The Prospects of Civic Alliance: New Civic Activists Acting Together with Civil Society Organizations

A new form of civic activism is taking root in many countries, which diverge from traditional civic actors with their structural and membership patterns. This article focuses on the relationship between the new and the traditional civic actors in Turkey, investigates the alliances established between them and discusses how these alliances contribute to civic activism. The discussions in this article are informed by existing conceptual debate in the literature on alliances. This article contributes to this literature by showing how the respective strengths of the new and the traditional activists complement each other. New civic activists’ closer ties to grassroots and their flexible organizational structure allow for quick reaction, more visibility and legitimacy. Traditional civic actors complement this with their stable structure that enables them to sustain their campaigns, engage in and follow up the legal struggles and act as a transmission belt to relations with public institutions and governance.

Keywords: civic activism; civil society organizations; alliances; Turkey; Gezi protests

# Introduction

Profound changes are underway in civil society across the world. Scholars and practitioners talk about new forms of civic activism in recent years (Youngs 2017). During the last decade, on the one hand, locally organized community-level groups and forums sprout up everywhere, but they often escape the researchers’ attention. There is now a growing debate on the nature, extent and motives of these groups. On the other hand, there are large-scale protest movements mobilizing thousands and sometimes even millions of people in many countries. Some of them are short-lived, while others last longer (Clemens 2013; Mason 2013; Krastev 2014).

In parallel with these developments, significant changes are underway within Turkish civil society as well. Since earlier this decade, a burgeoning group of activists reinvigorated the civic sphere in Turkey. These groups have become more visible during and after the Gezi protests in 2013. Although activists have scaled back their protests dramatically lately, they still have a potential of gaining ground on the civil society sphere. This article focuses on these groups in Turkey and refers to them as new civic activists. What makes these civic activists “new” is their diffuse and flexible organizational and membership structure. They are also new in their ability to work on multiple, diverse issues at the same time with a focus on very local and specific problems. In a way, they link together different networks. Traditional civic actor is used as an overarching term to denote those established organizations recognized and commonly referred to as a civil society organization. In the Turkish context, NGOs, associations, unions, chambers are traditional civic actors.

This article focuses on the relationship between the new and the traditional civic actors. It investigates the alliances established between these two groups and discusses what impact these alliances produce. In doing so, this article achieves two things. First, despite that new civic activism developed as distinct from traditional civic actors, the article shows that the two frequently enter into an alliance. Second, these alliances between the new and the traditional civic actors reveal promising prospects. As the below examples and their discussion reveal, their respective strengths complement each other and enable them to work together in a way benefiting all sides. Also, given cooperation in civil society is not common in Turkey, these alliances have the potential to bring great impact in strengthening Turkish civil society.

Alliances and alliance formation are not new in the literature. Various studies brought up the fields of interaction in social movements (Kriesi 1989b, 1991; Klandermans 1980b, 1990). Some examined how these alliances provided resources, created opportunities and in this way shaped their behavior (Della Porta and Rucht 1995). Others (Klandermans 1993; Gerhards and Rucht 1992) looked into how this multiorganizational field mobilized people and supported the movement. This article examines the alliance formation between the new and the traditional civic actors in the light of the existing conceptual debate in the literature.

Studying these activists’ alliances is important for several reasons. First, there is now an ample literature on the Gezi protests. Several scholars studied civic actors that took part in the protests, their claims as well as different forms of protest they employed along with varying approaches (see for instance several chapters in Özkırımlı 2014; Farro and Demirhisar 2014; Marchetti and Kaya 2014; Yörük and Yüksel 2014; Budak and Watts 2015; Abbas and Yiğit 2015; Önal 2016; Gümüş 2017; Derman 2017). However, studies focusing on new civic activists in the post-Gezi period have been far more limited. The few studies examining new civic activists in the longer run analysed the impact of the Gezi protests on these groups’ practices, activities and values (Bee and Chrona 2017) and this new activism’s relation to active citizenship and participation (Bee and Kaya 2017a, 2017b). This article takes a different angle. It looks at new civic activists’ relations with other civic actors and asks if and how these different actors complement one another. Second, cooperation among civic actors is limited in Turkey (YADA Foundation 2014, 2015). Examining the cooperation, coalition and even interaction among different civic actors is interesting in understanding the dynamics of Turkish civil society. This subject is all the more relevant in the ever closing civic space in Turkey, where the government delegitimizes those groups challenging public policies and practices. Third, this study adds a new dimension to earlier work on alliances by examining the coalition work among groups with distinctive structural and organizational patterns.

Following this Introduction, this article is divided into six main sections. Section one gives an overview on the background of social mobilization in Turkey. Section two defines and discusses new civic activism, particularly in the context of the Gezi protests in Turkey. The next section investigates the literature on alliances and alliance formation as understood and operationalized in this article. Section four explains the methodology and case selection of this study. Section five provides an overview of several alliances between the new and the traditional civic activists, while the next section discusses why these alliances matter in general for activism and in particular for these new activists in Turkey. The concluding section reprises the main argument in the light of the perspective offered in prior sections and with special attention to insights relevant for its implications.

# New Social Movements in Turkey

Mass mobilization of the workers and university students during the 1960s and 1970s came to an abrupt end with the coup in 1980. Although the military rule and the ensuing governments tried to maintain strict control over Turkey’s associational life, new movements soon began to emerge. It was the changing outlook of Turkey’s political and social landscape during the 1980s and 1990s that shaped these new movements.

In the early 1980s, Turkey started employing liberal economic policies, while adopting conservative policies in political and social spheres. In the absence of umbrella ideologies of the previous decades such as Marxism and ultra-nationalism, the tension between the liberal and the conservative prompted a new wave of movements (Şimşek 2004, p. 112). In addition, in the 1980s, the understanding of modernity started to change. The rise of new and in particular Islamic actors with different societal visions and political discourses challenged the earlier understanding that considered the secular-rational thinking as the only source of modernity (Keyman and İçduygu 2003, pp. 222-3).

As a result of these changes, starting in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, religious and identity politics expanded in Turkey with visible repercussions in civic activism. The rise of religiously motivated rights movements and organizations are important in this respect. In the 1990s, veiled girls were not allowed to enter classes. In addition, the Higher Education Council’s regulation made it difficult to enroll higher education programmes that did not coincide with the students’ secondary school type. This regulation was especially troubling for graduates of religiously oriented vocational high schools (*İmam Hatips*) unless they applied to theology departments of the universities. As the legal processes were exhausted, these two issues converged and led to mass protests (Kalaycıoğlu 2002, 263-264). During this period, religiously oriented advocacy groups such as Women’s Rights against Discrimination Association (AK-DER) and The Association for Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed (MAZLUMDER) emerged as well.

The same period also has witnessed the rise of identity politics, where several new Kurdish groups were established. Some advocated civil rights abuses, while others focused on cultural issues. In 1995, the families of the forcibly disappeared people in the wake of the military coup in 1980 and during the war against Kurdish separatists in the 1990s started gathering in Istanbul’s Galatasaray Square. “Saturday Mothers”, as they come to be known, were joined by human rights activists in their sit-down protests, which became one of the longest-running protests in Turkey.

Women’s movement was one of the first to exert its presence in the public sphere after the coup in 1980. They held a conference on women’s problems in Istanbul in 1982, formed a study group called Women’s Circle in 1984 and established a major campaign to force the government to ratify the UN Convention on Elimination of All Kinds of Discrimination against Women, and nearly 3000 people demonstrated against battering women the following year. Starting in the late 1980s, women’s movement has diversified and grown stronger (Şimşek 2004, p. 125-126). Apart from these, other issues including environmental protection and animal rights were also politicized and became part of Turkey’s new social movements. Until recently, contemporary social mobilization in Turkey had been characterized largely by the social movements of this period.

# New Civic Activism

A new form of civic activism is taking root in many countries stretching from Asia to Latin America, from Africa to Europe. In the case of Turkey, civic activism has taken an unexpected turn with the Gezi Protests in 2013. **Initially, the Gezi protests started with a group of activists’ sit-in protest against the government’s urban development plan of Gezi Park in Taksim, one of the few green areas left at the heart of Istanbul. When this resistance was violently repressed by security forces, it quickly turned into a huge wave of protests including around three million people in almost all provinces in Turkey for 18 days.**

Even during the Gezi protests, new forms of organizing were experienced by the activists. One example is the local forums (public assemblies). In the beginning, these forums were established towards the end of the protests inside the Gezi Park to discuss how to proceed. There were 5 or 6 different forums in the Gezi Park and they were meant to create an inclusive and participatory structure for decision making. Once the protests in Istanbul (as in elsewhere) ended and the Gezi Park was shut down to protestors, the forums were scattered around Istanbul as the great size of the city made it difficult to meet in one spot. Initially, these forums sustained for a period with varying size and agendas. While some may have voiced more ambitious aims like being more active in the upcoming local elections, soon various participants conceded the value of focusing on local issues. The forums’ activities ranged from the fight against urban renewal plans to participation at municipality’s assembly meetings. As these local forums are a by-product of the protests against the Gezi Park’s renewal plans, forums’ members are inclined to focus on urban renewal issues. However, urban renewal plans have become of interest to many other new civic activist groups. This is not only because of the government’s growing number of urban renewal plans and their often contested nature, but also these plans have a direct and tangible impact on the locals that often make up the new civic activists. This is not to suggest that new civic activism is confined to urban renewal plans. These groups also mobilize around other issues including local environmental problems or establish local self-help platforms.

Although the number of local forums’ participants eventually shrank, cooperation with local civil society organizations and platforms enabled them a wider reach. Eventually, these forums either merged with other new civic activists or faded away. With their horizontal, equal and direct relations, these forums became an attempt for an elaborative public sphere and making citizen participation possible especially for young people who feel singled out of the system (Zihnioğlu 2017, p. 45). Traditional organizations with theirhierarchical and bureaucratized structure not being attractive models, young activists, in a way were experiencingnon-traditional citizen participation mechanism (Özçetin and Özer 2015, p. 9). Therefore, the Gezi protests not only rendered new civic activists more visible but also acted as a catalyst for civic activism.

This new activism is still an evolving phenomenon in Turkey and it is difficult to draw boundaries of its nature and extent. It includes diverse groups with different demands. Still, a number of commonalities characterize new civic activists.

New civic activists work in loose networks. This is not to suggest they are unorganized groupings since some of them include different forms of organization and structure. Most have regular meetings and some even develop strategies to achieve their overall aims. For instance, Northern Forests Defense devises different action plans for its protests against thermal power plants or quarries planned to be built in the villages of Istanbul’s Silivri district. All these action plans are then discussed as part of a larger action plan for Silivri. However, they are diffuse and flexible in their structures and memberships. This is partly because they regard the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures of traditional organizations as millstones and administratively burdensome. Such loose structures are also a practical way –for especially protest movements– to circumvent the government’s attempt to control their activities and trace members (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2013; Youngs 2017; Zihnioglu 2017).

The focus on an informal network of interactions also characterizes social movements (Diani 1992). However, I use the term “civic activism” because there is much in this new activism that sets it apart from the social movements. For one, they have a different way of doing politics (Clemens 2013). Unlike social movements, which are characterized by sustained efforts to make collective claims on authorities (Tilly 2004, p. 3), the new civic activists rarely put forward specific policies or follow coherent policy messages. They organize and join in ad hoc campaigns without clear and long-term goals (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2013). In a way, it is a process where participants have an “experience of collective deliberation” (Clemens 2013, p. 113). For this, the new activism is sometimes criticized for not going beyond grievance-based politics and failing to deliver concrete results (Beaumont 2013).

More distinctively, they often engage in multiple issues and link together different networks. In addition, new civic activists tend to focus on local issues. This does not mean, however, they are indifferent to macro issues. They rather address macro problems through more specific issues. For instance, several local protests against mining operations in Turkey implicate a reaction to government’s environmental policies that put economic interests ahead of environmental concerns and local’s livelihood. It is a reaction “against an urbanism that puts the interests of capital over the interests of ordinary inhabitants” (Kuyumlu 2013, p. 275). In that sense, the activists more broadly seek a more transparent government, more roles for civil society and more respect for human rights (Önal 2016, p. 20), while making their claims through specific, local issues.

Even if the new civic activists differ from traditional actors of civil society (such as non-governmental organizations, unions, associations), they frequently enter into alliances with them. This article focuses on new civic activists’ alliances with other civil society actors.

# Opportunity Structures and Alliance Formation in Civic Activism

When and why movements succeed (or fail) has been a recurrent theme that puzzled students of collective action. Several studies probed movement effectiveness referring to a “political opportunity structure”. The concept of political opportunity structure was introduced by Eisinger (1973) to explain variations across the US in protest behavior and analyze the causes of their effectiveness. Tilly (1978), later conceptualized political opportunities in a comprehensive model. Tilly’s model included interests, organization, mobilization, collective action and opportunity as its main components. Others (Tarrow 1983; Kitschelt 1986; Meyer 2004) elaborated further the definition of political opportunity. Today, studies focus on the openness of a political system, stability of political alignments, availability of or potential strategic alliance partners as their independent variables. Broadly, political opportunity comes to “refer to those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively” (Giugni 2009, p.361). More recently, scholars attempted at nuancing this broad understanding and highlighted specific opportunities in certain areas or for certain movements are also possible (Berclaz and Giugni 2005).

Political opportunity theory provides a variety of variables to analyze movement effectiveness as looking at grievances alone does not suffice. It enables us to examine new actors such as those referred to in this article as new civic activists, how they play out in the movements and whether they further or hinder movement effectiveness. A major problem with such broad set of variables is that the notion of political opportunity becomes “a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment” (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275). The abundance of factors and dynamics hinders establishing a causal relationship between the movement and its social and political environment. This article overcomes this challenge by focusing only on one intervening variable, namely the alliance systems.

This article also loosely draws on resource mobilization theory, which considers social movements as rational organizations that employ best available strategies and employ resources to mobilize their followers and achieve their goals (Oberschall 1973, Gamson 1975, McCarthy and Zald 1977). This theory’s assumptions, in particular, those on the availability of opportunities and resources, are useful in analyzing civic alliance between the new and traditional civic actors in Turkey.

Alliances make an important variable because large-scale movements are rarely staged by a single group. On the contrary, earlier studies established that multiple groups representing different sectors of society take part in the efforts to these movements (Chang 2008; Rucht 2004; Almeida 2005; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005). As Chang noted, “with the diversification of social groups participating in a movement comes the potential for alliances between them” (2008, p. 657).

Allies and the formation of alliances is a much-studied topic. Various scholars focused on alliances formed with different types of NGOs and in different country contexts. These studies explored the drivers (Moshtari and Gonçalves 2017), limits and possibilities (Roca 2007), outcomes (Witesman and Heiss 2017) and how the outcomes relate to the process itself (Dong et. al 2018). Alliances are equally common within social movements literature. The availability of potential allies is included in Tarrow’s (1983, p. 28) earlier definition of political opportunity structure. Various studies point to the fields of interaction in social movements (Kriesi 1989b, 1991; Klandermans 1980b, 1990). Della Porta and Rucht conceptualize this interaction as an “alliance system”, which is composed of a changing set of actors that support a social movement (1995, p. 235). In a similar vein, Klandermans, too, points out that social movements work within the context of multiorganizational fields that “are not neutral sets of organizations but contain an alliance system consisting of groups and organizations that support the movement organization” (1993, p. 286).

Other studies discuss the importance of these alliances for the success of the movements (Shaffer 2000; McCammon and Campbell 2002; Van Dyke 2003). These alliances among different social groups can provide a leverage, motivate the protest events, increase the resources and facilitate the frame development. In doing so, they can contribute to the vitality of the movement (Chang 2008, p. 657). For Della Porta and Rucht, the alliance system, among other things, provides resources, creates political opportunities for social movements and in this way, shape their behavior (1995, p. 235). In addition, Gerhards and Rucht underline the importance of alliances as an element that facilitates social movement mobilization (1992, p. 557). Thus, the support of other groups and organizations is expected to help the ability of social movements to mobilize people (Saxonberg 2013, p. 101). A more recent study on the protests in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan found much crossover and collaboration between new civic activists and NGOs, where the boundaries between the two are sometimes blurred. Authors note that the activists rely on NGOs for technical support, expertise and they sometimes even work for NGOs. In return, NGOs’ staff support and participate in protests and direct actions to escape what they regard as constraints of their organizations (Glasius and Ishkanian 2014, p. 2623).

The vast array of studies on alliance formation among social groups in movements provide different conceptualizations and operationalization of alliances. This is also due to the variety of alliances between different groups in movements. Some of the coalition work among these groups are relatively “tight” and have formal interorganizational linkages. Some others exhibit more “loose” alliances. Loose alliances are limited to a recognition of one another’s actions and offering moral and other support (Chang 2008, p. 661). This article adopts Rucht’s definition that conceptualizes alliances in this latter sense. According to Rucht, “as long as these parts [different groups] deliberately seek to support each other, they form an alliance within or as a social movement” (2002, p. 202). Accordingly, for this article, an alliance is a relationship among different civil society actors to achieve a common purpose, whether or not they have an explicit agreement among themselves. Alliances do not necessarily have a stable composition, in other words, different actors may join or leave the alliance. This loose definition of alliance formation is appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, such a broad definition captures the wide range of coalition work. Second, as outlined in the Introduction of this article, new civic activists themselves are organized in loose networks with flexible structures. It would be futile to look for tight alliances with formal organizations formed by these new activists. Accordingly, this article investigates the role and impact of alliances on new civic activists.

New civic activists denote both the individual activists and the groups they organized for a certain cause. For the purposes of this article, I adopt the latter use. I will specify it when referring to individual activists.

# Methodology and Case Selection

This article explores civic alliances established against four cases: mining activities in Cerattepe, expropriation of an olive grove in Yırca, plans to demolish Emek Theatre and plans to build a new hospital in Bakırköy. All four cases have one commonality – extensive and sustained mobilization. Although there are numerous new civic activists of different size, scope and extent, their work and campaign have become less visible due to Turkey’s deteriorating political and legal circumstances. Those that cannot have an extensive outreach and sustain their mobilization receive limited or no media coverage, which makes it impossible to track the alliances. In addition, looking at alliances around bigger and longer campaigns allows for a better understanding of their impact.

The cases show diversity in certain respects. Cerattepe and Yırca had environmental claims, while Emek Theatre and Bakırköy hospital were against urban development plans. New civic activism is by no means limited to protests against urban development plans and environmental claims. However, there have been many new urban renewal plans and public projects raising environmental concerns. Many of these are legally contested. In addition, these projects have a direct and tangible impact on the locals that often make up the core of new civic activists. Therefore, these two issues are the most common ones leading to larger and bigger campaigns among new civic activists.

The selected cases have distinct features rendering them interesting and valuable for the purposes of this article. First, Cerattepe has one of the longest histories among Turkey’s social mobilizations, where mining plans go back to 1990s and the first reactions to the early 2000s. The Cerattepe case is interesting for it shows how new civic activists can form alliances with groups that had been mobilizing around a cause for nearly the past two decades. Second, the Yırca case, where activists and civil society organizations protested against the expropriation plan of an olive grove to build a power plant, on the other hand, was relatively small. What makes this case interesting is that the civic alliance sustained for the legal battle even after the destruction of the grove. Third, the replacement of Emek Theatre with a shopping and entertainment complex has also entailed prolonged reactions spanning from 2006 until 2014. More interestingly, despite the issue’s locality, especially the final years of the campaign saw protests bringing thousands of people and succeeded in directing the public’s attention to the issue. Fourth and finally, the campaigns against the building of a new hospital in place of an existing psychiatric hospital in Bakırköy, Istanbul is an interesting case as the alliance comprised of diverse groups. The new and traditional actors included city planners, doctors, environmentalists, archaeologists as well as the local community. This shows us that civic alliances can establish horizontal networks within civil society. This is also a relatively new case and the protests have been taking place against the backdrop deteriorating civic space.

I adopted a three-level research to explore these cases. First, I reviewed the participating organizations’ and new civic activists’ web sites to collect any relevant background information on the alliances possible. Second, I supplemented this with the information in Turkish newspapers. I screened written and online press. Third, in certain instances when details were not present or conflicting in the media, I interviewed relevant organizations or civic activists. This allowed me to not only follow-up on the details but also gain further insight into the campaigns, alliances and its members.

As a researcher, I have not been part of any of the cases as an activist. However,

I also interviewed several new civic activists and attended their meetings. These were useful to get a better understanding of how new civic activists function and in particular how they differ from traditional civic actors. Before I held the interviews and attended meetings, I informed the activists that the data obtained would be used for academic publications. I do not think my presence as an “outsider” led the activists to alter their discourse or behavior because new civic activists are loose networks with no definite set of members. Therefore, in principle their meetings are open to the public and although not frequent in every group, newcomers and one-offs are welcomed.

# Alliance Formation in Practice: Examples from Turkey

The above overview of new civic activists shows how this new activism developed as distinct from traditional forms of civil society organizations. However, this is not to suggest that new civic activists challenge these organization. Nor other civic actors consider new civic activists illegitimate and reject them altogether. The activists on either side should not be considered as against one another. Rather, they can establish and sustain long-term cooperation on various issues. Examples of such cooperation are numerous. But cooperation is more striking in major cases of new civic activist protest. Public attention to such issues arises usually with the eruption of mass protests. However, while mass protests may be spontaneous, it may also be part of a long-term joint effort of both new and traditional civic activist groups.

Alliances were most visible during the initial years following the Gezi protests. This is first because the positive atmosphere after the Gezi protests prevailed for another couple of years. At the same time, although not welcoming, political environment nonetheless allowed for activists and their campaigns to a certain extent.

One major campaign that peaked during these years and that sets a good example of an alliance among civic actors has revolved around the anti-mining activities in Cerattepe. Cerattepe is located in Turkey’s Black Sea province of Artvin and hosts a vast forest reserve. The plans for the destruction of the forest in Cerattepe to open a mine goes back to 1990s. And the first reactions against the mining plans emerged in the early 2000s. Initially, the reactions were confined to a small number of locals and local civil society organizations. The Environmental Assessment of the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources in 2012 gave a green light to the project and this became the turning point for the activists. Following this assessment, Cerattepe began attracting increasing attention of the activists and various civil society organizations. First, Green Artvin Association commenced a legal action. The legal struggle resulted in first a stay of execution and later an annulment decision in 2014. However, the mining contractor made minor changes in its projects and soon secured another Positive Environmental Assessment. In the meantime, the contractor started preparations for exploration and extraction. This led to major protests in Cerattepe. The protests soon spilled over to neighboring provinces and later in Turkey’s major cities. These largely episodic protests took place between June 2015 and February 2016. During these protests, activists, at times reaching thousands, joined local people. Civil society organizations filed another annulment action against the new Positive Assessment (Aslan 2016). In the end, the government stepped in to find a resolution. Then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu first met the local representatives and some of the civic actors. Davutoğlu then announced the suspension of all mining activities in Cerattepe until the lawsuit is concluded (Leverink 2016). In the summer of 2017, however, the Council of State approved the administrative court’s decision that allowed for the mining.

New civic activists enter into alliances with civil society actors for less visible issues and much smaller campaigns as well. A good example of this is the campaigns against the destruction of an olive grove to build a power plant in a small village. The campaign brought activists and various civil society organizations together to support the villagers. In 2014, the cabinet took a rapid expropriation decision of an olive grove in Yırca village in the western Turkish province of Manisa. Immediately after, the contractor company chopped down some six thousand olive trees overnight. New civic activists joined the villagers in their campaign against the destruction of the grove and the government decision. The decision was later dismissed by the Council of State and the government suspended the project. On the one hand, the protests continued. On the other hand, several civil society organizations took up a legal action and followed up the judicial process. Chamber of Chemical Engineers and Chamber of Environmental Engineers along with environmental platforms have been active in this process. They filed an annulment action against the Positive Environmental Impact Assessment Decision. While the olive grove had been lost, they won the legal battle. They succeeded in reversing the Decision and prevented the building of the power plant (Daloğlu 2014; Birgün 2015).

New civic activists and their alliances are not confined to environmental issues. The campaign against plans to demolish the historic Emek Theater in Istanbul to replace it with a shopping and entertainment complex is a good example of this. These campaigns brought together various new and traditional civic actors from different working areas. The Emek Theater, which had been publicly owned, was leased to a private developer back in 1992 (Özyurt 2013). What sparked the initial wave of reaction was the Council of Ministers’ decision in 2006 that opened the way for its demolishment (Emek is Ours Initiative 2016). Following this, on the one hand, Istanbul branch of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects initiated a legal action. Their request in 2009 for a stay of execution was approved in 2010, but reversed in 2011 in contradiction with the majority opinion of experts. Experts were appointed by the court.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Union’s subsequent legal challenge resulted as late as December 2014 reaffirming the stay of execution decision. However, this decision came in too late. The company had received the construction permit from the municipality in 2013 and demolished the theatre soon after. The company went ahead and completed the complex in late 2016 (Sözcü 2015). Civic actors may not have achieved their desired outcome, but they succeeded in directing the public’s attention to this issue. From when Emek Theatre closed down in 2009 until it was demolished in 2013 (and even stretching into 2014), there have been numerous mass protests. On the one hand, professional organizations and associations of the cinema industry were active during these protests. On the other hand, new civic activists and other civic groups that represented broader agendas have been active. These groups at times brought thousands of protesters on site (Oda TV 2014).

The opening produced by the Gezi protests and the promising trend of new civic activism thereafter continued only briefly. Soon after, both the legal and political environment for civic activism deteriorated. Recently, much of civic activism in Turkey is crippled but different protests in 2017 suggest that the potentials for this new activism and their alliances are still alive.

For instance, throughout 2017 there were several campaigns against the plans to build a new hospital in place of an existing psychiatric hospital in the Bakırköy district of Istanbul. The campaigns brought various groups including city planners, doctors, environmentalists, archaeologists as well as the local community. They included new and traditional civic actors alike. The new plan does not protect the existing hospital’s plan and opens up a large part of the green spaces (the land with 17 thousand trees) for construction. This plan incited anger among environmentalists, city planners as well as the local people and led to various forms of protests. In addition, the proposed hospital angered the doctors as well because the new hospital will be a public-private joint venture replacing the public one. Especially during the summer and fall of 2017, several demonstrations were staged by local activist groups together with chambers, unions, associations and opposition party members. The protests included new civic activists like Istanbul City Defence and Bakırköy City Defence. The Green and Left Future Party as well as members of Parliament from the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and People’s Democracy Party (HDP) also joined the protests (Bakırköy Daily 2017). The protestors also collected 30 thousand petitions that called for the annulment of the construction plan (Tarcan 2017).

# Why Alliances Matter

Much focus on new civic activism has been on its features separating it from the traditional activism of civil society organizations. The above examples show that, more often than not, new and traditional civic actors enter into alliances in pursuit of the same cause. The composition, scope and duration of these alliances and the issues that bring them together vary. Yet, in each case, both new and traditional civic actors have shown a capacity to sustain the alliance. The important question is what purposes these alliances serve. In other words, why do these alliances matter?

The examples above show that new civic activists and traditional civic actors may contribute to addressing the same problem in their own way. The difference in their approaches is mainly a result of their distinctive strengths and weaknesses. Their respective strengths and weaknesses stem from their diverging structure and organization.

For instance, because new civic activists tend to focus on local and specific issues, they can spot the problems more easily. In major controversial issues similar to Cerattepe, one may not need the locals to spot the problem. However, many other issues are a lot smaller in scale, but no less important to the locals affected by them. With their flexible structure, they can also respond to these problems more quickly. Their focus on local issues allows new civic activists to work more closely with local people and incorporate local people’s concerns to their agenda and campaigns. In return, this brings more legitimacy to new activists in the eyes of the public at large to their campaigns.

In addition, new civic activists’ focus may have local substance, but the protests go beyond the local scale. In a way, the issues are local, but the protests are not. As in the examples above, the reactions are partly driven by indigenous (environmental, urban, cultural etc.) concerns. But at the same time, from the prism of these local problems, these activists protests broader implications of that problem on governance. They protest being excluded from policy-making, they challenge the political and economic interests. By then, these could no longer be considered local issues. For this very reason, their calls resonate with other people and their reactions spill over to regional and sometimes even to national scale. Their effective use of social media also contributes to new activists’ capacity to attract the attention of a larger public. The public’s growing attention and participation, in turn, draws the media’s interest. In a nutshell, new civic activists can make the problem and their action more visible.

Bureaucracy in traditional civic actors may absorb the intensity of the initial reaction and lose its strength until they take an action. Because these new activists are less bureaucratized and more flexible in their actions, they are quick to react and stage a protest against what they regard as a problem. Therefore, the involvement of new civic activists has great potential to bring a strong push to the initial reaction.

On the other hand, what makes new civic activism strong restricts its power for other things. These new activists may be better positioned to identify the problem and have the structure and means to make their reaction more visible, but these may not be enough to bring change. First, new activists may lack the expertise to substantiate their initial reaction and turn it into a factual challenge. As we have seen in the above examples, challenging government plans requires an understanding of environmental impact assessments or city planning. No matter how informed new civic activists may be in their area, they may lack such technical expertise or even data to further their cause.

In addition, new civic activists often challenge the government plans’ legal and regulatory conformity. As in above examples, activists are frequently compelled to resort to the judiciary. There are two caveats for new civic activists here. First, judiciary processes are expensive and require funds that may not be readily available for these activists. Fund raising requires official registration. Groups like new civic activists that are not officially registered are unable to raise funds. Therefore, new civic activists rely on individual activists’ contributions and even simple court cases may strain their budget. As lawyer expenses would be beyond their means, new civic activists need committed lawyers to their cause with experience in the given issue. While this may not be a problem for major disputes against public authorities, we cannot easily assume the presence or at least the support of lawyers for every activist cause. Second, controversial cases is a long legal battle often including counter actions, annulments and appeals to the Supreme Court. As a result, they easily stretch over several years. Even with committed lawyers, fighting this long battle is very difficult under the fluid structure of new civic activists.

New civic activists are also ill-equipped to bring policy changes. As the above examples illustrate, new civic activists focus on local issues but have broader political claims. Their reaction may be partly driven by local environmental, urban planning or other concerns. But, at the same time, they protest broader implications of that problem on governance. The problem is how do the new civic activists move from protest to power, from grievance to governance? The new activists are often criticized for not putting forward specific policy suggestions. Single or sporadic protests against a certain policy are not enough to influence lawmakers. Changing laws or even influencing their making requires ceaseless efforts and consistent lobbying. With their fluid structure, new activists cannot sustain their reaction in the long run. Therefore, even if these new activists intend on bringing policy change, their way of organizing is not conducive to that. To connect to governance and influence policymaking, they need the help of other civil society actors.

At this point, the new activists’ relations with traditional civic actors become important as the latter can make up for new civic activists’ limitations. First, with their members, staff (if any) and sustained work in the given area, traditional civic actors such as chambers, unions and even local civil society organizations accumulate the necessary knowledge and expertise. Second, these organizations have the advantage of a stable institutional structure. If why people mobilize is a curious question, how they keep enough momentum in the long run and remobilize is an equally interesting one. This question is particularly relevant for Turkey considering the current difficult conditions for civil society. Traditional civic actors’ established structure allows them to sustain their cause, develop long-term strategies and even follow the judicial process. Finally, traditional civic actors are more likely to have experience in working with state institutions and public officials. Based on this structure and experience, they are potential transmission belts to governance on issues they act together with new civic activists.

The above comparison shows that the new and traditional civic activists take up different functions as a natural outcome of their difference in structure and organization. That said, it is misleading to think that their alliance is contingent and they function in a purely mechanic way. First, it is important to underline that new civic activism in Turkey emerged from within Turkish civil society. Therefore, many of the activists, be it new or traditional, and in particular, the prominent ones, are well-recognized activists. It is reasonable to expect that these people with similar concerns know one another and follow each other’s activities. In certain cases, an activist may be a part of both groups acting as a natural bridge. Finally, the most controversial issues take many years before they are resolved. It is very likely for a different group of civic actors to get to know one another (if they had not already known each other) and coordinate their work formally or in ad hoc manner.

# Conclusion

New civic activism is a fast-growing part of Turkish civil society. As they develop, the new activists diverge from traditional civic actors with their flexible structure, focus on specific local problems and ability to work on multiple issues. However, despite the differences in understanding and approach, the two groups of Turkish civil society do not stand much apart from each other. Different examples illustrate that the two groups frequently enter into alliances.

The literature has already underlined the importance of alliances for bringing leverage, facilitating frame development, boosting mobilization and creating resources and political opportunity structures. This article shows that the alliances formed between the new and the traditional civic actors in Turkey are meaningful for several other reasons. First, these alliances bring together different actors to work on the same issue in a country where long-term cooperation in civil society is a rare thing. Therefore, the cooperation between these two groups has the potential to bring greater impact not only locally but also nationally. More importantly, as the examples above reveal, the new and the traditional civic actors have the potential to complement one another. New civic activists’ closer ties to grassroots and also their flexible organizational structure, give them several advantages including quick reaction, more visibility and legitimacy. Traditional civic actors complement this with their stable structure that enables them to sustain their campaigns, engage in and follow up the legal struggles and act as a transmission belt to relations with public institutions and governance. In a way, with these alliances, new civic activists can sustain long-term campaigns without needing to be institutionalized.

Despite their not so long presence, it is clear by now that new civic activism will continue to develop and be an active part of Turkish civil society. New civic activists are not developing at the expense of traditional civic actors and indeed, the potential benefits of their cooperation are many.

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