of Republic of Türkiye. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20335/3/

response has been characterised not by dialogue, but by a strategy of criminalisation, deterrence, and violence.

14. The most striking manifestation of this was the wave of youth-led protests that erupted on and after 19 March 2025, following the imprisonment of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. Youth in Türkiye had already been confronting profound poverty under austerity policies, systematic discrimination against women, LGBTI+ communities and minorities, and the erosion of their right to vote through the imposition of government-appointed trustees. For a generation already burdened by economic hardship, disenfranchisement, and systemic inequality, the arrest of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on 19 March 2025 came to symbolise the culmination of prolonged institutional disregard for democratic norms and fundamental rights.
15. In response, young people and university students emerged as a central force in a nationwide mobilisation, advocating for democracy, justice, the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and socio-economic rights. From nearly every province across Türkiye, youth took to the streets in defence of such universal values, even in the face of disproportionate police force, arbitrary arrests, and ongoing repression. Within academic institutions, students initiated coordinated boycotts, signalling a deliberate and collective refusal to accept the normalisation of democratic backsliding and calling for the restoration of civic and institutional accountability.
16. The state's response to this mobilisation was defined by a campaign of brutal crackdowns. Reports emerged of physical assault by law enforcement, excessive and disproportionate deployment of tear gas, pressured water mixed with chemical irritants, and plastic bullets deliberately aimed at sensitive zones of the body. Between 19 and 23 March 2025, during the height of the demonstrations, 1,133 individuals—the majority of whom were young people—were taken into custody.
17. These detentions were often preceded by targeted police raids that disproportionately focused on youth who played leading or highly visible roles in the protests. Among those arrested were members of youth organisations, including several representatives of the National Youth Council of Türkiye (GoFor). Many of these individuals were subjected to degrading treatment in custody. There were documented cases of invasive strip searches and sexual violence, particularly targeting young women—clear violations of Türkiye's obligations under international human rights law.
18. The case of Esila Ayık, a 22-year-old university student, is emblematic. Despite suffering from chronic heart and kidney conditions, Ayık was detained during the protests and remains in custody. Her case has drawn widespread attention from political leaders and human rights advocates, becoming a symbol of the

disproportionate and punitive nature of the state's response to peaceful youth mobilisation.

19. Similarly, Cem Aydın, President of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Youth Wing, faces judicial harassment for political speech. Charged with "insulting a public official" and "targeting individuals involved in counter-terrorism," Aydın is currently being prosecuted for retweeting a critical post. The indictment seeks a prison sentence of up to 5 years and 4 months, along with a political ban that would bar him from holding public office. This prosecution reveals the government's broader strategy of silencing organised youth opposition through legal intimidation and the weaponisation of counter-terrorism narratives.
20. Alongside physical repression, the digital infrastructure used by young people for mobilisation came under direct attack. Access restrictions were imposed on X (formerly Twitter), targeting youth and women's organisations and independent media outlets. 53 youth organisations' accounts were suspended or rendered inaccessible under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651, which was invoked on the grounds of "protecting national security and public order". As a result, over 500,000 individuals—primarily young people—were unlawfully denied access to critical information, including protest safety guides, legal aid resources, and political statements. These digital clampdowns were accompanied by bandwidth throttling, which severely impaired real-time communication and online coordination during protests.
21. Youth repression extended into domains of everyday life, notably through the use of state-provided housing as a coercive tool. In connection with the March protests, students residing in KYK (Credit and Dormitories Institution) dormitories were targeted with disciplinary investigations. At Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, 11 students were investigated; five were expelled from their dormitories after participating in peaceful demonstrations.
22. Students reported being pressured by dormitory officials to "voluntarily withdraw" from housing to avoid formal expulsions. A similar case occurred in Hatay, where Görkem Akşit, a student at Mustafa Kemal University, was expelled from their dormitory after sharing a protest-related post in a private WhatsApp group. These incidents reveal the extent to which housing, a basic right, is being instrumentalised to suppress dissent and punish youth for political participation.
23. The state's targeting of youth activists escalated further around 1 May 2025. In the days leading up to International Workers' Day, authorities conducted pre-emptive house raids in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, detaining more than 150 members of youth organisations, trade unions, and leftist political collectives.
24. On 1 May, Turkish authorities detained over 400 individuals in Istanbul alone. The police response was again marked by excessive force, including tear gas and physical

assault, particularly concentrated in the central districts of Beşiktaş and Şişli. These mass arrests demonstrate a continuity of the government's approach to youth dissent: preventative criminalisation, indiscriminate violence, and collective punishment aimed at discouraging future mobilisation.

25. This repression did not occur in a vacuum. As documented in GoFor's civil and political rights report, young activists in Türkiye operate in an environment where even the expression of dissenting opinion can be interpreted as a criminal act⁶. Peaceful protest is routinely equated with public disorder, and digital mobilisation efforts—such as organising via WhatsApp groups or posting protest content on social media—have been used as the basis for criminal investigations.
26. The crackdown following the March protests mirrored earlier cycles of repression, such as the Boğaziçi University protests of 2021–2022, in which students protesting a politically-appointed rector were met with detentions, prosecutions, and bans on student clubs. However, the March 2025 wave stood out in two important ways. First, it was deeply decentralised: there was no central coordination, yet young people acted in synchrony across the country, often using anonymous networks and informal coalitions. Second, it was explicitly political in its demands, calling not only for the release of an elected mayor, but also for the restoration of democratic processes, protection of university autonomy, an end to rule by decree, and socio-economic welfare.
27. Rather than addressing these demands, the government doubled down on its repressive stance. Ministry of Interior statements described the youth protests as “provocations instigated by foreign-funded groups,” while pro-government media outlets accused student activists of being “terror sympathisers.” This language has had material consequences. Youth organisers and their families report increased surveillance, home visits by police, and threats of expulsion from dormitories or universities.
28. Furthermore, civil society organisations providing legal aid, documentation, or public advocacy in relation to the protests were also targeted. Some faced administrative audits; others had their public visibility diminished due to media smear campaigns and social media censorship. These pressures have led many youth groups to either suspend operations or go underground, adopting informal organising models to avoid visibility while continuing their activism.
29. In summary, the March 2025 protests and their aftermath offer a vivid snapshot of the existential threat facing association, assembly, collective action and solidarity among youth in Türkiye. What began as an assertion of democratic will was met with a

⁶ Youth Organisations Forum. (2024). Report on the civil and political rights of young people in Türkiye: UNHRC 142nd Session International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_19832/1/

machinery of state repression that seeks to silence, punish, and delegitimise young people as political actors. The consequences extend beyond individual rights violations—they strike at the heart of youth political agency and the future of democratic and peaceful participation in the country.

Shrinking Civic Space and Financial Weaponisation

30. The right to freedom of association in Türkiye is not only under threat from direct repression, but also from increasingly hostile financial and administrative conditions. For youth organisations, particularly those that are rights-based, autonomous, or oppositional in their outlook, survival has become a structural challenge. The political and bureaucratic environment in which these organisations operate is marked by discriminatory funding practices, weaponised audits, and restrictions on both domestic and foreign resources.
31. The disruption of international aid systems, including significant funding shifts by European governments and the decline of multilateral support, has severely impacted youth civil society. This has left grassroots organisations with few alternative avenues for funding, and exacerbated their precarity in an already restrictive domestic environment.
32. Public funding mechanisms in Türkiye systematically exclude youth organisations that do not align with the government's ideological or political agenda. It is revealed that 82% of youth organisations in Türkiye do not receive any public financial support, and among those that do, funding is often conditional on non-political or state-aligned programming⁷. This situation is further aggravated by the absence of a legal status that recognises youth groups or platforms as legitimate actors eligible for institutional support.
33. Youth organisations led by or focusing on LGBTI+ individuals, ethnic minorities, or politically critical youth groups face near-total exclusion from municipal or national grant schemes. Furthermore, calls for project-based support through state channels (e.g. the Ministry of Youth and Sports) are often designed in ways that structurally disqualify independent or grassroots youth initiatives. Many such calls require prior project completion histories, high co-financing ratios, and criteria that reflect private-sector logic rather than civil society realities⁸.
34. In addition to financial exclusion, youth organisations frequently encounter extensive bureaucratic barriers when attempting to formalise their activities or access basic legal status. Registration procedures remain opaque and inconsistent. In some cases,

⁷ Youth Organisations Forum. (2025). The needs assessment of youth organisations in Türkiye. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20721/3/

⁸ Youth Organisations Forum. (2024). Gençlik ve Spor Bakanlığı 2025 Bütçesi hakkında bilgi notu [Policy brief on the budget of the Ministry of Youth and Sports for 2025]. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20321/3/

applications are stalled or rejected without explanation. Routine activities—such as renting public space, printing educational materials, or organising open-air events—are subject to pre-authorisation and scrutiny. Several youth organisations have reported that their social events were subjected to surprise inspections by local authorities, sometimes resulting in administrative fines or police reports⁹.

35. More disturbingly, auditing and reporting requirements for associations receiving foreign funding have become a tool for intimidation. Organisations must disclose every detail of their donor agreements, down to specific activities and expenditures, under threat of closure. These measures create a chilling effect and discourage new or marginalised youth actors from engaging in public life. Many groups choose to remain informal, limiting their visibility and long-term viability¹⁰.
36. In the aftermath of the March 2025 protests, at least nine youth organisations known for their critical stance on government policy were subjected to retaliatory financial inspections or targeted audit procedures. These were not triggered by formal complaints or indicators of misuse, but rather appear to have been part of a larger strategy to weaken organisational capacity and deter political activism. In some instances, public statements of solidarity with detained protesters were followed by the withdrawal of promised funding by local administrations.
37. This dynamic is compounded by a broader strategy of state capture of civil society. Government-affiliated youth foundations and organisations are heavily funded and promoted as the legitimate face of youth work. They occupy policy-making platforms, distribute state grants, and dominate media narratives. Meanwhile, independent youth organisations are denied visibility, legitimacy, and access to decision-making processes.
38. The collapse of the global financial aid ecosystem, as reflected in the abrupt reduction of US and EU-funded programmes in 2025, has had particularly devastating consequences for Türkiye's youth sector. Youth-led initiatives that previously relied on international support for their programming, especially on climate justice, minority inclusion, and anti-discrimination, have been forced to cancel activities or suspend operations altogether. This has disproportionately affected grassroots and regional youth formations, which lack the infrastructure or capacity to seek private philanthropic alternatives.
39. Furthermore, foreign-funded organisations face increasing suspicion and delegitimisation. A new wave of legislative proposals has sought to brand organisations receiving international support as "foreign agents," mirroring restrictive

⁹ Youth Organisations Forum. (2025). The needs assessment of youth organisations in Türkiye.
https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_20721/3/

¹⁰ *ibid.*

models used in other authoritarian contexts. While not yet passed into law, the public discourse surrounding these initiatives has already generated a chilling effect across the sector, causing funders to delay or scale back grant implementation.

Legal and Policy Trends Undermining Freedom of Association and Assembly

40. In Türkiye, the erosion of civic space has been facilitated not only through administrative suppression and financial restriction, but also through an increasingly repressive legal framework that criminalises dissent and undermines constitutional guarantees of the freedoms of assembly and association. This trend has intensified following the 2023 elections and culminated in 2025 with sweeping legislative changes that directly target youth participation in democratic processes.
41. The scope of association is narrowly defined in national laws, as the term association is strictly limited to associations, foundations, political parties, and unions. This narrow definition excludes informal or partially formal structures such as civil initiatives and student societies. In practice, Articles 11 and 13 of the ECHR, as well as Article 33 of the Constitution¹¹ guarantee freedom of association for everyone, but national legislation in this field is insufficient.¹² Legislative deficiencies, the state's limited approach in practice, and the position of decision-makers as producers of hate crimes serve as obstacles to organisation.
42. While 73% of young people state that they are not organised anywhere, the area with the highest level of organisation is student societies, at 12%. The main reasons for not being organised include, in order: lack of interest, lack of time, and fear of being monitored.¹³
43. 2,077 students were detained, 203 students were arrested, lawsuits were brought against 658 students, 152 were sentenced to prison, 720 were injured, and 23 students lost their lives while exercising their freedom of association between 2015 and 2019.¹⁴ An in-depth look into freedom of association at campuses reveals a series of backlashes including the shutting down of students' societies, banning their activities, intervention by the police and private security forces, disciplinary proceedings, and penal sanctions.¹⁵

¹¹ Constitution of The Republic of Türkiye, #2709. (1982). Article 33. https://anayasa.gov.tr/media/7258/anayasa_eng.pdf

¹² Karan U. (2018). *Örgütlenme ve toplanma özgürlüğü* [Freedom of association and assembly]. Council of Europe. https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/media/3546/03_organlenme_toplanma.pdf

¹³ Youth Organisations Forum. (2024). *Research on political preferences of the youth 2024*. https://go-for.org/yayinlar/#flipbook-df_18668/1/

¹⁴ Human Rights Foundation of Turkey. (2021). *Demokratik yurttaşlık alanının daraltılması TİHV Akademi bilgi notu 1: Öğrencileri hedef alan ifade, toplantı, gösteri ve örgütlenme özgürlüğü ihlalleri (2015-2019)* [Narrowing the area of democratic citizenship TİHV Academy information note 1: Violations of freedom of expression, assembly, demonstration and organization targeting students (2015-2019)]. https://tihvakademi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Yurttaslik_Alani_Bilgi_Notu_1.pdf

¹⁵ Sivil Alan Araştırmaları Derneği [Civilian Area Research Association]. (2023). *Kelepçelenmek istenen kampüsler: Pandemi sonrası kampüslerde ifade özgürlüğü bağlamında örgütlenme ve barışçıl toplanma hakkı* [Campuses that are being shackled: The

44. Two big students' movements of the past five years that are worth attention present an important example on this topic. The first is the Boğaziçi protests which were sparked by the appointment of Melih Bulu, former candidate running for an MP status from AK Party, by President Erdogan to Boğaziçi University as an appointed, not elected, rector on January 2, 2021. The second movement is called as 'Barınamıyoruz' [We Cannot Find Shelter], which began as a response to inadequate dormitories and high rents. Both actions have spread nationwide since their inception, and their effects continue to be felt today. In both actions, young people who sought to exercise their right to organise faced police intervention, lawsuits, detentions, and arrests. Students participating in these actions have experienced punitive measures that violate their fundamental rights, such as the cancellation of their KYK scholarships and expulsion from KYK dormitories.¹⁶
45. According to the Law on Associations¹⁷, the establishment of an association requires only seven individuals to come together and prepare a charter. Due to the lack of a standard application for student societies, each university establishes its own standards, resulting in, for instance, the founding member count varying, with some reaching up to 25 individuals. Moreover, the establishment of student societies has been left to the approval of the relevant units of the universities. This makes the establishment of student societies more difficult than the establishment of associations.
46. An amendment to the Regulation on Associations in 2018¹⁸ obliged all associations to report their members to an online interface of the Ministry of Interior Affairs (DERBİS). This escalated individuals' fears of being monitored, causing associations to lose members.
47. The Law no. 7262¹⁹ adopted in 2020 brought about practices that curbed freedom of association by intensifying surveillance on associations, making it more difficult to collect donations and totally attributing individual crimes to the association.²⁰

right to organize and peacefully assemble in the context of freedom of expression on campuses after the pandemic].

<https://sivilalanarastirmalari.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Kelep%C3%A7elenmek-%C4%B0stenen-Kamp%C3%BCsler.pdf>

¹⁶ Sivil Alan Araştırmaları Derneği [Civilian Area Research Association] (2023). Boğaziçi direnişi kronolojisi [Chronology of the Bosphorus resistance]. <https://sivilalanarastirmalari.org.tr/kronoloji/>

¹⁷ Law on Associations, #5253. (2004).

https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/kurumlar/siviltoplum.gov.tr/Mevzuat/Kanunlar/Dernekler_Kanunu-Ingilizce.doc

¹⁸ Dernekler Yönetmeliği [Associations regulation], #25772. (2005).

<https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=8038&MevzuatTur=7&MevzuatTertip=5>

¹⁹ Prevention of Financing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, #7262. (2020).

[https://ticaret.gov.tr/data/6050a37613b87603ac1c4f42/Rehber%20\(%C4%B0ngilizce\).pdf](https://ticaret.gov.tr/data/6050a37613b87603ac1c4f42/Rehber%20(%C4%B0ngilizce).pdf)

²⁰ Amnesty International Türkiye. (October 21, 2021). Türkiye: Terörün finansmanının önlenmesi hakkında kanun şimdiden sivil toplum üzerinde 'caydırıcı etki' yarattı [Türkiye: Law on preventing financing of terrorism already has 'chilling effect' on civil society].

<https://www.amnesty.org.tr/icerik/turkiye-terorun-finansmaninin-onlenmesi-hakkinda-kanun-simdiden-sivil-toplum-uzerinde-caydirici-etki-yaratti>

48. Associations report the funds they receive from abroad to the Ministry of the Interior through DERBİS. Although this notification is intended for the prevention of the financing of terrorism and the fight against money laundering, the data obtained from these notifications are being used in a way that criminalises receiving funds from abroad. The former Minister of the Interior misleadingly shared this data with the public, making statements that targeted organisations working in the fields of human rights, youth rights, LGBTI+ rights, and electoral security. Additionally, some media outlets have produced targeting news based on the lists of organisations that receive funding abroad.²¹
49. There are 100,896 associations in Türkiye.²² The Law on Associations provides tax exemptions and incentives for those recognized as public benefit associations, a status granted by the President since 2008²³. Currently, 364 associations hold this status, with only 34 receiving it post-amendment.²⁴ Donations require state approval, but 50 organizations are exempt²⁵; data on permits granted is unavailable. Youth associations struggle with resource access, citing this as a major barrier.²⁶ The GSB has reduced support for youth projects in its 2024 program²⁷, and most EU youth funds are directed to pro-government groups²⁸. Consequently, youth organisations face unfair access to resources, and when they receive foreign funding, they become targets of scrutiny. The state controls rather than supporting civil society, impeding the right to association.
50. In May 2025, the Government of Türkiye tabled a legislative proposal titled “*Law on the Execution of Sentences and Security Measures*”, which constitutes a significant legal development threatening the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly and

²¹ International Federation for Human Rights. (May 6, 2021). Turkey: Ongoing crackdown poses existential threat to independent civil society.

<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/turkey/turkey-ongoing-crackdown-poses-existential-threat-to-independent-26851>

²² Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü [Directorate General of Civil Society Relations]. (2024). Dernek sayıları [Number of associations]. <https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/dernek-sayilari>

²³ Law on Associations, #5253. (2004).

https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/kurumlar/siviltoplum.gov.tr/Mevzuat/Kanunlar/Dernekler_Kanunu-Ingilizce.doc

²⁴ Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü [Directorate General of Civil Society Relations]. (2024). Kamu yararı statüsüne sahip olup faal olan dernekler [Associations that have public benefit status and are active].

[https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/kurumlar/siviltoplum.gov.tr/istatistikler/Kamu-Yarari/kamu_yararli_dernekler\(1\).pdf](https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/kurumlar/siviltoplum.gov.tr/istatistikler/Kamu-Yarari/kamu_yararli_dernekler(1).pdf)

²⁵ Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü [Directorate General of Civil Society Relations]. (2024). İzin almadan yardım toplama hakkına sahip kuruluşlar [Organizations that have the right to collect donations without permission].

<https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/izin-almadan-yardim-toplama-hakkina-sahip-kuruluslar>

²⁶ Youth Organisations Forum. (2022). *Türkiye'deki gençlik örgütlerinin yerel katılımı ve ihtiyaç analizi raporu* [Local participation and needs analysis report of youth organizations in Turkey].

<https://go-for.org/turkiyedeki-genclik-orgutlerinin-yerel-katilimi-ve-ihitiyac-analizi-raporu/>

²⁷ Youth Organisations Forum. (2023). Gençlik ve Spor Bakanlığı 2024 Bütçesi hakkında bilgi notu [Policy note on the 2024 Budget of the Ministry of Youth and Sports]. https://go-for.org/yavinlar/#flipbook-df_18364/1/

²⁸ Teke, C. B. (August 22, 2024). Ulusal Ajans'tan TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, Ensar, İlim Yayma Cemiyeti ve tarikat derneklerine AB fonu yağdı [EU funds rained down from the National Agency to TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, Ensar, Science Dissemination Society and sect associations]. T24.

https://t24.com.tr/haber/ulusal-ajans-tan-tugva-turgev-ensar-ilim-yayma-cemiyeti-ve-tarikat-derneklerine-ab-fonu-yagdi.1180189#google_vignette

association. Presented to Parliament on 29 May and expedited to the Justice Commission by 31 May—coinciding deliberately with a weekend—the bill has been subject to limited public scrutiny and bypassed meaningful democratic debate. Although presented as a reform of the penal execution system, the bill includes provisions that amount to a direct assault on the rights of young people to engage in peaceful protest:

- a. The bill introduces new criminal offences under the guise of maintaining public order. Articles 13 and 14 broaden the scope of criminal liability under the pretext of “obstructing transportation” or “endangering traffic safety.” Article 14, for instance, defines the act of impeding the movement of vehicles through “unlawful conduct” as a crime punishable by one to three years’ imprisonment. Moreover, the inclusion of clauses allowing for cumulative charges where protests overlap with other acts opens the door for compound criminalisation of peaceful assemblies, especially those taking place on roadways or public thoroughfares. Although these articles were retracted in the final and now-approved law, such proposed articles clearly reflect the intentions of the Government of Türkiye concerning the freedom of assembly.
- b. In addition, the bill significantly restricts access to conditional release and supervised probation. Articles 18 and 19 reduce the parole eligibility threshold from 50% to 40% of the sentence served and tighten conditions for accessing probation. This change is particularly alarming for youth activists. Offences commonly used against protestors—including violating Law No. 2911 (6 months to 3 years), insulting the President (1 to 4 years), or resisting a public official (6 months to 3 years)—previously resulted in sentences that could be converted to fines or served through alternative measures. Under the new legislation, these alternatives will be severely limited. Protesters convicted on such charges may now be required to serve time in prison, even for relatively short sentences. The law mandates actual imprisonment for at least one-tenth of the sentence, with a minimum of five days in custody, thereby reinforcing the chilling effect on youth-led protest activity.
- c. The bill also undermines freedom of expression by expanding state powers over digital content. Article 25 allows for court-ordered content removal or access bans to be issued within 24 hours, without a detailed examination, if the violation is “evident at first glance.” Given Türkiye’s well-documented record of arbitrary digital censorship, this provision is likely to further enable the suppression of dissent and independent journalism. Additionally, it mandates bandwidth throttling (between 50% and 90%) for social media platforms that fail to comply with removal orders. This punitive measure threatens to significantly restrict access to online spaces where civil society

and youth groups communicate, organise, and disseminate information. The proposed enforcement mechanisms represent a comprehensive effort to place digital platforms under state control, undermining transparency, pluralism, and the public's right to access information. Similar to Articles 13 and 14, this article was also retracted. Nevertheless, it again highlights the political stance of the Government of Türkiye concerning association within the digital realm.

51. These amendments, by design and effect, disproportionately target youth who often rely on street protest and digital mobilisation as their principal tools of democratic engagement. The legislation reframes protest as a matter of security and penal enforcement, rather than a constitutional right, reflecting a dangerous shift in Türkiye's legal architecture.
52. While Türkiye has not officially passed a "foreign agents law," the government has proposed to do so and increasingly adopted similar rhetoric and investigatory practices. Civil society organisations receiving foreign funding are subject to intensified audits, reputational attacks, and insinuations of disloyalty or subversion. Legislative proposals introduced in 2024 have proposed labelling foreign-funded NGOs as potential "national security risks".
53. This narrative aligns with global trends of securitising civil society, but in Türkiye it particularly endangers youth organisations involved in transnational advocacy, such as climate justice, LGBTI+ rights, and anti-discrimination work. Some organisations have been forced to return donor funding or cancel international partnerships to avoid being targeted.
54. University campuses in Türkiye, once considered spaces of political expression and self-governance, have been systematically brought under centralised control. The appointment of trustee rectors by the President, bypassing academic election mechanisms, represents one of the most significant rollbacks in institutional autonomy in Türkiye's recent history. This practice, which became standard following the 2016 state of emergency, has now been fully institutionalised: as of 2025, none of the 129 state universities operate under an elected rector .
55. The appointment process lacks transparency, accountability, or meaningful consultation with academic staff or student bodies. This centralisation has directly undermined the ability of universities to act as platforms for youth engagement, critical thought, and dissent. In many universities, democratic student organisations have been banned, suspended, or denied registration, especially those focusing on LGBTI+ rights, minority issues, or academic freedoms .
56. Campus-based repression has intensified alongside legal developments. Students participating in peaceful protests against appointed rectors—such as at Boğaziçi,

Hacettepe, ODTÜ, Marmara, and Dokuz Eylül—have been met with disciplinary investigations, detentions, and legal charges. Hundreds of students faced investigations in the aftermath of demonstrations at Yıldız Teknik University and Hacettepe alone in 2025, with charges ranging from “public disturbance” to “damage to public property” simply for engaging in peaceful assembly .

57. In parallel, the closure of Gender Equality Units (CİTÖK) at several universities, and the imposition of politically compliant administrative staff, has further restricted efforts to create safe, inclusive, and democratic academic environments. These policies are not only suppressing youth’s right to organise, but also represent an ideological restructuring of higher education, prioritising loyalty to the state over academic merit or civic responsibility.
58. These developments reflect a broader authoritarian trajectory in which youth organising in higher education is viewed as a threat, and where universities are transformed from autonomous institutions into instruments of state surveillance and ideological control.

Youth Resistance and Strategic Adaptations

59. Despite the deepening democratic crisis and intensifying repression in Türkiye, youth have not withdrawn from political life. On the contrary, the post-March 2025 period has seen the emergence of a renewed culture of resistance, characterised by decentralised organising, adaptive mobilisation tactics, and creative forms of solidarity. These developments underscore young people’s commitment to defending civic space, even as traditional avenues for participation are systematically closed off.
60. Following the nationwide youth protests triggered by the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu and the broader crackdown on civil liberties, young people across Türkiye have increasingly shifted their organising strategies to informal, decentralised, and locally embedded structures. This has allowed them to bypass surveillance, maintain agility, and build trust-based solidarity networks within neighbourhoods, dormitories, and online communities.
61. In cities where public gatherings are banned or violently dispersed, students have convened “quiet boycotts” of university dining halls and classes, effectively creating non-visible protests that evade immediate police intervention while maintaining political pressure. This tactic has proven particularly useful in highly militarised campuses where even small gatherings are subjected to criminal scrutiny.
62. In the face of escalating legal risks, youth have also embraced symbolic protest as a form of low-risk but high-impact resistance. Common tactics include:

- a. Leaving empty shoes and/or personal belonging in central squares and classes to represent detained students,
 - b. Posting encrypted solidarity messages using local slang to evade digital censors,
 - c. Circulating protest music, poetry, and visual art that embed dissent into cultural expression.
63. These symbolic gestures—often disseminated through encrypted or decentralised messaging channels—reclaim public imagination and create a shared political culture of resistance, even when physical assembly is impossible.
64. As institutional protections have collapsed, youth organisations have stepped into the breach, establishing mutual aid systems and rapid legal response networks. Following the March 2025 protests, informal legal aid circles composed of law students, young lawyers, and human rights defenders coordinated the documentation of rights violations, provision of legal counsel, and monitoring of court hearings for detained protesters .
65. In parallel, groups have established:
- a. Psychological support hotlines for students experiencing trauma,
 - b. Emergency funds to support those expelled from state dormitories,
 - c. Housing cooperatives for displaced activists and students.
66. These initiatives not only mitigate the risks of state repression but also embody generative politics, affirming care and community as tools of resistance.
67. Faced with the collapse of domestic legal remedies, youth-led groups have increasingly turned to transnational advocacy, submitting shadow reports, participating in EU and UN mechanisms, and forming alliances with diaspora organisations. For instance, GoFor’s submission to the UPR and ICCPR cycles, and advocacy through the European Youth Forum have allowed youth organisations to internationalise their struggle, elevating local violations to the global stage .
68. This strategy has proven critical in preserving civic space, as international pressure remains one of the few viable deterrents to unchecked repression. It has also enabled young people to access solidarity, training, and support networks that would otherwise be unavailable under domestic constraints.

Recommendations and Pathways Forward

69. The experience of youth in Türkiye in 2025 offers a stark warning about the consequences of civic space erosion—but also a roadmap for resistance and renewal. Informed by the lived realities of youth organisations, students, and activists, this section outlines recommendations for national, regional, and international actors committed to upholding the rights to freedom of assembly and association.

For the Government of Türkiye:

70. End criminalisation of peaceful protest and repeal punitive legislative proposals, such as the May 2025 Criminal Enforcement Bill. Laws that impose additional sentences on protest participation must be withdrawn immediately to ensure alignment with international human rights standards.
71. Restore institutional autonomy in universities, including reinstating elected rectorate systems, recognising student clubs without political discrimination, and ensuring campuses are safe spaces for democratic engagement.
72. Cease retaliatory practices such as revoking student housing, dormitory rights, or social assistance due to protest participation or dissenting views.
73. Ensure access to public funding for youth-led civil society without political interference, and end the use of administrative and financial audits as tools of suppression.
74. A national standard for the establishment of student societies should be specified, and this standard should not be more difficult than that for founding a non-governmental organisation.
75. Current practices that penalise the exercise of freedom of association via withholding of scholarships, expulsion from dormitories and suspension from education should be abandoned and prohibited by law.
76. The regulations governing associations should be rewritten with a perspective that facilitates and protects their activities rather than restricting them. The requirement for associations to report their members should be abolished, and the protection of personal data should be ensured.
77. Practices that enable the public institutions to treat associations unequally, such as the permission to collect aid or public benefit association status, should be revised on an equitable basis.
78. The mentality of criminalising receiving funds from abroad should be abandoned, and inspection mechanisms should be formed to ensure fair distribution of public

resources to NGOs. The Law no. 7262²⁹ should be revised in consultation with civil society.

79. The definition of civil society should be expanded in legislation, in a manner to enable civil initiatives and platforms to be recognized.

For international donors and development agencies:

80. Rebuild sustainable financial support mechanisms for youth civil society, with multi-year, core, and flexible funding options that reach beyond large NGOs to grassroots and informal youth groups.
81. Avoid the securitisation of aid by ensuring funding is not conditional on depoliticisation or state approval, and prioritise local ownership and co-designed programme structures.
82. Support regional protection mechanisms for young human rights defenders, including emergency relocation, legal assistance, and digital security infrastructure.
83. Fund transnational advocacy and watchdog functions that enable youth organisations to participate in UN, EU, and international policy spaces.

For the UN System and the Special Rapporteur:

84. The UN system should initiate the creation of a Universal Youth Rights Convention that explicitly recognises freedom of peaceful assembly and association as a fundamental right of young people. Existing international frameworks fall short of protecting youth civic space, especially for those aged 18–35. There is currently no international covenant dedicated to youth rights—a critical gap in the global human rights framework. While youth rights are human rights, systematic barriers prevent young people from fully exercising their fundamental freedoms, including assembly and association. A Universal Youth Rights Convention is urgently needed to recognise and protect these rights as uniquely and structurally challenged. A dedicated convention would close this normative gap and affirm young people as full rights-holders in democratic life.
85. Recognise youth as a specific group at heightened risk under closing civic space conditions and adopt targeted guidance on how States should protect the rights of assembly and association for young people.

²⁹ Prevention of Financing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, #7262. (2020). [https://ticaret.gov.tr/data/6050a37613b87603ac1c4f42/Rehber%20\(%C4%B0ngilizce\).pdf](https://ticaret.gov.tr/data/6050a37613b87603ac1c4f42/Rehber%20(%C4%B0ngilizce).pdf)

86. Promote a global agenda for youth civic space resilience, ensuring that the 2030 Agenda, climate commitments, and peacebuilding frameworks all integrate the protection of these freedoms as cross-cutting principles.
87. Develop and disseminate best practices for decentralised and informal organising, including protection strategies and institutional engagement pathways for youth-led actors operating outside traditional NGO models.

Conclusion

88. Despite escalating repression, the youth of Türkiye have shown extraordinary determination in defending democratic values and human rights. Their response to the shrinking civic space—through informal networks, decentralised mobilisation, mutual aid structures, and transnational advocacy—reflects not only a survival strategy but a bold reimaging of civic engagement under authoritarian constraint.
89. In a context where institutional pathways are deliberately obstructed, young people continue to forge new forms of political participation. Legal aid circles formed by students, encrypted digital platforms enabling coordinated resistance, and acts of transnational solidarity with global civil society actors have laid the groundwork for a renewed civic culture in Türkiye—one rooted in dignity, justice, and collective care.
90. These efforts must not be viewed in isolation. The case of Türkiye is emblematic of broader global trends in which the rights to freedom of assembly and association are increasingly under threat. As such, international actors—particularly donors, multilateral bodies, and human rights mechanisms—must not only act to shield and support youth movements in Türkiye, but also learn from their innovative resistance. The defence of democratic space is not solely a matter of policy but of shared global responsibility.
91. At this critical juncture, safeguarding the freedom to assemble, associate, and dissent is essential not only for the future of Türkiye's youth, but for the preservation of democratic principles worldwide.

