Original Research

The Uniformization of Think Tanks in Turkey: The Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA) as a Case Study

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Abstract

The present study analyzed the role of Turkey's think tanks as NGOs and conducted a case study on the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), an organization that appears to dominate Turkish think thanks' sphere of activity. Based on the general classifications accepted in the literature on think tanks, the study found that SETA is a "political party affiliation" and "advocacy" think tank. Since its establishment, SETA has been ideologically aligned with the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). It acts as a partner in the design of AK Party policies, provides human resources to the AK Party bureaucracy, and conducts public diplomacy to legitimize these policies in the public eye. According to the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program's (TTCSP) data for 2019, 48 think tanks exist in Turkey. The fact that SETA stands out so significantly from its peers suggests that pluralism has been lost in this field and that a monopolization policy is preferred. This study concluded that if a country's NGOs are weak, this will lead to a democratic deficit. Utilizing Carl Schmitt's theory of "the total state," the study analyzed the way in which the post-2016 state-of-emergency regime and the new political regime that emerged following Turkey's constitutional amendments in 2017 have narrowed the sphere of influence of think tanks and NGOs in Turkey.

Keywords

think tanks, Turkey, civil society, SETA, Justice and Development Party (AK Party)

Introduction

Although think tanks in Turkey began to be established in the 1960s, research on this topic only began in the 2000s. Güvenç's (2006) study on think tanks in Turkey and international relations is one of the pioneering works in this field. In his study, he states that the opening of policymaking to civil elements and Turkey's bid for EU membership have been the driving force in the establishment and development of think thanks in Turkey (pp. 159–179). Various studies discussing and examining think tanks and their functions appeared in the literature following this. Of these, the most comprehensive is Kanbolat and Karasar's (2009) book in which the roles assumed by think tanks in Turkey from their inception, especially in terms of foreign policymaking, are discussed based on "insider" information from the researchers, academicians, and bureaucrats who play important roles in these organizations. Studies comparing think tanks in Turkey with those in other countries have also begun to be conducted. For example, Özgüzel and Çetintürk (2016) examined NGOs and think tanks in Turkey and the Netherlands and, based on the connection between think

tanks and civil society, drew attention to the different and belated formation of civil society in Turkey. However, as mentioned by Karabulut (2010) in his study comparing Turkish think tanks to others around the world, especially in the USA, the paucity of studies on think tanks in Turkey suggests that their importance has not yet been grasped in Turkey. In addition, the insufficient functional separation of the small number of think tanks from each other poses another problem. Tüysüzoğlu (2015) emphasizes this uniformization in his observation: "The attitude displayed by a significant part of think tanks in Turkey is to legitimize the foreign policy followed by the political power rather than to evaluate alternatives that will guide the power." The insufficient number of think tanks in Turkey, the lack of diversity among those existing and problems surrounding their

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effectiveness in policymaking can be considered the primary reasons for the lack of studies on the subject.

This study therefore aims to contribute to the literature by using McGann and Johnson's (2005) typology to examine the level of influence that Turkish think tanks have over policymaking and their status in the country. It will also analyze their position, relationship with the state, financial, and political autonomy, and contribution to political life using the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*—SETA) as a case study. Since its foundation, this think tank has had a close relationship with Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AK Party), has elevated bureaucrats to high positions of office, and has been the brains behind Turkish foreign policy. By categorizing SETA through McGann's typology and using concrete data, this study will revisit the discussion regarding what a think tank is, what its functions are in Turkey, and how it functions by discussing the role, impact, and activities of SETA in Turkey. At the same time, it will analyze the current relationship between civil society and the state and discuss the narrowing of think tanks' sphere of action and whether it can be said that there is uniformization and monopolization in this field.

Defining Think Tanks and Their Development

A think tank is a *sui generis* organization, institute, or corporation that conducts research and engages in advocacy in areas, such as social policy, political strategy, science or technology, industrial or business policies, as well as military advice. In Pautz's (2011) definition (s. 221) they are "nongovernmental institutions; intellectually, organizationally and financially autonomous from government, political parties or organized interests; and being set up with the aim of influencing policy." In light of this, it can be said that think tanks are also NGOs. However, the most important characteristic that distinguishes them from other NGOs is that they are dedicated to guiding public policies and creating new ideas and political initiatives by conducting research, analysis, and consultancy services with their intellectual knowledge. Given that a think tank is also a kind of NGO, it would be useful at this point to determine the roles and functions of NGOs in a democratic society and their position within the state apparatus.

The concept of civil society is both ambiguous and semantically complex, leading to different interpretations depending on one's historical point of view. However, putting aside these semantic differences, within the general framework it can be said that this concept refers to the self-guiding tradition that Western societies have with NGOs, the market relations based on this tradition and the values particular to urban life. Civil society emerged in Western Europe as a result of

the interaction between economic processes and political action, in other words, the transformation of the economic problem that arised between property owners and rulers into a political problem. In this framework, civil society came into being not only as formally independent from government but also as a field of action for NGOs that are especially ideologically opposed to it and try to achieve democratic goals by limiting the authoritarian practices of the state.

In essence, the concept of civil society is a multi-dimensional social, political, and economic one. The political science literature discusses this extensively, and it is beyond the scope of this study to enter into these discussions in detail. Keane (1988) defines civil society "as an aggregate of institutions whose members are engaged in a complex of non-state activities economic and cultural production, household life and voluntary associations, and who in this way preserve and transform their identity by exercising all sorts of pressures or controls upon state institutions" (s. 14–15). It should be underlined that in all studies examining the concept, a relationship of opposition between civil society and the state is discussed. In modern theories of democracy, a positive correlation is established between the power of civil society and democracy.

In Keane's (1988) definition, democracy is a pluralist system of power within civil society and the state in which decisions concerning all communities, large and small, are taken directly by all members of these communities (s. 2). Meanwhile, Diamond (1994) sees civil society as having many functions pertaining to the development of democracy that include limiting state power, subjecting political power to public scrutiny, increasing democratic participation, balancing interest demands, ensuring the democratization of political parties, spreading information to wide segments of society, increasing the responsibility of the political system toward people, and mitigating political polarization (s. 7–11). Once civil society started eroding state sovereignty, foreign policy began to be seen as a technical field requiring expertise. Thus, NGOs started to gain more and more influence in the foreign policymaking process with the increasing complexity of the structure of international relations. The sophisticated form of current foreign policymaking has changed the harmony between state and non-state actors in the foreign policymaking process.

The first generation of think tanks can be defined as policy research institutions that emerged as a result of a desire among leading intellectuals to create institutions where scholars and leaders from the public and private sectors could congregate to discuss and debate world issues (Abelson, 2002, s. 9). In the early 20th century, the think tanks that were established applied scientific inquiry to several policy-related issues. Weaver (1989) labels think tanks such as Carnegie Endowment and Brookings as "universities without students" and continues this labeling by defining them as think tanks which "assign the highest priority to

producing quality academic research and publications for different target audiences: both policymakers and the public, but very rarely for decision-makers to avoid getting too involved directly in the policy decision-making process as to preserve their institutional independence as think tanks" (s. 568).

When the USA emerged from the Second World War in a more prominent position as the domineering force in a bi-polar world, a need arose to provide American decision-makers with reasoned and objective foreign policy recommendations. Haass (2001) accordingly argues that "the rise of modern think tanks parallels the rise of the United States to global leadership." To promote the USA's interests abroad as a hegemonic power, the RAND Corporation, which was the first of its kind to be purely financed by government and aimed to address policymakers specifically, was established in 1948. For this type of think tank, Weaver (1989) coined the term "contract research organisation" (s. 566), as their research and studies are strictly for agencies, not for the public, and the research agenda for contract researchers is set primarily by what an agency is willing to pay for.

Weaver's (1989) third model of think tank is "advocacy tanks" which "combine a strong policy, partisan or ideological bent with aggressive salesmanship and an effort to influence current policy debates and synthesize and put a distinctive 'spin' on existing research rather than carrying out original research" (s. 568). Examples of this are the Heritage Foundation and the Economic Policy Institute. McGann and Weaver (2000) describe advocacy think tanks as follows (s. 7):

> "Advocacy think tanks, while maintaining formal independence, are linked to particular ideological groupings or interests. They tend to view their role in the policymaking process as winning the war of ideas rather than as a disinterested search for the best policies, and they are more often than not staffed by nonacademics who are less interested in basic research."

The last type of think tank to emerge in the United States were the legacy-based and vanity-type think tanks. Legacy-based think tanks (like the Carter Center and Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom) are created by aspiring office holders or their supporters, and by former presidents intent on advancing their political and ideological beliefs well after leaving office. As Abelson and Carberry (1998) observed: "vanity think tanks appear more concerned with engaging in polical advocacy, are particularly interested in generating or the very least repacking ideas which will help lend intellectual credibility to the political platforms of politicians" (s. 114).

Another category widely referred to in modern-day think tank topology was coined by the Go to Think Tank Index (GTTI). This index has been collating information on all known think tanks for nearly two decades using the same typology as McGann (2015), but making a distinction between autonomy and influence as two fundamental concepts in think tank studies (s. 7):

> "THINK TANK TYPOLOGY/THINK TANK AFFILIATIONS
>
> **Autonomous and Independent**: Significant independence from any one interest group or donor and autonomous in its operation and funding from government.
>
> **Quasi Independent**: Autonomous from government but an interest group (i.e. unions, religious groups, etc.), donor or contracting agency provides a majority of the funding and has significant influence over the operations of the think tank.
>
> **University Affiliated**: A policy research centre at a university.
>
> **Political Party Affiliated**: Formally affiliated with a political party.
>
> **Government Affiliated**: A part of the structure of the government.
>
> **Quasi Governmental**: Funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of the government.
>
> **For Profit**: Public policy research unit located within a corporation or operating as a free-standing for-profit think tank."

The most contentious issue here is measuring the formality of the relationships between think tanks and governments or their degree of relative independence. McGann's categorization of the organizational characteristics means that the lines between a think tank and government organization are often blurred and in many cases this is the most difficult aspect to determine. Almost all research organizations will guarantee a fair or bipartisan position and this claim may mirror a desire among research organizations to remain neutral in the eyes of onlookers and contributors alike, notwithstanding the necessity of maintaining their tax-exempt status.

Despite the difficulties in distinguishing between different types of think tank, typologies can still be useful when examining them. The following section illustrates the types of think tank that exist in Turkey with respect to the aforementioned categories, revealing the position that civil society holds within the state.

Civil Society in Turkey

To discuss the status of think tanks in Turkey and their influence on public policymaking we first need to look at the status of and change in civil society–state relations in Turkey over the years. Risse-Kappen (1995) noted that "state-controlled domestic structures encompass highly centralized political institutions with strong executive governments and a rather weak level of societal organization and civil society is too weak to balance the power of the state" (s. 23). Past state–society relations in a country are one of the most

important factors determining the autonomy of civil society. Thus, the structure characterized by a *strong state–weak society* relationship and whether suitable conditions existed to construct a democratic civil society in Turkey were the most important debates raised during the process of democratization in the country (Çaha, 1994).

As civil society emerged in Turkey with a top to bottom approach, banks in different production sectors and mandatory professional organizations were established, domestic capital was supported, and the country's institutional structure was strengthened with Western-style civil law and criminal law. This process also saw the state attempting to establish a civil society. As Mardin (1997) notes: "the state attempted to establish institutional and legal forms that have evolved through resistance to the state in Western civil society, which have a history and tradition behind them" (s. 31). The civil society that has been established in Turkey through a top to bottom approach thus lacks a historical grounding that would only develop naturally through resistance to the state. Having had a different progression than in the West, rather than withstanding the state it obtained a role that is dependent on the state. As also stated by Tekin (2000), this situation causes the process of communicating the demands of society to the state—which is among the primary functions of civil society—to function in reverse in Turkey, hence creating a "mutant-like" Turkish type of civil society that transmits the demands of the state to society instead of transmitting society's demands to the state. Thus, far from communicating the political demands of society to the state, civil society serves to dictate the demands of the state; instead of examining the actions of the state, it performs to justify; rather than providing protection to society, it acts to protect the state from other sections of society.

This Jacobinist state of affairs manifests itself in the interventions that occur in the field of political action and, as a matter of fact, the political system in Turkey has suffered many military interventions since 1960. Even the narrowing and expansion of rights and freedoms in the constitutions drawn up after these interventions took place under state control. The 1961 Constitution, for instance, which provided a relatively free environment with regard to personal freedoms, civil rights, and political rights, attracted military intervention in 1971 and freedom of association was severely damaged. The 1982 Constitution, which is still in force and is the product of a military coup, is described by Tanör and Yüzbaşıoğlu (2002) as "statist, nationalist, authoritarian and reducing solidarist participation" (s. 49). Undoubtedly, this preference has had significant repercussions on civil society. It should be underlined that the development of civil society is closely related with freedom of expression and association. The European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR, 2019) statistics show that Turkey has always ranked at or near the top among European Council members ruled to have violated these two freedoms since 1989, when it was included in the individual application system.

Certainly, when discussing Turkey's venture into democracy, the "strong state versus weak civil society" duality has always been a noteworthy argument. The lack of a civil society within the system has also created a democratic deficit. Consequently, the political system and civil society have always remained in a state-controlled bell jar, and the establishment, impact, and level of influence that think tanks in Turkey have within the country should not be considered independently of the general position of civil society within the Turkish system, as discussed above.

Thinks Tanks in Turkey: From Their Emergence to the AK Party Era

Turkey's think tanks emerged with the freedom brought about by the 1961 Constitution and an autonomous environment which saw different thoughts being presented in parliament and an expanding political sphere. Parallel to the expansion of the political field in Turkey, the détente started to ease the bipolarity of the Cold War. As the relationship between the USA and Turkey became strained by the Cyprus crisis and Johnson Letter, Turkey began to look at the EC as a potential foreign policy partner. The thought process behind the establishment of the first think tanks was to find objective answers to the economic and political challenges that could arise from globalization and a possible partnership with the EU.

Three major waves can be seen in Turkey when the development of think tanks with different characteristics is analyzed. The first wave or generation of think tanks (1960–1970) in Turkey is characterized primarily by the emergence of organizations focused on research and translation, especially enhancing the relationship with the EEC, regardless of the political impacts and political preferences. The first private think tank in Turkey was the Economic Development Foundation (IKV), established in 1965. While this think tank was created by the government as a technical unit to translate the EC's documents, the IKV is seen by the private sector as an intermediary that helps to influence the government's economic policy decisions.

The second wave (1971–1990) saw the emergence of "advocacy" think tanks, which significantly changed the policy research landscape. These think tanks became far more engaged in the political debate and optimized new methods and formats by which to "most effectively influence policymakers, the public and the media" (Abelson, 2002, s. 13). The Foreign Policy Institute (DPE) was the first think tank to be civically institutionalized in order to serve as a voice for Turkey on the Cyprus Issue in particular. Based on the grounds of the Foreign Policy Journal, established in 1971 both in Turkish and English, the DPE was founded in 1974. However, the DPE became a propaganda tool used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the second half of the 1970s both as a result of a shortage of resources and its founders' closening ties with the political powers in the following period and loss of objectivity.

In line with the worldwide boom in think tanks in the late 1990s, many think tanks rapidly emerged in Turkey at this time. The end of the Cold War and the innovations taking place in Turkey's neighboring countries allowed the expression of alternative thoughts in foreign policy, while the EU candidacy process developed freedom of expression in Turkey, thus opening the field of foreign policymaking to discussion. Developments that required rapid policy design, such as the independence of the Turkic republics in Central Asia, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the beginning of the Gulf War in the Middle East, put Turkey in a difficult position. This led official agencies to search for and support the establishment of certain ministries or government agencies in order to increase their knowledge and support from experts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Strategic Research Center (SAM) and the Council of Higher Education's National Strategic Research and Studies Committee (SAEMK), which can be classed as "government affiliated" think tanks, are examples of these.

The increasing pace of globalization, the changing relationship between the state and individuals, the further opening up of policymaking to society, the growing diversity of technical subjects, changing political and social perceptions of security, the expanding workload of governments, and the acceleration of the decision-making process are among the main changes that were experienced at the end of the 20th century. This climate formed the basis of the emergence of the third wave of think tanks. These are what Abelson (2009) refers to as "vanity or legacy-based think tanks" (s. 34), which aimed to leave a lasting legacy in the policy arena. It can be seen that the think tanks in this period gave more importance to institutionalization and the employment of specialized teams. In the meantime, think tanks began to be supported and financed by academics, NGOs, and universities, and the role and visibility of civil actors in the process of foreign policy design, which was developed in government, high-level bureaucracy, and military business cooperation, started to increase.

It should be noted that these new generation think tanks differed in many ways from their predecessors. One was their "quasi independent" nature, which meant that they acted together with political parties, and a second was the increase in subject diversity. With regard to the first, an unusual and striking example of a partnership with political parties is the Social, Economic and Political Research Foundation of Turkey (TUSES), which was established in 1989 in order to produce left-wing alternatives and can be classified as "quasi independent." In this period, the TUSES had a special place among think tanks in transnational movements and had very close contacts within the social democratic circles in Europe in particular. Although foreign policy at first was not among its areas of study, with Kuwait invading Iraq and the policies of the then President Turgut Özal enforcing Turkey's traditional perspective in the Middle East, the TUSES was motivated to prioritize foreign policymaking and to focus its first research on the Middle East.

The aforementioned case is also an example of the second feature of the new generation think tanks, which is their "subject diversity." In this period, in addition to the think tanks concentrating on economics in relation to the EU, "strategic research" organizations prioritizing security and highlighting the relationships with republics that gained independence following the disintegration of the Soviet Union started to emerge. Thus, think tanks developed into institutions that were not solely dedicated to US/EU policymaking but were also interested in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Asia. The Eurasia Strategic Research Center (ASAM) established in 1999 is an example of this new generation. It defines itself as a "strategic data bank and research centre" devoted to the regions of Eurasia and Asia and is interested in regions where "Turkic people live" on the grounds of anti-EUism, not just geographically but with a political preference. At the same time, by adopting the regional table model of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in terms of its institutional structure, it employs a large research staff and became an important model for the "strategic" centers established within ministries and universities before "university affiliated" institutions came about.

Thus, it can be said that in the early 2000s, think tanks had a significant role in civilians' demands starting to be considered as an effective factor and Turkey abandoning its traditional understanding of foreign policymaking, which had been characterized as closed, narrow, and authoritarian. It can also be seen that think tank organizations play a role in encouraging and legitimizing civilian support in the sense of evaluating new strategies and overcoming the traditional foreign policy strategies that had dominated the Cold War era. Followed closely by the media, universities, and the public, think tanks began to promote the democratic control of foreign policy and a social awareness by reconsidering military and civil bureaucracy-dominated foreign policy within the framework of alternative solutions/strategies (Aras et al., 2010, s. 169–175).

In summary, the development of think tanks in Turkey should be considered in parallel with globalization and its opportunities and threats. Beginning from the 1990s, the efforts of political powers in Turkey to develop a more liberal economic model and parallel efforts to integrate with the EU helped Turkey become more open. This policy of openness led to an increase in civil demands and the number of NGOs. On the other hand, openness policies also brought the nation closer to the risks brought about by globalization. The desire for outward integration has therefore made it necessary to think multidimensionally and evaluate opportunities and risks together when designing public policies. Fulfilling this need can positively influence the ideological diversification of think tanks in Turkey and increase their numbers. As a result of the policy of openness, think tanks in Turkey focused their activities on foreign policy. Thus, in a study on Turkish think tanks, this focus on foreign policy must be taken into account.

"New Turkey" and Civil–State Relations

After the EU recognized Turkey as a candidate for full membership in 1999, a number of constitutional amendments aimed at expanding civil liberties were made. Clearly, the main motivation behind these changes was EU membership. However, despite all these changes, chronic problems persist in the field of freedom of expression and association.

Three different periods can be observed in the development of the AK Party government, which gained power in 2002. Believing that it could weaken military control only through the EU membership process and thus gain political legitimacy within the system, AK Party tried to form a social coalition to withstand the militant conception of secularism between 2002 and 2010. As Özkan (2020) says, "SETA's propaganda focused on the claim that the AKP led a democratic front made up of both conservatives and liberals fighting against a system of military tutelage; the AKP, in short, represented civil society against an authoritarian, secular political establishment." In the expectation of gaining EU membership, the conservative sector and also some leftist and liberal intellectuals supported constitutional reforms and related policies followed in this period. Concurrently, in the same period, new think tanks were set up in the relatively free environment inspired by the EU membership process. This is confirmed by the table presented later in the study.

When AK Party increased its percentage of the vote to 49.83% in the 2011 general election, it began to gain more power in the political system. The announcement by AK Party Istanbul Provincial Chairman stating that some segments of society (e.g. liberals) who had worked with the party and became stakeholders over the past decade would not be able to do so in the next shook the Turkish political scene (*T24*, 2013) and opened the way for the second period.

The presidential election held in 2014 ended the parliamentary system de facto and a state of emergency was declared following the failed coup of 2016. This was followed by a complete overhaul of the political system in the Constitution and the adoption of a political regime known as the "Turkish presidential" system, ushering in the third period. This period has been influenced by a state-of-emergency regime, policies focusing on public security, an increase in social polarization, and largely interrupted pluralism in the political sphere. It is a state of affairs that has been criticized in reports published by international organizations. For example, the Venice Commission (2017) of the Council of Europe stated in its 2017 report that the governmental system outlined by the 2017 constitutional amendments would eliminate the check and balance mechanisms in the political regime and marginalize the role of legislature (s. Par. 126). Similar conclusions are also found in the EU's progress reports. The 2019 EU Progress Report, for instance, states that the new presidential system has concentrated power in the executive body and significantly diminished the legislative and supervisory functions of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT), while the state-of-emergency measures have narrowed the field of opposing or alternative views (European Commission [EC], 2019, s. 5–7).

Another important point concerns the status of civil society. The report notes that there has been a serious decline in dissident civil society and that, in particular, pro-government organizations have started to occupy a more prominent role and enjoy favorable representation (EC, 2019, s. 15). It also criticizes the lack of a comprehensive government strategy for cooperation with civil society and the failure to set up a coordinative body to monitor NGOs, establish a transparent mechanism for public finance and to provide appropriate fiscal incentives (EC, 2019, s. 16).

"New" Turkey's position should be viewed considering both the change in the political system and the de facto situation toward which the political party system in Turkey has evolved. The political science literature provides various ways of classifying political parties. For example, Sartori (2005, s. 113) presented seven different typologies in a study in which he examined political parties according to their power structures and polarization tendencies: the one-party system, the hegemonic-party system, the predominant-party system, the two-party system, moderate pluralism, polarized pluralism, and the atomized system.

In this context, Sartori's definition of a predominant-party system seems to fit the de facto situation that has been ongoing since 2002, when AK Party came to power in Turkey. In Sartori's (2005) predominant-party system (s. 112), although opposition parties exist, one party receives the absolute majority of votes and comes to power alone. The situation does not change despite repeated elections. In this system, a dominant party has key control over a majority of voters, and unless this party loses power, it is unlikely that its political power will end. With the effect of the de facto situation mentioned above, AK Party is able to act comfortably in a political environment that lacks an opposition and has thus become influential in all areas of political and social life. Having the administrative and legal apparatus to enable it to control the political system and bureaucracy to a large extent, the AK Party has also subjected civil society to this control.

In a study that examines new forms of state apparatus in the 20th century, Carl Schmitt (2010, p. 13) states that an increase in organized social forces' demands on public policies is perceived as a threat by the state. As a reaction, he thinks that governments have repressed NGOs and absorbed them into their bureaucratic structures. This situation, he argues, has resulted in the dissolution of civil society within the state and also turned parliament into an unnecessary device that remains in the shadow of the state power (Keane, 1988, s. 159). Terming this new form of state as "the total state," Schmitt (2010, p. 16) reports that under the umbrella of sovereign political power, NGOs are allowed to legitimately survive, provided that they do not endanger the established political order. As soon as states try to fulfil their function of ensuring

internal order and security, they necessarily acquire a total identity (Bolsinger, 2001, s. 111). As a result, the state does not consider itself limited to the political sphere only but intervenes in other social spheres, leaving no area autonomous from the state power (Scheuerman, 1999, s. 86). According to Schmitt's (2007) theory the total state can potentially embrace every domain and render everything at least potentially political (s. 22). This process results in the end of the division between political state and non-political civil society and the state becomes society (Schmitt, 2007, s. 72).

The post-2016 state of emergency and the constitutional amendments of 2017 are examples of how "new" Turkey has become a total state. Taking advantage of the opposition gap through the predominant-party system, AK Party has taken control of the civilian arena. The most important point to underline in this context is that, as also emphasized by Schmitt, NGOs are allowed to survive in the bureaucratic branches of the state as long as they do not pose a risk to the established political order. A trend in this direction, however, will undoubtedly eliminate the pluralistic nature of civil society and push it toward a uniform/standard structure. In light of this data, it is clear that civil society and NGOs in Turkey were already rootless and now face significant decline, suffering a significant reduction in their margins of influence. It should be noted though that although this is in part due to the developments in Turkish politics, it also stems from problems with the internal structures of think tanks.

Although the number of think tanks has increased in the last two decades, think tanks in Turkey often fall short of reaching their goals. One of the major constraints is funding. Think tanks finance their activities by raising funds from private foundations, corporations, individuals and government grants, contracts, and endowment income. Economic problems often lead to a decrease in the number of researchers, a decrease in the number of publications made and therefore a decrease in the interest in the subject studied. When the structure of think tanks is examined, it can be seen that financial constraints cause systemic problems. Think tanks in Turkey neither have the necessary budgets nor a sufficiently competent and sizeable inhouse staff with the expertise to carry out extensive and substantial regional studies. They are caught between the public and the private sector as they are financed by both, and this puts the independency and objectivity of the think tanks in serious jeopardy. For instance, when the ASAM fell foul of the government it was forced to end its activities as the financial support provided by the private sector ceased.

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP, 2019) has been conducting global studies for nearly 30 years on active think tanks and their role in the formation of public policies. In this sense, it is also called "the think tank of think tanks." Based on the indices it releases each year, the TTCSP publishes lists of the best performing think tanks of the year by their field of activity. According to the last report by McGann issued in 2019, for instance, there are 48 think tanks based in Turkey (TTCSP, 2019, s. 45). The increase in the number of think tanks in Turkey by year is shown below (Figure 1):

Though their number has been increasing substantially in recent years, especially in the area of foreign policymaking, it should be noted that there are limited moments in history when these think tanks have played a role in giving new directions to issues of strategic importance. Despite this relatively low profile, similarly to Haass' (2001) observations for US think tanks, think tanks influence Turkish foreign policymakers in four distinct ways: "by generating original ideas and options for policy, by supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government, by educating citizens about the world, and by supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict." The effectiveness of Turkish think tanks can be seen as crystallization points for
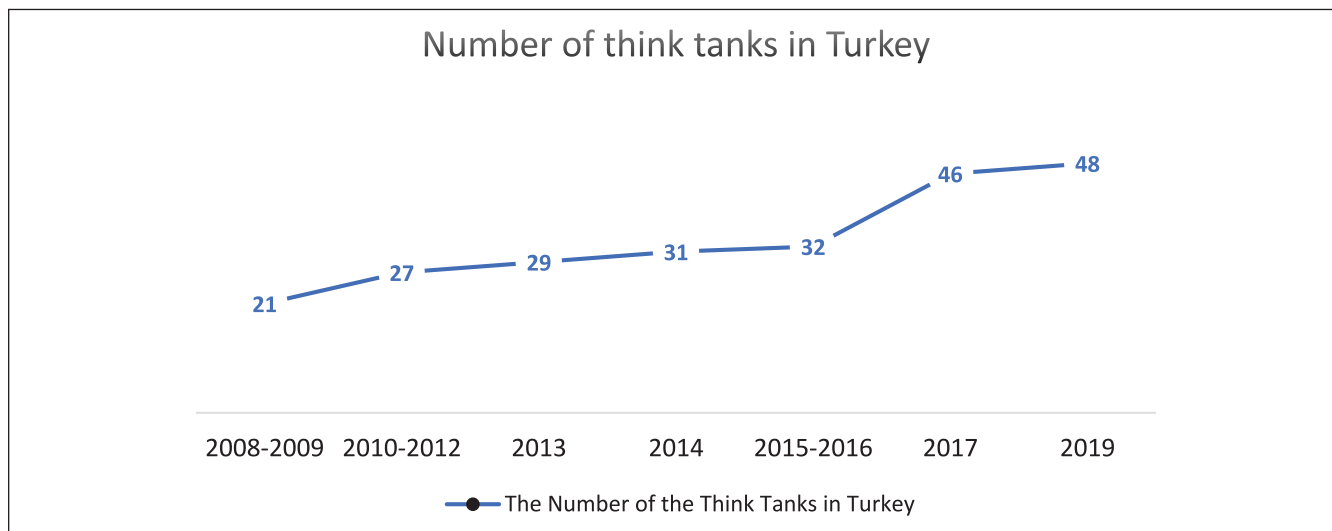

Figure 1. Number of think tanks in Turkey (GTTI).

democratization movements, as Jamal (2009) also states that "they can be regime-sustaining rather than regime-challenging" (s. 126). Still, think tanks can in principle promote civic participation in public affairs, thereby contribute to pluralism and as Suzuki says (2006, as cited in Köllner, 2011) "help to restrain the monopolisation of politics." In order to consider whether this is this case in Turkey, this study must now turn to Turkey's leading think tank, SETA, and assess whether it contributes to pluralism by examining its structure, features, and position in the system.

SETA: A Case Study

Establishment and Organization

The subject of our case study, SETA is seen by the Turkish public as a think tank that aligns with the AK Party government, its ideology and its policies. It stands very close to the government rhetoric in terms of foreign policy, security, media, and management of the social sphere, and even acts as a kind of public diplomacy pillar for these policies. From this vantage point, SETA has been described as a quasi-governmental think tank in some academic studies (Simavoryan et al., 2021, s. 145, 154). In this respect and when the current status of civil society is considered, it can be said that SETA has become a partner of the state's bureaucratic structure, especially its diplomatic bureaucracy. Some of the think tanks that were operating in the 2000s have been shut down in this period and some have become almost dysfunctional. SETA, on the other hand, enjoys an ever-growing momentum among the think tanks that still exist. SETA was able to assert itself more comfortably in the international arena since its establishment coincided with an increase in Turkey's foreign policy agenda and public diplomacy activities (Şehitoğlu, 2021, s. 115). It has managed to transform itself into a dominant NGO in the field and almost monopolized this area, which, in turn, can be said to have led to the disappearance of pluralism in Turkey's think tank sphere, resulting in uniformization.

One of Turkey's largest think tanks in terms of staff and budget, SETA was founded in 2005 in Ankara and later opened offices in Washington, DC and Cairo. It has a General Coordinator at its head and underneath an academic structure of director, researchers, and research assistants. Today, SETA has about 100 full-time employees, about 30% of whom are administrative staff dealing with corporate financial affairs, public relations activities, and translation and editorial processes.

Academic activities are divided into research fields such as politics, foreign policy, economics, society and media, security, law and human rights, strategy, education and social policy, Europe and energy, however foreign policy and politics are its most important areas of work. Each field has its own director, researchers, and research editors who are graduates of Turkey's best universities and have studied abroad at postgraduate level or as guest researchers.

Another aspect of SETA which differentiates it is that it has the highest media visibility among Turkey's think tanks. Posner's (2011) comment that "they are also acclaimed media stars in their own right, they promote their research and findings as 'a news event'" (s. 219) is also applicable to SETA. At the same time, many specialists at SETA are columnists for newspapers such as Yeni Şafak, Star, and Sabah, which are well-known for being close to the government, or they are program providers on Turkish television. Indeed, SETA's specialists may have the opportunity to share their thoughts with the public first, especially on the channels Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) and A News, by frequently appearing on news commentary and discussion programs where they can appeal to the Turkish public and reshape public opinion, providing visibility, which in turn contributes to SETA's popularity. SETA disseminates its information and research in a variety of languages and platforms, due to its publications and active communication networks with major national and international think tanks and media outlets. In this way, it contributes to Turkey's public diplomacy efforts and becomes a "soft power" component (Şehitoğlu, 2021, s. 172).

AK Party Links

In 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu became Turkey's Foreign Minister and put into practice the foreign policy theories formulated in his book *Strategic Depth* (Davutoğlu, 2001). The AK Party government's power and Davutoğlu's approach are based on a policy of being alternative, proactive, and open to new areas. The dynamics of the economy, international trade, and exports constitute an important pillar of foreign policy. It was envisaged that government programs would receive assistance from NGOs as a force to implement these policies. At the same time, Turkey's choice to employ "soft power," focusing on regional and global platforms as a strategic actor, instead of employing military power as it did in the Cold War era, is an important aspect of Turkish foreign policy. The idea of using soft power effectively in this framework and the opening up of foreign politics to civil elements have intersected. Davutoğlu and his ideas were influential in the establishment of SETA. According to Muhittin Ataman, Director of Foreign Policy Research at SETA, this is the outcome of "a necessity that arose after AK Party was established and voted into power" and it was these individuals who determined the discourse of the institute and its political position (Bedir, 2017, s. 223).

The continuing influence that AK Party has over SETA and its succession ensures that though there is no official connection, SETA is party-affiliated in terms of its discourse and staff links. The cohesion with AK Party has helped so many SETA employees transfer to public office that Çağlar expressed his discomfort that those working at the institution were using it as a springboard to get into politics (Bedir, s. 186). The appointment of Fahrettin Altun who was Istanbul General

Coordinator at SETA to the Presidency of the Communications Centre of Turkey is the latest example of this.

The institutions where the most transfers are seen are the Prime Ministry and the Presidency. There are also those who have been promoted to positions within institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Anadolu Agency, and TRT. Burhanettin Duran has been General Coordinator of SETA since 2014. However, Ibrahim Kalin occupied this role until 2009 before being appointed as Prime Minister Reponsible for Foreign Policy and then Spokesman of the Presidency. Taha Ozhan was General Coordinator of SETA between 2009 and 2014, and went on to be appointed to various roles in the Prime Ministry and most recently the Presidency. Many employees at SETA have also stood as AK Party candidates for election, demonstrating yet again the career progression from SETA to AK Party/government. In fact, it is these links that strengthen SETA against its counterparts. McGann (1995) states that while ideas make their way into the various forms of written and spoken media, they are also carried by the people "who frequently enter government positions in which they can attempt to transform their ideas into policy" (s. 65). The aforementionned career moves mean that SETA's policies are carried to government level, and the continuity of communication between the two structures helps to produce, implement, and eventually reproduce these ideas.

SETA and AK Party's perspectives regarding foreign policy overlap and it is observed that SETA does not criticize Turkey's foreign policy, nor other areas of influence, and that it often positions other countries or factors at the center of problems. For instance, one publication by SETA examining AK Party's 15 years in power in terms of foreign policymaking, hints at this "corporate culture" and AK Party views throughout. Some of Duran's works can be presented as an example of SETA's foreign policy analysis (Inat et al., 2017, s. 10):

> "Despite the West's criticism for its shift in policy, Turkey's insistence on shaping foreign policy in line with its own interests. . . caused the pressure from the USA and European countries in the last decade to increase. The problems experienced by Turkey in Syria, in particular, as a result of the instability into which the Arab Spring dragged the Middle East, were considered as an opportunity for the West to discipline Ankara."

In fact, it is possible to come across comments that go even further and interpret these troubles as "a means of ensuring better days ahead." In a study assessing foreign policy, Researcher for the Society and Media Research Directorate, Ali Aslan, stated that "the difficulties being experienced are closely associated with the Arab Spring, the occurrence of these problems does not signify a decline in terms of Turkey's power relations, rather it indicates an assent" (Inat et al., 2017, s. 40).

SETA's key goal is to offer a unique Turkey and Ankara-based perspective on Turkish and worldwide issues, and to share it globally. SETA explains this on its website accordingly: "Turkey's dynamic structure necessitates the development of new knowledge today. The historical and cultural identity of Turkey, which is stuck in the middle between the modernization theory of the 20th century and the political conjuncture of the Cold War era, needs a proper horizon and depth in harmony with its own historical–cultural identity and geostrategic position" (SETA). The question as to how independent this different and unique position can and will be from the government can only be answered by the political system, the status of civil society and the extent to which democracy advances in Turkey. It should also be noted that if there happens to be an absolute connection or impact between a think tank and the government, in addition to the high importance of comprehending the characteristics of that think tank there is a need for an accurate tool to determine this impact, and this is indeed difficult to obtain (Little, 2016, s. 16).

SETA's *Report on International Media Outlets and their Operations in Turkey*, published in 2019, was a significant development increasing public awareness in Turkey of the relationship between SETA and the AK Party government (SETAV, 2019). Although SETA stated that this report was written to describe the political climate that influences international media outlets' perception of Turkey (SETAV, 2019, s. 7), the report was perceived in the media and in public opinion as a blacklisting of opposition media organizations and journalists in Turkey. In response, a motion for investigation signed by opposition deputies was submitted in parliament (TBMM, 2019a). The motion called for the establishment of a parliamentary investigation committee to evaluate the report and identify the promoter(s) of SETA, which defines itself as an independent organization (TBMM, 2019b). In parliamentary speeches on the motion, opposition deputies accused SETA of being a subsidiary of the government, while ruling party deputies argued that SETA was an independent think tank organization and that it was unnecessary to set up such an investigative committee (TBMM, 2019c, 2019d).

In SETA's report, only two of the seven foreign media outlets with an office in Turkey were considered to be objective. It is clear, however, that government policies were largely central to this evaluation and that the attitude taken by media outlets about those policies was decisive (SETAV, 2019, s. 193). SETA makes certain recommendations to these media outlets in this regard. Under the section "Recommendations for the Public," the report states that when false content and inappropriate attitudes are detected in news that directly targets the government, in particular, mechanisms for complaint and application should be formed against them (SETAV, 2019, s. 195). The fact that SETA takes these outlets' attitudes toward government policies as the basis of determining their objectivity provides important clues as to its perspective regarding its relations with the government.

SETA has been increasingly discussed in Turkish political life since this report. In parallel, opposition MPs raised the issue in parliament of SETA being recognized as a tax-exempt foundation pursuant to the Cabinet Decision No. 2013/4603 dated 4 April 2013. On 11 July 2019, an opposition MP submitted a written question to the Vice President (TBMM, 2019e) in which he reminded parliament that, pursuant to the relevant legislation, tax exemption may be granted to a foundation only if its activities actually reduce the state's public service burden, and asked what type of activity the SETA carries out to fulfill that condition, whether it takes any shares from the allowances of public institutions and organizations, and how much discretionary funding it receives. In the written answer provided by the Ministry, only the date and approval information related to the establishment of the Foundation and its tax exemption were provided, while the above questions remain unanswered (TBMM, 2020).

As revealed through the concrete examples above, although it cannot be proved formally, a significant picture of an informal association between AK Party and SETA can be drawn from the promotion of SETA's staff to public office, its adoption of a discourse in line with government policies, its influence over media outlets and the negative attitude assumed by the ruling party against the demand for setting up a parliamentary investigation committee to look into the SETA's impartiality.

Typology

Despite originally defining itself as a non-partisan and non-profit research institute dedicated to innovative research on national, regional, and international issues (SETAV, 2019), since 2015 SETA has been positioned in the GTTI index under the "political party affiliated" category (GTTI, s. 124). Moreover, in the last decade, SETA officials have openly shown themselves to be supporters of AK Party. Although they say there are no "formal ties" with AK Party, they do not hide the fact that the leaders of AK Party played an active role in the founding of SETA and the ideological viewpoint of the institution. Ataman confirms this by describing SETA as an organization which is "conservative and aligned with AK Party" (Bedir, 2017, s. 235).

In the periodical indices of the TTCSP, SETA has been listed among the "Best Think Tanks with a Political Party Affiliation" since 2015. An examination of the TTCSP's think tank indices published from 2008 onward shows that SETA is the only think tank in Turkey that is placed in this category.

This kind of think tank is formally affiliated with a political party and ideology. In the USA, for example, as aggregate data from 2014 shows, 39% identify as independents, 32% as Democrats, and 23% as Republicans (TTCSP, 2019, s. 42). The existence of such think tanks is known in European countries as well. In these countries, however, one can talk about a spectrum that involves various parties and ideologies. But this kind of variety is not found in the TTCSP's indices for Turkey. Besides this, in Turkish domestic legislation, there is a law that imposes very strict rules and prohibitions on politic parties' organizations and spheres of activity. Pursuant to this law, a financial audit of political parties is carried out by the Constitutional Court and the Turkish Court of Accounts. Therefore, the establishment and funding of a think tank by a political party is not legal; the relations that political parties establish with think tanks in this area will often have to be based on informal and non-transparent grounds. It can be said in this regard that the relationships established between SETA and AK Party are based on ideological rather than legal grounds. Actually, in a democratic state, it is not abnormal for political parties to engage with such think tanks, as long as such relationships are transparent and open to public scrutiny because political parties that pledge to design alternative policies in the social and political sphere may need civil society's support to achieve this. The problem in Turkey, in this context, stems from the lack of transparency regarding the relationship between AK Party and SETA. Considering AK Party's dominant party position, the number of years it has held power and its place in government, SETA can be considered as being "affiliated with government" rather than "affiliated with a political party." This makes the problem even more complex. If the relationship between SETA and AK Party remained "affiliated with a political party," as in the USA and other European countries, it would be possible to talk about a horizontal relationship created by two legal entities of private law. However, the fact that AK Party has been in power for so long and its apparent control over bureaucracy carry this relationship beyond that and make it a non-transparent relationship established between the public sector and a legal entity of private law. It is therefore obvious that this relationship does not rest on a legal and accountable basis. Moreover, the notion of the public sector being impartial in its actions and operations and treating all social groups equally becomes problematic at this point. The fact that SETA personnel and administrators legitimate the government's everyday political actions and consider the AK Party's existence to be synonymous with the country's national interests promotes SETA's image as a political party affiliated (Özkan, 2020, s. 235).

SETA and political power are tied together in a vicious circle. SETA not only helps to prepare the government's policies and shape the public's opinion regarding its legitimacy, but it is also an informal partner of the kitchen where these policies are cooked up. This is a structure that operates in a closed circuit and is very open to uniformization. A system can be renewed and generate new policies as long as it receives external feedback. This can only happen on a pluralistic ground. Many disadvantages will arise when there is a policymaking process from which other think tanks are excluded and without a functioning process of negotiation and criticism.

Easton's (1953) system theory (s. 25) states that the most important factor in the functioning of a political system is its "input–output" relationship. Inputs are variables that create pressure in the environment for the political system. Consisting of requests and support, inputs are expected to be processed by the political system and converted into outputs. The political system's ability to maintain its continuity is related to its ability to produce outputs in the social field (Easton, 1953, s. 132). The tendency toward uniformization that has taken place in Turkey's civil society also carries risks in terms of the system established by AK Party. Monopolization of the think tank field eliminates idea generation and alternative policy options. This is followed by a one-dimensional policy, which essentially dooms the system to a vicious circle and eventually crisis.

Conclusion

Civil society's level of influence in a country is correlated with the strength and stability of that country's democratic institutions. Given that democracy is a regime of alternatives, NGOs provide diversity in the process of public policy design. A lack of civil society in a country will naturally result in a democracy deficit. It follows then that Turkey's rootless civil society has produced a rootless and unstable democratic regime in the political system. The Jacobin approach to the building of its political system has imprisoned political and public spheres within a controlled network of relationships. As emphasized in the present study, think tanks, which are considered as NGOs, have often had to act within this closed bell jar.

The changes that have occurred in Turkish political life largely developed under the influence of external factors. The lack of civil society makes it difficult for the political and social system to transform its own internal dynamics. The EU candidacy process led to certain changes in Turkey's political and public spheres. As the expectations and developments in this area stagnate, however, the political system reverts to its natural self and becomes a closed bell jar once again. The think tanks discussed in this study have been affected by these developments. Although their number and functions increased in those periods when the EU process kept developments in foreign policy alive, they are rapidly losing their function in the current period of introversion because the political system lacks the self-mechanisms to maintain their existence due to the lack of a civil society.

By analyzing Sartori's political party classification this study shows that Turkey's political life settled de facto into a predominant-party system following the 2002 elections when AK Party came to power. With the opposition gap that emerged after the 2011 elections, AK Party, as the dominant political party in the system, has attempted to assume active roles in all areas of civil and political life. The attempted coup in 2016, the subsequent transition to a state-of-emergency regime and the transition to a presidential system with the 2017 constitutional amendments have paved the way for AK Party to become not only a party but an actor that dominates all state policies. It has almost made itself the state apparatus. States gain a totalitarian identity in periods when security concerns and threats come to the fore. According to Carl Schmitt's "the total state" theory, NGOs continue to exist under state control, resulting in the weakening of the influence of dissident civil society on the formation of public policies.

Those think tanks that were active, albeit partially, in the system when the EU candidacy and political reform processes were alive, have lost a significant amount of influence. Now, it is the NGOs and think tanks that are supported by public bureaucracy which have come to the fore. SETA is one of the most obvious examples of this, with its fields of activity and influence having increased considerably in recent years. The relationships between SETA and AK Party are the product of an ideological convergence. SETA formally states that it is a neutral think tank but, as seen in this study, its harmony with AK party policies, their unity of discourse, the promotion of SETA staff to diplomatic roles, in particular, and AK Party's attitude regarding motions for investigation submitted against SETA in the legislature offer important clues about the extent to which this relationship has deepened.

In the TTCSP's periodic reports on think tanks SETA has always been included in the "political party affiliated" category. Think tanks affiliated with a political party are known to exist both in the USA and in Europe. There is therefore nothing unusual about a political party whose aim is to offer voters an alternative by working with a think tank. The problem for Turkey is that SETA is the sole think tank listed in this category of the TTCSP's indices. AK Party's dominant position in Turkish political life and public bureaucracy, the sheer number of staff from SETA who have been appointed to public office and the privileges given to SETA take this relationship beyond political party affiliation and almost make it a government affiliated think tank. In this respect, SETA has become a part and partner of the ideological state apparatuses. Again, considering another classification of think tanks in the literature, the SETA constitutes an important example of an "advocacy think tank" and effectively conducts public diplomacy activities in order to legitimize government policies before the public. At some point, therefore, this relationship goes beyond political party affiliation and turns into a "partisan" defence.

In conclusion, it can be said that AK Party has produced a dominant think tank of its own. Such an environment that is closed to pluralism makes it difficult to discuss alternative policies. Every political system is fed by external inputs. A political system's rejection of these will disable the production of ideas and cause the system to eventually become stuck in a rigid political space. Therefore, democratic institutions in Turkey must be open to alternative views in order to operate in an efficient way. Freedom of expression and association is central to achieving this.

The de facto status of think tanks in Turkey that this study has attempted to show essentially points to deeper issues related to democracy. Therefore, any suggestions made in this field cannot be independent of the general issues relating to the functioning and stability of democratic institutions in Turkey. In order to build a truly democratic society, it is necessary to strengthen civil society and improve freedom of expression and association. Some concrete suggestions for doing this are ensuring the pluralism of think tanks, providing a legal basis for the relations that political parties establish with think tanks, building a transparent and auditable public financing system, providing equality of opportunity for think tanks to enable them to contribute to the design of public policies, and establishing a coordination unit to provide a link between think tanks and public office.

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