

Article

Empowering Youth in European Civil Society: A Case Study from Türkiye

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Abstract: A vibrant civil society has always been an important precondition for a democratic regime. The European Union (EU) has been one of the main actors in the world, promoting democratic values through various programs, especially in candidate and neighbouring countries. Those programs and the domestic change in the countries promote a Europeanization process. Türkiye has been an EU candidate country since 1999, and ongoing projects have been undertaken to strengthen civil society, which has been an important part of the Copenhagen criteria for full membership. The empowerment of civil society requires the role of youth, since the young people are the main actors in social learning processes. The social inclusion of youth is promoted with an active civil society, which serves the social learning of European norms and values accordingly. The aim of this paper is two-fold: It firstly aims to analyze the impact of Europeanization on the social inclusion of youth and secondly, the contribution of youth to the development of civil society in Türkiye. The paper follows a qualitative study with observation and archival research at Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Business between 2021 and 2024. The study found that social learning at universities, although being a top-down process, can create a more democratic environment at the local level.

Keywords: Youth; Social Inclusion; Civil Society; European Union; Türkiye

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) candidacy process of Türkiye started with the Helsinki Summit in 1999. Constitutional changes and harmonization efforts with the EU *acquis communautaire* in economic, political, social, and educational fields transformed the previous structures by modelling European norms and values. As part of this process, new bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs such as 'European Studies' and 'EU Studies' have been opened in Türkiye. The literature in the 1990s and the early 2000s has explained the domestic change in the candidate countries from a social constructivist perspective. The social constructivist approach assumes that social learning processes create motivations for actors [1]. Thus, the Europeanization process, which began with Türkiye's candidate status and spread from the top down, has had a direct impact on universities, academics, and students [2]. This process, referred to as the social learning process according to social constructivism, has also been observed at Dokuz Eylül University.

The Europeanization process in Türkiye has allowed the social construction of norms that serve both the individual and society. The university students, as one of the segments of youth analyzed in this paper, have been directly influenced in this process. Youth have considerable potential to shape civil society and promote intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, civil society can potentially serve the social inclusion of youth. The courses,

which include both theory and practice in the labour market, public institutions, or civil society, offer a wide range of opportunities, from finding a job or internship program to becoming a member of a network, as well as social skills such as self-confidence and empathy.

This paper argues that the Europeanization process in Türkiye has brought about domestic changes throughout society, from universities to civil society. It has also promoted the social inclusion of young people through various courses, programs and departments. One example is the course named IRE (Department of International Relations) 4314 Civil Society and the State, which is offered by Dokuz Eylül University.

2. Methodology

This paper uses observation and archival research at Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Business as a means of qualitative methodology. It is based on the findings of the undergraduate elective course IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State which was taught to about 60 student groups and 113 students in fall semesters between 2021 and 2024 at Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir, Türkiye. The article does not include the activities of all student groups that took the course between 2021 and 2024. This is because some groups were not active in the civil society organizations (CSOs) for which they volunteered and did not successfully complete the course.

IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State course consists of a two-stage learning process, theoretical and practical. The theoretical phase includes the first nine weeks of lectures on the conceptual background of civil society, its role in democratic transition and consolidation processes, its place in social movements, its place in Türkiye, the reforms carried out in the EU candidacy process, and the return from democratization and Europeanization processes since the 2010s. The remaining four weeks are dedicated to group presentations. Student groups within the class were required to volunteer in CSOs during the semester, play an active role in them, organize volunteering events in or outside of the Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Business, and participate in the Civil Week Exhibition at the end of the semester to showcase their efforts and inform visitors about their organization's goals and activities. The analysis is limited to the years 2021–2024.

3. Literature Review

The EU candidacy process has strengthened civil society in Türkiye through three mechanisms: EU funds, harmonization with the EU *acquis*, and social learning processes. The EU funds have empowered CSOs by providing opportunities to manage projects, organize activities, and raise awareness programs. With the Europeanization process, various types of organizations from ethnic and religious minorities, women, the elderly, the third sex to youth, the unemployed, immigrant, worker, and employer organizations were established. However, when we look at the literature analyzing the relationship between the EU and civil society, we see a significant difference between the studies conducted in the 2000–2005 period and those conducted since 2005. In the early 2000s, academic studies on this topic mainly focused on the positive impact of the EU and the achievements of civil society in Türkiye [3–5]. In contrast, in recent years, studies on the same field have reflected a more critical perspective, considering the developments in the candidacy process and crises in the domestic realm [5–9].

Despite the positive developments in the 2000s, it is not possible to speak of a strong, sustainable Europeanization process in Türkiye. The process, which is referred to as 'de-Europeanization', represents a reversal of all the progress that has been made in the name of strengthening democracy [10]. This trend is evident not only in Türkiye, but also in many EU member states. The reversal of reforms has weakened civil society. Nevertheless, Turkish civil society continues to contribute to democracy, despite the limitations imposed by current policies. The literature shows that civil society can emerge and act even within non-democratic regimes. In his book *Alternate Civilities*, Weller argues that associations and interest groups in Taiwan play a significant role in promoting democracy, despite their scope being more limited than that of Western civil society [11]. Conversely, Hansson and Weiss [12] and Al Qurtuby [13] posit that civil society in numerous Southeast Asian countries does not promote democratization, has been molded by authoritarian regimes and has become a catalyst for polarization in the region. In essence, civil society has become a partner of governments or political parties in many countries. Recognizing the diverse facets of civil society, this paper aims to demonstrate its positive impact and the participation of youth through a specific case study.

4. Theoretical Background: Social Constructivism and Europeanization

Social constructivism is a particularly relevant explanation for the end of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s of European integration. The approach starts from the assumption that material structures should be observed beyond biological facts [1]. Thus, social facts are determinants of material patterns. Secondly, since the social interaction of state and non-state actors constructs the environment, actors and their relations to institutions are important. Kauppi and Smith agree that social constructivism differs from the assumptions made by mainstream theories such as realism and liberalism. For social constructivism, rules, norms, identity, ideas, language, and discourses shape and construct a state, its policies, and its domestic environment [14,15].

The process of harmonization of the EU candidate countries with the Copenhagen criteria, i.e., the political, economic, and legal criteria, has been explained by social constructivism. This process has democratized the political sphere, promoted the protection of human rights, the rule of law, and an open market economy, and brought about constitutional reforms at the domestic level.

The social inclusion of various groups has been a consequence of Europeanization. Social inclusion ensures the participation of citizens in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres by providing them with opportunities and resources. Young people are also considered one of these groups. For the well-being of young people, for equality in benefiting from opportunities, and for their social integration, the social inclusion of youth brings peace to society [16]. Their social inclusion is key to enabling them to fulfil their potential by contributing to social life. This can take the form of volunteering, employment, or academic study. Young people have gone through a very critical turning point in the course of their education and training. The years spent in education prepare them for social life, from being a family child to becoming an individual in society [17].

Universities are educational institutions that house students from all social backgrounds. Some young people may be more disadvantaged than others, but all are leveled up and given equal opportunities through classes, student clubs, and university cafes. Courses are an important tool, combining lecture and practice to help students prepare for the labour market, improve their skills, and overcome barriers in social life.

EU policies aim to encourage young people to participate actively in all areas of society, such as education, social services, and the private sector. The objectives of the 'EU Youth Strategy' are to promote the social inclusion of young people and to identify the steps needed to Europeanize this process. These objectives focus on providing opportunities, active citizenship, solidarity, realizing the full potential of youth work and youth centers as a means of inclusion, following a cross-sectoral approach to prevent exclusion in several fields, developing intercultural awareness and combating prejudice, supporting information and education for young people about their rights, and promoting access to quality services such as transport, e-inclusion, health, and social services [18].

From a higher education perspective, youth inclusion can be achieved inside and outside universities. University students can impact social life by applying what they have learned in the classroom. In this way, civil society becomes a social learning mechanism for young people. Young people's voluntary work in CSOs develops their sense of citizenship, creates job opportunities, and, most importantly, adds value to their lives by helping others or working for the benefit of society, the environment, rights, etc. In the section below, civil society in Türkiye is explained to draw the scope of the role of youth from the past until recently.

5. Europeanization of Civil Society in Türkiye

Civil society refers to an organized society that is self-governing, delimited by state laws, monitors the state, ensures its accountability, and represents and protects the interests of different groups. It is a force for social peace by taking the initiative on many issues that are not priorities for the state. As one of the most important components of democratization, it both promotes and criticizes state policies and affects many areas. Since these are the main characteristics of civil society, the relationship between civil society and the state is, by its very nature, unstable.

Civil society comprises voluntary, nonviolent, and nongovernmental organizations that seek to transmit information, improve the functioning of the state, and support the formation of a more accountable structure [19]. Political society distinguishes itself from civil society by its political goal of seeking victory in elections. Civil society, as a space between the state and individuals, does not aim to rule the country. However, it aims to monitor and control the state and achieve the goals of actors peacefully and this consolidates democracy [4-7]. CSOs operate in many fields, including human rights, religious freedoms, and economic interests. Trade unions, interest groups,

associations, and foundations follow specific goals, and voluntary members work to realize those goals.

The development of civil society in Türkiye has not lasted long [20]. Before the Turkish Republic, the Ottoman Empire had provided limited rights to merchants and non-Muslim minorities to establish associations and foundations. The early years of the Turkish Republic focused on developing a national economy and protecting the borders against possible attacks, especially during the Second World War.

The democratic transition from a one-party to a multi-party system in 1946 was a turning point for civil society. However, military coups and coup initiatives between the 1960s and 1980s and the rise of terrorism in the 1990s led Türkiye to adopt more security-oriented policies, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, the statist approach has limited the empowerment of civil society in Türkiye. The state has heavily regulated civil society. This approach has made civil society ineffective in monitoring state policies [21]. The weakness of civil society has prevented social activism and has not contributed to the democratization of the country. The strong tradition of the state has not allowed non-state actors, including youth organizations, to influence domestic politics, thus limiting pluralism in all areas [22].

Civil society in Türkiye gained power for the first time at the end of the 1990s [7]. The domestic impact of Europeanization has been the main driver of civil society development. The candidacy process, which began in 1999, has brought about many constitutional and political reforms. It should be stressed, however, that these effects have not been permanent in Türkiye. The Cyprus issue, state policies after the 2010s, the 2016 coup initiative, and the politicization of EU-Türkiye relations have changed the positive atmosphere in the country and in civil society. The organizations that protect the rights and interests of different groups have been restricted for the sake of the security of the country [23].

Europeanization has maintained to be a motive power in civil society and youth policies, specifically at higher education in Türkiye. Social constructivists argue that CSOs play an important role in shaping society [1]. It brings a social learning process that includes interaction with various structures and obtaining new goals and expectations. Türkiye has had close economic, political, and cultural relations with Europe since the early years of the Republic. The association relationship that began in 1963 was transformed into a candidate relationship in 1999 with the Helsinki Summit. European norms and values were implemented in a reform process that can be considered a Europeanization process. Totally 9 harmonization packages have been adopted, and many constitutional amendments have reformed the 1982 Constitution.

CSOs bring trust, pluralism, altruism, empathy, and the creation of networks of social relations. Those organizations have the potential to serve in many fields and make life easier for the youth [24]. Voluntarism in civil society means that all citizens voluntarily abide by the rules of the state. It encourages them to live together in harmony, despite their different interests [5]. Dolowitz and Marsh [25,26] argue that a voluntary policy transfer becomes apparent if there has not been a dominant pressure over an institution for a policy change. Europeanization has been a significant tool that directly affects the domestic environment and changes policies to benefit society in a peaceful manner. In this process, an active civil society serves the transparency of governance, enables policy oversight, and helps to build a more democratic society.

The reforms in the 2000s and the EU programs in higher education in Türkiye have brought about social learning processes in Turkish society. Türkiye has Europeanized higher education institutions via the Bologna process since May 2001. The universities voluntarily adopted the reforms brought by the Bologna process [27]. It has transformed the departments and the offered courses within the universities. IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State course taught at Dokuz Eylül University has been one of the outcomes of this process, where the learners first understand the roots of civil society and later learn from their own experiences at CSOs. Students studying in this type of program or benefiting from the Erasmus exchange programs raise awareness of the freedoms, the role of civil society, democracy, and universal values. The research by PODEM titled "Values, Interactions, and Aspirations: Understanding University-level Youth in Turkey and Europe," conducted with European and Turkish youth in 2020, supports this argument that Erasmus exchange programs have increased the tolerance of university students for differences, and the Turkish students have gained a positive perception of the EU after their Erasmus experiences despite their pessimism about full membership of Türkiye [28]. On the other hand, Saleem, Kausar, and Deeba highlight the importance of practicing in a learning process. According to the authors, students' practices are social activities that place them in inclusive environments [19].

The sections below aim to shed light on university students' contributions to civil society and how those vol-

untary actions served their social inclusion in the case of Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir.

6. Findings

IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State course aims to teach students the theoretical background of civil society, democracy, and Europeanization, and to practice this theoretical background through voluntarism at CSOs. Between 2021 and 2024, 113 undergraduate students received this course. The **Table 1** below shows the number of students in class and the number of groups formed by the students between the aforementioned years.

Table 1. Students and Groups for Voluntary Work.

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Students	32	27	28	26	113
Groups	15	15	18	12	60

Source: This table was created by the author.

The variety of CSOs in which the students became volunteers explains the wide range of contributions by the youth to civil society. The **Table 2** below indicates the categorizations of those organizations where the students volunteered.

Table 2. The Civil Society Organizations Students Volunteered.

Student Organizations	Environmental Organizations	Aid Organizations	Organizations for Children	Educational/Youth Organizations	Other Organizations/Ngos
1. Dokuz Eylül Gönüllüler Topluluğu (Dokuz Eylül Volunteers Student Community)	1. Çevreci Enerji Derneği (Environmental Energy Association)	1. Turkish Red Crescent	1. Lösemili Çocuklar Vakfı - LÖSEV (Foundation for Children with Leukemia)	1. Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği (Association for Supporting Contemporary Life)	1. Konak Rotaract
2. Kadın Çalışmaları Topluluğu (Women Studies Student Community)	2. Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (Mediterranean Conservation Society)	2. Mahallede Dayanışma Var (There is Solidarity in the Neighbourhood) Project of İzmir Municipality	2. Türkiye Eğitim Gönüllüleri Vakfı-TEGV (Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye)	2. Youth Camps Project of Ministry of Youth and Sport of Türkiye	2. Eastern Mediterranean Institute
3. Erasmus Student Network of Dokuz Eylül University	3. Greenpeace Akdeniz (Greenpeace Mediterranean)	3. Sokak Çorbacıları Derneği (Sokak Çorbacıları Aid Association)	3. Servas Peace School	3. Alsancak Youth Center under the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Türkiye	3. TIAFI
4. PlatformUP Student Club		4. Karşıyaka Solidarity Platform of Municipality	4. Bir Dilek Tut Derneği (Make a Wish Association)	4. Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı (The Community Volunteers Foundation)	4. UNHCR English Conversation Facilitator Project
5. AISEC İzmir		5. Bizİzmir of İzmir Municipality	5. SosyalBen Foundation		5. UNICEF
		6. İmece İnisiyatifi (İmece Initiative)			

Total: 28 organizations.

Source: This table was created by the author.

6.1. Findings 1: Contributions of Youth to Civil Society

In this section, the contributions of the students to CSOs are analyzed under five categories: Contributions to student organizations, environmental organizations, aid organizations, organizations for children, educational/youth organizations, and other organizations/NGOs.

6.1.1. Contributions to Student Organizations

There were five student organizations in which the students acted as volunteers between the years 2021 and 2024. The first of those was Dokuz Eylül Gönüllüler Topluluğu (Dokuz Eylül Volunteers Student Community), which was founded in 2013 by university students to help both children and youth in need. The second was Kadın Çalışmaları Topluluğu (Women Studies Student Community), a student community founded in 2023 to protect the rights

of women and combat violence against them on campus. The third organization, PlatformUp Student Club, was founded in 2016 by Faculty of Business students to draw attention to gender equality and other United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals. Finally, the fifth organization, the Erasmus Student Network of Dokuz Eylül University, is a student club for incoming Erasmus students. AISEC İzmir is the fifth organization where students have become volunteers by contributing to international cultural exchange and promoting sustainable development goals.

The students taking the IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State course more actively participated in the PlatformUp Student Club. They took a role in organizing activities during the Orange Week of the Faculty of Business. Every year, between November 25 and December 10, the PlatformUp voluntary students paint the Faculty orange with the slogan “Paint the World Orange, End Violence Against Women”. The voluntary students made decorations and hung posters and banners to draw attention to violence against women. They mentored first-year students and students who came to the Faculty for the first time due to the pandemic, despite being in their second year. They collected second-hand clothes from business people and organized a fast fashion event at the Faculty. This activity drew attention to the importance of second-hand clothing in promoting sustainable development. The Platform-UP students also collaborated with the academic staff at the Faculty on a UNHCR project titled “Leave No One Behind” for the social integration of refugee students. They organized seminars, a chess tournament, and an international culture fair.

6.1.2. Contributions to Environmental Organizations

There were three environmental organizations in which the students actively participated between the years 2021 and 2024. The first organization was Çevreci Enerji Derneği – ÇED (Environmental Energy Association), established to protect the environment and promote renewable energy resources. The second organization was the Mediterranean Conservation Society, established in İzmir in 2012 to protect the endangered species in the Mediterranean basin. The third organization was the Greenpeace Akdeniz (Greenpeace Mediterranean).

The voluntary students at the Environmental Energy Association invited the head of the organization to give a speech about the renewable energy policy of Türkiye and the organization’s projects. The students wrote a research article on the energy sector in the organization’s magazine and established a unit for young volunteers. The voluntary students at Greenpeace Mediterranean participated in several online training programs. They raised awareness of people in İzmir streets with banners and brochures in their hands and gave information about global warming, environmental degradation, and the importance of recycling. The voluntary students at the Mediterranean Conservation Society edited the management plan of the association and translated it into English.

6.1.3. Contributions to Aid Organizations

IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State course students contributed to six aid organizations between 2021 and 2024. The first of them is the Turkish Red Crescent, which was established in 1868 under the name of the ‘Ottoman Society for The Aid of Wounded and Sick Soldiers’ to prevent or alleviate the suffering of humanity without discrimination, to protect the life and health of human, to ensure that his/her personality is respected and to ensure mutual understanding, friendship, respect, cooperation and constant peace between people. The second organization is the Mahallede Dayanışma Var (There is Solidarity in the Neighbourhood) Project of İzmir Municipality, which was established in 2007 with the aims of promoting quality education, gender equality, and reducing inequality. The third organization is Sokak Çorbacıları Derneği (Sokak Çorbacıları Aid Association), established in 2018. It provides hot soup to the homeless, those who work on the street, and disadvantaged groups. The fourth organization is Bizİzmir of İzmir Municipality. It was established to inform the city’s people about the municipality’s projects and promote their participation in decision-making processes. İmece İnisyatifi was the fifth organization in which the students acted voluntarily. It was founded in 2012 to help refugees by providing food, water, and medical aid.

Students volunteering with the Turkish Red Crescent took on different roles in the organization, such as distributing hygiene kits to women in deprived areas, visiting kindergartens, celebrating special days such as Republic Day with children in schools or squares, donating blood to the organization, and encouraging people to donate blood. The voluntary students stated that they won the appreciation and thanks of the parents and teachers of the children who accompanied them in their events. They also joined other Turkish Red Crescent members, officers, colonels, and veterans at Buca Çevik Bir Square to commemorate 10 November, which also commemorates the

founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

During blood donation, the students were in close contact with people of different ages, which helped them develop their communication skills. They also collected and distributed food for street animals. They planted trees in Buca, Izmir, after they learned how to plant. They attended several online meetings held by the Turkish Red Crescent, such as 'Training on Food and Hygiene Box Preparation' and 'Training on Digitalization and Digital Marketing.' The students volunteered at the organization's community centre in İzmir, where they spent four weeks as mentors in the Turkish language club to improve the Turkish language skills of 20 Syrian migrants, most of whom were housewives. Finally, the students invited Turkish Red Crescent representatives to the class. The representatives gave seminars about the organization's role in the social cohesion of migrants in Izmir and the organization's role in disaster management in Türkiye.

The volunteers of the Mahallede Dayanışma Var (There is Solidarity in the Neighbourhood) project of the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality participated in the training programs of the municipality and supported children living in deprived districts of Izmir by teaching them various courses, such as mathematics and science, and playing games with them every week during the semester. The volunteers from Sokak Çorbacıları Derneği (Sokak Çorbacıları Aid Association) helped the soup makers prepare the hot soup by buying the cooking utensils, chopping the vegetables, and pouring the soup into the bowls. Together with other volunteers, they went out to the Basmane area of İzmir to meet the homeless, mainly to distribute hot soup to them. Voluntary students at the Karşıyaka Solidarity Platform of the Municipality worked in an office at the municipality building to check and list the applications for aid from the needy people in Karşıyaka, İzmir. Then, they presented those lists to the social experts of the municipality to decide the aid recipients. Voluntary students at Bizİzmir of Izmir Municipality visited a nursing home and enjoyed their time with the elderly. Voluntary students at İmece İnisyatifi served food at lunchtimes, cleaned the places, taught French and English lessons, painted ceramics, and played games with children.

6.1.4. Contributions to Organizations for Children

IRE 4314 Civil Society and State students contributed to five organizations for children between 2021 and 2024. The first organization, Lösemili Çocuklar Vakfı -LÖSEV (Foundation for Children with Leukemia) LÖSEV, was founded in 1998 to treat children with leukemia in Türkiye. The second organization, Türkiye Eğitim Gönüllüleri Vakfı-TEGV (Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye), was established in 1995. It is one of the leading CSOs in Türkiye, dedicated to providing educational opportunities for children. The third organization, Servas Peace School, was established in July 2009 in the İkinci village of Antakya. It was activated in 2023 to support the children who survived the devastating earthquake in Hatay as a sub-project of an international non-governmental organization, Servas International. The fourth organization, Bir Dilek Tut Derneği (Make a Wish Association), was founded in the US in 1980 and founded in Türkiye in 2005 to fulfill the wishes of children aged 3-18 who struggle with life-threatening illnesses. Finally, the fifth organization, SosyalBen Foundation, was founded in 2013 to enable children aged 7-13 living in disadvantaged areas to discover and develop their talents.

Voluntary students at LÖSEV established 'Dokuz Eylül University LÖSEV Fayda Community' and became supervisory board members at this student club of the organization. They created the community's Instagram account to inform and influence students at the university. They started to hold meetings for this club and started a campaign on social media during the awareness week of '2-8 November Children with Leukemia'. The students had visited LÖSEV Seferihisar natural tangerine farm and collected tangerines for the children with leukemia. They sold LÖSEV gifts at LÖSEV caravans. They met with children with leukemia and their families and organized parties for them. They hang posters on leukemia in the Faculty of Business to inform the university staff and students about the illness. The students also invited LÖSEV representatives to the class to give a speech on leukemia and the projects of LÖSEV.

Voluntary students at Türkiye Eğitim Gönüllüleri Vakfı-TEGV (Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye) completed a training program on voluntarism. They later taught several lectures under 'Algo Digital', 'Science Mind', 'I Read, I Play', 'English Speaking Club', 'My Hidden Treasure', 'The World of Numbers', and 'Learn Math and Science with Fun'. Voluntary students at Servas Peace School in Antakya hosted volunteers from abroad, ran financial aid campaigns for the organization, helped with the social media requirements, prepared activity tracking charts, organized activities for children to improve their handicraft skills, colored and painted the ruined school walls after the earthquake, and organized a farewell night with the children.

Voluntary students at Bir Dilek Tut Derneği (Make a Wish Association) communicated with several children with significant health problems and received the wishes of a bedroom set and PlayStation 4. They also created a QR code that redirects directly to the Make a Wish donation site when read to the phone and prepared small New Year's cards by combining these codes with the photos of the donation campaigns of our wish children, which were shared with consent. Finally, voluntary students at SosyalBen Association organized programs for special days and weeks, such as the 10 November Commemoration of Atatürk, 20 November Children's Rights Day, 5 December World Volunteers Day, and 9 September, the foundation day of SosyalBen Foundation. During the pandemic, they painted, exercised, and danced with children between 7 and 13 in online meetings. They also taught science and writing skills and drew cartoons with children in 40-minute workshops.

6.1.5. Contributions to Educational/Youth Organizations

IRE 4314 Civil Society and State students contributed to four educational or youth organizations between 2021 and 2024. The first one was Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği (Association for Supporting Contemporary Life), which was founded in 1989 with the goals of protecting the principles and revolutions of Atatürk, promoting human rights, and developing scientific thoughts. The second voluntarism project was the Youth Camps Project of the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Türkiye, started in 2012 to support youth in meeting social, physical, cultural, and personal needs. The third organization was Alsancak Youth Center under the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Türkiye to foster personal development and social participation among youth in İzmir. The fourth organization was Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı (The Community Volunteers Foundation), founded in 2002 to increase the social responsibility of the youth in Türkiye.

The Association for Supporting Contemporary Life volunteers participated in the weekly meetings to discuss news on the agenda, Turkish politics, movies, music, and sports together. Voluntary students at Youth Camps Project of the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Türkiye participated in museum visits and arts and sports activities. Voluntary students at Alsancak Youth Center took roles in several activities such as tree planting, environmental cleaning, feeding of street animals, visits to İzmir Metropolitan Municipality Awareness Center, and celebration of World Volunteering Day with volunteers from other CSOs in İzmir. Finally, voluntary students at Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı—TOG (The Community Volunteers Foundation) visited the nursing home located in Buca Social Life Center. TOG and Buca Innovation Center cooperated with people who needed clean clothes. The students gathered clothes from their friends at Dokuz Eylül University and the dormitory where they were accommodated to contribute to this project.

6.1.6. Contributions to Other Organizations/NGOs

IRE 4314 Civil Society and State students voluntarily contributed to five organizations: Konak Rotaract, Eastern Mediterranean Institute, TIAFI, UNHCR, and UNICEF. Voluntary students at Konak Rotaract joined environmental projects and actively participated in international projects. The students at Eastern Mediterranean Institute prepared research projects and organized activities to draw attention to international conflicts. The voluntary students at TIAFI, a civil society organization for refugees, taught refugee children several courses such as English, Turkish, and mathematics, and played games with them each weekend.

The voluntary students at UNHCR and Manisa Yunus Emre Municipality's English Conversation Facilitator Project became facilitators for Syrian refugees and taught them English for two months. They noticed that the beneficiaries could not speak Turkish, either. Then, the voluntary students decided to give both Turkish and English lessons to the refugees in the project. UNICEF volunteers applied to a Faculty-wide competition to raise donations for the organization. They won the competition with their project. Their project was about broadcasting donations on a platform they had jointly decided on with UNICEF. They planned to agree with a broadcaster who would be a role model for children, like not smoking, not using alcohol, and not displaying abusive speech on his/her broadcasts.

6.2. Findings II: Social Inclusion of Youth in İzmir

This section analyzes the social inclusion of youth in İzmir in four categories: Social inclusion in student organizations, environmental organizations, aid organizations, organizations for children, and other organizations/NGOs.

6.2.1. Social Inclusion in Student Organizations

Women Studies Student Community volunteers demonstrated their commitment to creating a safer and more equitable campus environment. Voluntary students at the Erasmus Student Network of Dokuz Eylül University contributed to the organization's social activities, such as football matches and trips to historical places. This socialization contributed to cultural exchange among students from European countries and Türkiye.

The PlatformUP students enabled their friends to join the community as new members. This indicates that voluntarism is something that is learned, and the learning process has a snowballing effect by spreading its impact on the social environment of each volunteer. The students who volunteered at AISEC built strong connections with the international students abroad, developed their language skills, and discovered their potential. The voluntary students showed that people could change each other's lives if they, as refugees, women, and men, listened to each other.

6.2.2. Social Inclusion at Environmental Organizations

Environmental Energy Association members and Mediterranean Conservation Society volunteers learned about endangered species in Türkiye, information on ecology, and the importance of grammar, both in Turkish and English, in dealing with the association's reports. Greenpeace volunteers draw people's attention to environmental degradation, climate change, and recycling in the street. They communicated with people to promote environmental protection.

6.2.3. Social Inclusion at Aid Organizations

The voluntary students at the Turkish Red Crescent received first aid training and conflict resolution training from the organization. These programs showed the importance of tolerance and nonviolent communication. They learned about blood donation and raised awareness among people who wanted to donate blood. They took part in tree plantation, kindergarten visits in disadvantaged districts of Izmir, and took part as representatives of the Turkish Red Crescent in special days. The Turkish Red Crescent students improved their communication skills, overcame their shyness, learned not to give even if rejected, and understood the importance of donating blood. They witnessed the problems experienced by the Syrian women in the Izmir Community Center. By taking the role of facilitators in Turkish-speaking lessons, they contributed to the well-being of those women tackling language barriers.

Voluntary students at Mahallede Dayanışma Var (There is Solidarity in the Neighbourhood) Project of Izmir Municipality became members of the families they visited. They became role models for the children, and they learned how to treat a child. Voluntary students at Sokak Çorbacıları Derneği (Sokak Çorbacıları Aid Association) learned that even the simplest act, such as giving the needy soup and bread, can be effective in keeping those people as a part of the society and making sure they feel support and love from other people. This volunteering project both made them more aware, opened a new dimension to their empathy, and established a bond with their group mates. The students also learned that the association informed them not to communicate closely with the homeless people and not to distribute soup to children without family members. This volunteer work made them aware of the need to be emotionally detached while helping the needy and protecting unaccompanied children from any possible danger on the streets.

6.2.4. Social Inclusion at Organizations for Children

The voluntary students at Make a Wish Association and LÖSEV learned to encourage people to take responsibility for children. They learned to be strong and never give up in hard times. They contributed to civil activism and fundamental human rights for children in Turkish society. The students at SosyalBen Association learned to plan and organize events. They received training of communication with children from the Association. They improved their crisis management skills while solving last-minute crises.

6.2.5. Social Inclusion at Other Organizations/Ngos

Students involved in Konak Rotaract made strong connections with the international community and gained skills in leadership, project management, and networking. UNHCR English-speaking club members became aware

of the language problems of refugees. The students supported those refugees to be able to reduce the difficulties they face in their social lives.

Volunteering at TIAFI changed the views of students. They realized that there is no difference between a Turkish child and a Syrian child. This realization opened a new window in the minds of these young people and broke their prejudices against refugees. UNICEF volunteers stated that drawing attention to children's rights and preparing for fundraising activities for UNICEF has been meaningful. Through voluntary activities, they became role models for the youth and children.

7. A Social Constructivist Analysis on Findings

The social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, such as minorities, refugees, women, children, the disabled and interest groups, including trade unions and business organizations, as well as free media, is one of the requirements of a strong civil society. A strong civil society fosters democratic consolidation within a state. However, Türkiye has a strong state tradition, and this has hindered the development of a strong civil society. The roots of this tradition can be traced back to the early years of the Ottoman Empire, when the state asserted its supremacy over its subjects in Anatolia. The modernization of the Ottoman Empire began with the Tanzimat and Reform Edicts in the 19th century. These turning points indicated that Westernization had become an important tool for modernizing society. However, the process of modernization had shaken the Empire's founding principles, resulting in the establishment of a new Turkish state in 1923. The first president of the new Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, encouraged a democratic transition to a multi-party system at the end of the 1920s. However, unsuccessful transition steps resulted in the democratization process being delayed until 1946, with the introduction of a multi-party system.

Between 1946 and the 1990s, civil society played no significant role in monitoring state policies, informing society, or mediating between different stakeholders. However, the Europeanization process, a top-down policy that began with Türkiye's EU candidacy in 1999, led to Turkish CSOs being funded by various EU programs, invited to attend meetings with different stakeholders, consulted by state institutions and involved in numerous projects. During the 1990s and 2000s, there was a consensus between civil society and the state regarding the EU membership process. For this reason, the EU's influence changed the dynamics of society. The number of Turkish CSOs grew rapidly from 2005, when EU accession negotiations began, until the 2010s. However, policies implemented since the 2016 coup attempt have led to a significant contraction in the field of civil society.

The constructivist turn in Turkish politics following the EU candidacy brought about a learning process in various environments [29]. One such environment is the higher education system. Changes in the educational sphere have also been influenced by Europeanization, which has brought harmonization to the Bologna process. This has led to new courses being offered, such as IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State. This course aimed to inform students about the role of civil society in democratic transitions and consolidations.

The Europeanization process, as a constructivist change in the European political environment, has brought about social learning processes that transform domestic actors [30]. IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State has emphasized the significant role of norms and democratic values in society. Specifically, the social learning process with IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State raised students' awareness of reforms in the field of Turkish civil society, encouraging them to exercise their right to join an association, participate in voluntary organisations, and create an impact on themselves and their environment. This gradual individual transformation lends further support to the social constructivist argument that rules, norms, identity, ideas, language and discourse shape and construct a state, its policies and its domestic environment [14,15].

The study observed that 113 students who took the course IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State, joined 28 organizations and participated in many activities for at least four months during the fall semesters. They learned how to act and behave towards the target groups of these organizations, discovered their limits and the unsuccessful or negative sides of these organizations, worked without pay and developed empathy, altruism and participation before their graduation.

The change in the students' behaviour towards disadvantaged groups, interest groups and policies can be seen as a top-down process, since the students applied the course instructions to succeed. However, it could be argued that these students initiated a bottom-up change in their environment. For example, LÖSEV volunteers at DEÜ reactivated the LÖSEV office and began delivering seminars on leukaemia and volunteering at LÖSEV within the university. PlatformUP students also voluntarily participated in a project titled 'Leave No One Behind', supported

by UNHCR Türkiye and DEÜ. They actively promoted the social integration of refugees through various activities. This is consistent with the social constructivist argument that social facts determine material patterns [31]. The students' voluntary contributions to society have served to transform approaches.

Another assumption of social constructivism is that there is a close connection between the agent and the structure. According to this assumption, if agents change their perspective, the structure changes too [11]. In the context of voluntary acts within the scope of IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State, it was observed that the 113 students contributed both their own life experiences and to the lives of people in need. During the 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024 semesters, the students transformed their perspectives through the social learning mechanisms of the theoretical and practical phases of voluntarism. For example, they developed empathy and a sense of responsibility by helping children with leukaemia. They recognized the needs of Syrian children during voluntary activities and abandoned their discriminatory attitudes towards people of different nationalities. Their inclusive attitudes impacted homeless people. They promoted the educational needs of children and families in cities devastated by earthquakes. They raised awareness of climate change and sustainability.

Social constructivism has its limitations when it comes to explaining the transformation of political systems. It should be noted that Turkish civil society has undergone considerable change since the 2010s. However, the weakening of civil society does not necessarily mean that there will be no positive developments or transformations. As social constructivism suggests, change is possible.

8. Conclusions

The EU has been a normative actor for the candidate country, Türkiye, and has been a driving force for democratization since the candidacy status was granted in 1999. The academia has an important role in distributing this impact to the higher education institutions and students. Accordingly, the Bologna process started in 2001 and has been a key instrument for Turkish academics. Courses or projects with a focus on civil society development have also been a motivation for the social learning process of university youth. The voluntary activities of 30 student groups in IRE 4314 Civil Society and the State between 2021 and 2024 in diverse fields such as students' rights, environmental protection, education, youth, children's rights, and charity organizations show that participation in civic activities serves both civil society development and youth social inclusion. Their participation in civil society is also conducive to the social inclusion of youth through building bridges between different social groups.

The students' voluntary work has increased the efficiency of the city's organizations, drawn attention to the main problems in society, spread the positive impact of these organizations on society, and accelerated the development of civil society. On the other hand, these voluntary activities have created a variety of social networks, opportunities for internships or jobs, and, more importantly, provided a learning process for empathy, altruism, collective action, and self-realization in one's own environment.

Social change is a prerequisite for creating a democratic civil society, and it is a long-term process. Although Türkiye's relations with the EU are virtually frozen for various reasons, such as the Cyprus issue and the deconsolidation of democracy in Türkiye, the constitutional changes of the 2000s are still alive. Moreover, the social learning process has been in progress since the beginning of the candidate status in 1999, despite the degeneration since the 2010s. Universal characteristics of EU values and their transformative power in Turkish society have openly influenced the participation of youth in civil society and their social inclusion at a local level. It can be concluded that a more vibrant and democratic civil society is built through the sustainability and spill-over of such educational policies.

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Informed Consent Statement

The students' consent was waived because the paper involves archival research at Dokuz Eylül University Faculty of Business and is not methodologically based on interviews, questionnaires, or fieldwork.

Data Availability Statement

The archival data is unavailable due to the privacy about the voluntary students' activities at civil society organizations.

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