

TÜRKİYE AND THE INTERNATIONAL FUNDING ECOSYSTEM

International funding often emerges as a controversial topic in Turkey's political, intellectual, and academic debates. In arguments opposing certain ideas, a logical fallacy known as *ad hominem* is frequently employed, portraying proponents as agents of foreign funding states. This not only criminalizes international funds in the public eye but also undermines the culture of public debate, opening the door to labeling specific viewpoints as unpatriotic. As a result, international funding takes on a mythologized character. Its volume, distribution mechanisms, recipient institutions, and impact capacity are rarely examined and are instead left to the imagination of the public.

Moreover, ulusalist, Islamist and nationalist groups that use international funding as a tool of accusation often target more liberal segments of society. The intention here is to frame these funds as being solely transferred from the European Union and the United States and to emphasize that they benefit liberal-leaning individuals and institutions. Thus, the accusation of being a “grant seeker” (*fonculuk*) has become a tool in domestic political battles, making it nearly impossible to have an objective discussion on the topic. In other words, the term has become more of a rhetorical device, accepted uncritically as a taboo or a societal sin.

The objective of this study is to examine the international funding ecosystem in Turkey from various perspectives. In doing so, it aims to challenge the conspiratorial mindset built around *fonculuk* by presenting concrete data. To achieve this, the study will seek to answer the following questions:

- **Why do international funds exist, and what do they signify in terms of freedoms?:** This question will be addressed through a theoretical lens, exploring the relationship between international funds, individual freedoms, and socio-economic development. The positive and negative impacts of international funding on these issues will be discussed, drawing from relevant academic literature.
- **How is the concept of international funding perceived in Türkiye?:** This question will be addressed through the results of a public opinion survey conducted in collaboration with the Metropoll Research Company. The data generated from questions designed to understand public perception of funding and its impact on society will be analyzed to offer insights into how international funding is viewed by the Turkish public.
- **What is the relationship between international funding and the media & civil society in Türkiye?:** This question will be answered by evaluating the current relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and media platforms in Türkiye and international funding mechanisms. The assessment will be based on data gathered through methods such as archival research and media monitoring.

INTERNATIONAL FUNDS AND DEMOCRACY

Following the end of the Cold War, the role of international funds in global politics began to expand significantly. During the Cold War era, the flow of funds was shaped by a bipolar political landscape dominated by statist and security-centered concerns. These funds were primarily

distributed by states to strategic actors in line with the interests of the alliances to which they belonged, often driven by security motivations. As such, the relationship between funders and recipients could not be explained through the concept of civil society. Rather, it implied operating on behalf of a particular state or alliance. Therefore, the interpretation that equates international funds with foreign state agents is essentially a product of the Cold War mindset.

Moreover, the funds allocated during the Cold War were primarily focused on political activities rather than humanitarian, social, or economic development. The bipolar world dominated by the U.S. and the USSR aimed to ensure the cohesion and functionality of the alliance systems led by each superpower. As a result, the internal stability, or instability, of member states was a critical concern. Consequently, these funds were expected to have political impact, and thus, they often had an intelligence-related character, were used by a very limited group of individuals, and lacked transparency.

With the end of the Cold War, this bipolar world order came to an end and was replaced by a globalization process led by the United States. The period in which the two blocs perceived each other solely as security threats and prioritized political agendas came to a close. Instead, a new era emerged where goods, services, people, and financial assets could move more freely across borders. During this period, formerly closed systems also began to pursue democratic transitions, and there was a growing expectation that democracy would be embraced as a global norm. This marked the era famously described by Francis Fukuyama as “the end of history.”

However, globalization has produced both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand, the volume of free trade, as envisioned by liberal international relations theory, increased, leading to a rise in global prosperity. Contrary to fears, the state of peace among countries embracing liberal values persisted even after the Cold War, despite the disappearance of a unifying threat such as the Soviet Union. On the other hand, new challenges emerged, including transnational terrorism, migration waves, and cyber security threats. As early as 1996, James Rosenau likened the international system to an airplane caught in turbulence, suggesting that we may need to live with constant shocks and uncertainty.

With globalization, both the nature and scale of international funds evolved. Many international organizations launched development programs, and local institutions began supporting such efforts by opening branches or appointing representatives in other countries. These programs were not limited to areas like education, health, or the economy. Concepts like human development and political development were also prioritized to an equal degree. Consequently, the values embraced by people and the nature of the political systems they lived under gained importance. Funds were allocated to countries undergoing democratization, and channeled toward groups believed to support such transitions. It is crucial to note here that the ideal of democracy was defined as *above politics*, that is, individual liberties and democratic values were seen as normative and universal, rather than as tools for political maneuvering.

Nevertheless, the realist perspective, which viewed democratic values as instruments of U.S. hegemony, objected to this framing. According to realism, it was impossible for international funds to remain apolitical or detached from the security concerns of the donor state. Especially in the post-Putin era, states like the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Islamic

Republic of Iran reacted strongly to the global dissemination of democratic values. They perceived such efforts as threats to the security of their regimes. This discomfort manifested as heightened sensitivity to national sovereignty and an allergy to globalization. Consequently, these regimes promoted the idea that international funding and development programs constituted an assault on their national sovereignty.

Such regimes developed a two-pronged response to the international flow of funds brought on by globalization. Domestically, they showed little tolerance for foreign aid organizations and NGOs, often criminalizing their activities and subjecting them to legal restrictions. At the same time, they did not hesitate to exploit the openness created by globalization. Particularly through their own international funding mechanisms, they sought to engage with civil society in strategic or Western countries, sometimes to undermine democracies or influence internal politics in key regions. This approach resembled a 19th-century mercantilist mindset: maximizing exports while minimizing imports through quotas and tariffs.

At the end of the day, the hope that globalization would foster the spread of democratic norms has ironically been undermined by the very instruments globalization created. One of the clearest examples of this paradox can be found in the ways far-right and far-left groups in Europe and the United States have allegedly received funding from the Putin regime, thereby weakening centrist politics in those regions. Moreover, these countries have successfully blocked international support that could have empowered domestic demands for democracy by enacting legal frameworks such as "foreign agent laws." In other words, while globalization has indeed created a field for international funding, it has simultaneously generated its own structural handicaps in realizing the norm-based systems those funds aim to promote.

To further concretize this issue, we may examine the foreign agent laws enacted in Russia and Georgia. On November 21, 2012, the Federal Law No. 121-FZ, "On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Activities of Non-commercial Organizations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent," came into force. Commonly referred to as Russia's Foreign Agent Law, this regulation mandates that any individual or organization receiving foreign support or suspected of being under foreign influence must register as a "foreign agent."

Unlike the United States' Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)—which primarily targets lobbyists and political consultants working on behalf of foreign principals—the Russian law interprets even the slightest degree of foreign funding as equivalent to foreign control. Whereas FARA is generally applied to professional agents serving foreign governments, the Russian legislation affects a wide array of civil society actors, including NGOs, media outlets, journalists, and individuals. Under this law, Russian non-profit organizations, with the exception of those owned by the state or municipalities, can be designated as foreign agents if they engage in political activity while receiving foreign funding. Political activity is defined broadly, encompassing any influence on public opinion or public policy, including actions such as submitting petitions and making public demands, which allows the law to be indiscriminately applied across the civil society sector.

Under President Putin's administration, the Foreign Agent Law has been used to initiate investigations, shut down operations, and detain numerous civil society organizations, media

outlets, and individuals. Many actions prosecuted under this law have been challenged at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), resulting in rulings against the Russian government. In one decision, the ECHR concluded that Russia's "foreign agents" framework fosters an atmosphere of suspicion toward independent voices and civil society, bearing "features of a totalitarian regime." Rather than serving the purpose of transparency, the legislation was found to undermine democratic foundations by stigmatizing and silencing independent actors in public debate. The Russian Foreign Agent Law has become one of the most powerful tools for obstructing opposition activity and stands as a defining symbol of the authoritarian character of Putin's regime.

Similarly, in Georgia, civil society organizations benefiting from international funding have been accused of acting as agents on behalf of foreign states. In May 2024, a new foreign agent bill introduced in the Georgian Parliament triggered nationwide controversy and mass protests. The legislation, referred to as the "foreign influence agents" law, significantly restricts the operating space of civil society within the country. It mandates that organizations and media outlets receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad must register themselves as serving the interests of a "foreign power." The law imposes heavy bureaucratic obligations and sensitive reporting requirements on these entities, while those who fail to comply face steep fines and vaguely defined criminal liabilities. The ruling Georgian Dream Party claims that the law is intended to increase transparency in civil society funding and prevent foreign interference. However, critics argue that it will derail Georgia's path toward European Union membership and distance the country from core democratic norms.

While authoritarian regimes label civil society organizations and media institutions in their own countries that receive international funding as foreign agents, they have simultaneously created space to support extremist groups financed by their own state apparatus. This dual approach allows them to both destabilize democratic countries and undermine social cohesion through disinformation campaigns.

For instance, Russia has cultivated strategic relationships with far-right and far-left groups across Europe to weaken democratic systems and Western-centric institutions. Anton Shekhovtsov notes that Russia's support for far-right movements has deepened political and social polarization in Europe. These groups view institutions like the European Union and NATO as threats, while embracing Russia as an alternative political model. They admire Moscow's neo-conservative, semi-authoritarian governance style. By collaborating with Russia, these far-right actors aim to distance their countries from Euro-Atlantic structures and restore national sovereignty, thereby enhancing Moscow's regional influence. This relationship is instrumentalized by Russia to undermine democratic values and solidarity in the West. According to Peter Kreko, far-right parties such as France's Front National, Belgium's Vlaams Belang, Hungary's Jobbik, and Greece's Golden Dawn, as well as far-left parties like Germany's Die Linke and France's Front de Gauche, have developed political ties with Russia and expressed support for its actions in Ukraine and Crimea. Some party leaders even acted as observers in the Crimean referendum and voted against European Parliament resolutions critical of Russia's Eastern European policies.

Moreover, Russia continues to pursue its destabilization efforts in Western societies through disinformation campaigns via media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today. Research by Kragh and Åsberg revealed that the Russian government produced fake news via Sputnik News to influence Swedish public perception of their own government and the European Union. Sputnik

amplifies anti-establishment narratives by highlighting the failures of Western refugee policies, economic and social shortcomings of Western governments, and mistrust toward Western tech corporations. It also frequently features statements from local anti-government politicians or activists in the West, making its propaganda appear more credible. Through these tactics, Russia seeks to manipulate the information ecosystem of Western societies, target political stability, and erode the foundations of democratic discourse.

International funding and its political ramifications are among the most hotly debated issues in today's world. Foreign interventions in U.S. presidential elections, the use of digital tools to manipulate public opinion, and the disproportionate influence wielded by rising extremist groups all pose significant threats to the future of democracies. As a result, globalization and international funding have come to be seen as existential threats, particularly by European states. The situation reached a critical point in Romania when the results of the 2024 presidential election were annulled after NATO-opponent Georgescu emerged victorious. This move raised the alarming prospect of abandoning democratic principles in the name of protecting democracy itself. Georgescu's campaign, largely conducted via the social media platform TikTok, was amplified by individuals allegedly connected to Russian networks, creating a troubling paradox: either an anti-democratic candidate wins the election, or democratic principles are violated to protect democracy, arguably the worst-case scenario.

So, what is the situation in Türkiye? Do international funds truly exert influence over society and politics? Are the actors supported by these funds perceived as legitimate by the public? Do they have a political agenda? Or is it possible that the public perceives them differently due to the influence of widespread propaganda?

TÜRKİYE AND INTERNATIONAL FUNDS

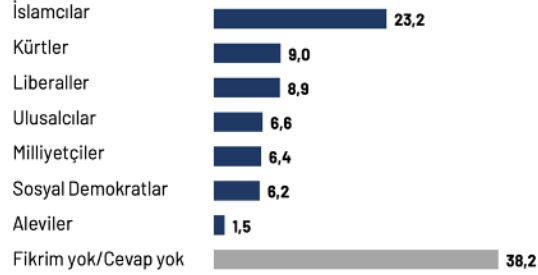
To understand how international funds are perceived in Türkiye, we collaborated with the Metropoll Research Company and conducted a public opinion survey between February 14–28, 2025. As part of this study, we asked four questions to explore how institutions benefiting from international funding are viewed by the public.

Our first question focused on which ideological group was perceived to benefit the most from international funds. In the introduction, we mentioned that public accusations of being “funded” are often directed toward liberal-leaning institutions by political elites. However, our research revealed results that contradict this perception. According to the survey, 23.2% of respondents believe that Islamists are the ideological group that benefits the most from foreign funding. Among CHP voters, 37% think Islamists are the main beneficiaries; this figure rises to 43.4% among İYİ Party voters and 26.3% among DEM voters. The second most frequently mentioned group is the Kurds, at 9%. Liberals come in third, with 8.9%, only slightly ahead of ulusalists (6.6%) and nationalists (6.4%)—the very groups who often label others as “foreign-funded.”

These results suggest that the general public has developed its own perspective on international funds, independent of elite-level discourse. The prevailing view is that Islamists are by far the primary recipients of foreign funding. Liberals, who are frequently accused of being “funded”, fall within a modest 6% to 9% range, on par with or even trailing other ideological groups. Interestingly, 38.2% of respondents declined to answer this question, a noteworthy figure that

indicates the “foreign-funded” accusation is perhaps not as widespread as public debates might suggest, and that a significant portion of society remains indifferent to this issue.

Sizce aşağıdaki siyasi gruplardan hangisi yurt dışı fonlarından daha fazla faydalanmaktadır?

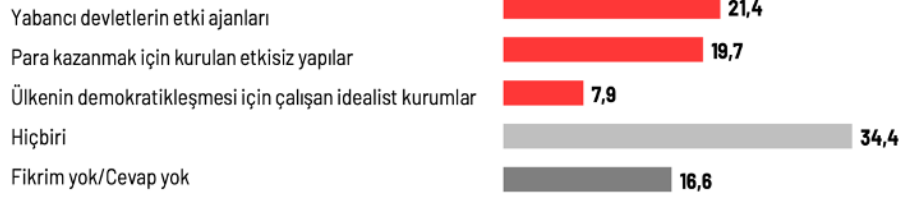


14 Mayıs 2023 Milletvekili seçiminde oy verilen partiye göre dağılım %

| | İslamcılar | Kürtler | Liberaller | Ulusalçılar | Milliyetçiler | Sosyal Demokratlar | Aleviler | Fikrim yok/Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
| AK Parti | 7,4 | 9,7 | 9,1 | 11,7 | 7,7 | 3,7 | 4,3 | 46,3 | 100 |
| CHP | 37,0 | 7,4 | 5,4 | 3,5 | 6,6 | 5,8 | | 34,2 | 100 |
| MHP | 3,5 | 8,1 | 22,1 | | 10,5 | 16,3 | | 39,5 | 100 |
| İYİ Parti | 43,4 | 16,2 | 11,1 | 2,0 | 3,0 | 3,0 | | 21,2 | 100 |
| DEM Parti | 26,3 | 12,5 | 8,8 | 6,3 | 5,0 | 11,3 | | 30,0 | 100 |
| Diğer | 32,7 | 9,6 | 6,7 | 2,9 | 8,7 | 5,8 | | 33,7 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 23,2 | 9,0 | 8,9 | 6,6 | 6,4 | 6,2 | 1,5 | 38,2 | 100 |

Our second question aimed to understand how the public defines institutions that benefit from international funds. One notable result is that only 21.4% of respondents view these institutions as extensions of foreign governments. Meanwhile, 19.4% describe them as ineffective entities established merely to generate income. Only 7.9% believe these institutions contribute to the democratization of the country. Remarkably, the proportion of those who selected “none of the above” or did not respond at all adds up to 51%. This reflects a continued public disinterest in the topic. When combined with the 19.4% who view such organizations as profit-driven and ineffective, it becomes clear that nearly 70% of society does not perceive international funding as carrying political weight or significance. In other words, while international funding might be a central subject of elite and intellectual debate, it evidently holds little relevance in the eyes of the broader public.

Uluslararası bir kuruluştan fon desteği alarak faaliyetlerini sürdüren bir kurumu nasıl tanımlarsınız?



14 Mayıs 2023 Milletvekili seçiminde oy verilen partiye göre dağılım %

| | Yabancı devletlerin etki ajanları | Para kazanmak için kurulan etkisiz yapılar | Ülkenin demokratikleşmesi için çalışan idealist kurumlar | Hiçbiri | Fikrim yok/Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|-------------|----------------------|------------|
| AK Parti | 17,7 | 11,4 | 10,0 | 38,9 | 22,0 | 100 |
| CHP | 26,0 | 20,9 | 8,9 | 31,8 | 12,4 | 100 |
| MHP | 32,6 | 11,6 | 2,3 | 46,5 | 7,0 | 100 |
| İYİ Parti | 33,0 | 27,0 | 10,0 | 12,0 | 18,0 | 100 |
| DEM Parti | 3,8 | 19,0 | 11,4 | 45,6 | 20,3 | 100 |
| Diğer | 21,2 | 31,7 | 7,7 | 28,8 | 10,6 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 21,4 | 19,7 | 7,9 | 34,4 | 16,6 | 100 |

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The demographic breakdown of this data is also noteworthy. Men, individuals aged between 35 and 54, and university graduates are significantly more likely than other subgroups to perceive such institutions as foreign influence agents. For instance, while only 10.6% of primary school graduates hold this view, the rate jumps to 31.8% among university graduates. Similarly, 18.3% of women perceive these institutions as influence agents, compared to 24.8% of men. Among those aged 18–34, 18.1% express this view, and among those over 55, the rate is 17%, whereas in the 35–54 age group, it rises to 27.6%. This suggests that as political curiosity increases, particularly along the lines of gender, age, and educational background, individuals tend to adopt a more state-centric and competition-oriented perspective. Conversely, when this interest diminishes, people are more inclined to refrain from making judgments.

Uluslararası bir kuruluştan fon desteği alarak faaliyetlerini sürdüren bir kurumu nasıl tanımlarsınız?

Cinsiyete göre dağılım %

| | Yabancı devletlerin etki ajanları | Para kazanmak için kurulan etkisiz yapılar | Ülkenin demokratikleşmesi için çalışan idealist kurumlar | Hiçbiri | Fikrim yok/ Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Kadın | 18,3 | 19,0 | 8,3 | 34,4 | 20,0 | 100 |
| Erkek | 24,5 | 20,3 | 7,5 | 34,5 | 13,2 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 21,4 | 19,7 | 7,9 | 34,4 | 16,6 | 100 |

Yaş'a göre dağılım %

| | Yabancı devletlerin etki ajanları | Para kazanmak için kurulan etkisiz yapılar | Ülkenin demokratikleşmesi için çalışan idealist kurumlar | Hiçbiri | Fikrim yok/ Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| 18-34 | 18,0 | 23,7 | 8,9 | 39,1 | 10,4 | 100 |
| 35-54 | 27,6 | 18,9 | 7,1 | 30,6 | 15,8 | 100 |
| 55+ | 17,1 | 15,8 | 8,1 | 33,9 | 25,2 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 21,4 | 19,7 | 7,9 | 34,4 | 16,6 | 100 |

Eğitim durumuna göre dağılım %

| | Yabancı devletlerin etki ajanları | Para kazanmak için kurulan etkisiz yapılar | Ülkenin demokratikleşmesi için çalışan idealist kurumlar | Hiçbiri | Fikrim yok/ Cevap yok | Toplam |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Ortaokul mezunu ve altı | 10,6 | 15,6 | 9,1 | 39,7 | 25,0 | 100 |
| Lise mezunu | 30,4 | 22,0 | 5,4 | 33,3 | 8,9 | 100 |
| Üniversite mezunu ve üzeri | 31,8 | 25,1 | 9,0 | 24,7 | 9,4 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 21,4 | 19,7 | 7,9 | 34,4 | 16,6 | 100 |

Another question focused on the profile of institutions receiving international funding. Participants were asked which type of institution receiving such funds they found most concerning. Contrary to common assumptions, the public appears more disturbed by state institutions accessing international funds than by associations or media outlets. While 27.5% of respondents indicated discomfort with public institutions receiving foreign funds, this figure was 10.5% for associations and 20.3% for media organizations. Meanwhile, 41.7% of respondents either expressed no discomfort or left the question unanswered. Here again, we observe that lower levels of education correlate with lower levels of discomfort. There appears to be a relationship between lower educational attainment and decreased concern over public institutions receiving international funds.

When broken down by political affiliation, the least discomfort over public institutions receiving international funding is found among DEM Party voters (14.1%), followed by AKP voters (20.6%). This figure rises to 31.8% for CHP voters, 33.7% for MHP voters, and 46.5% for İYİ Party voters. Regarding media organizations receiving international funds, the discomfort rate ranges between 16% and 22% across all party electorates. When it comes to associations receiving such funds, the rate ranges from 5% to 15%. Overall, voters from the CHP and İYİ Party appear to be the most concerned about international funding: approximately 65% of CHP voters and 75% of İYİ Party voters express discomfort with international funds supporting public institutions, associations, or media outlets. On the other hand, DEM Party voters show the least concern, with 40%, followed by AKP voters at around 50%.

Aşağıdakilerden en çok hangisinin uluslararası bir kuruluşun fon desteği alması sizi rahatsız eder?



14 Mayıs 2023 Milletvekili seçiminde oy verilen partiye göre dağılım %

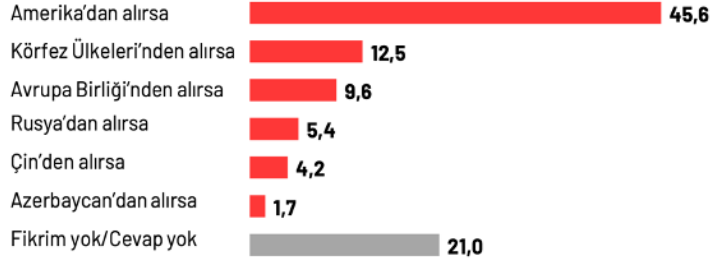
| | Bir kamu kurumunun | Bir derneğin | Bir medya organının | Hiçbiri | Fikrim yok/Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|------------|
| AK Parti | 20,6 | 8,9 | 20,1 | 35,0 | 15,5 | 100 |
| CHP | 31,8 | 15,1 | 18,2 | 27,5 | 7,4 | 100 |
| MHP | 33,7 | 4,7 | 18,6 | 34,9 | 8,1 | 100 |
| İYİ Parti | 46,5 | 7,1 | 22,2 | 16,2 | 8,1 | 100 |
| DEM Parti | 14,1 | 9,0 | 16,7 | 43,6 | 16,7 | 100 |
| Diğer | 36,9 | 11,7 | 27,2 | 11,7 | 12,6 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 27,5 | 10,5 | 20,3 | 30,2 | 11,5 | 100 |

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Lastly, participants were asked which country or group of countries they would find most concerning as sources of international funding. With the exception of DEM Party voters, respondents overwhelmingly cited the United States, with 45.6% selecting it as the most troubling source. Among AKP, CHP, MHP, and İYİ Party voters, this rate ranges between 44% and 58%. For DEM Party voters, the rate is lower at 29.8%. The Gulf countries come in second at 12.5%, with 18% to 20% of CHP and İYİ Party voters expressing discomfort with funding from these nations. In third place are funds originating from the European Union, which 9.6% of the public find concerning. Taken together, discomfort with funding from democratic actors such as the United States and the European Union reaches approximately 55%.

In contrast, the combined rate of discomfort regarding funding from authoritarian states, namely China, Russia, and Azerbaijan, is only 11.3%. Notably, 21% of participants chose not to respond to this question, which may reflect a lack of awareness or reluctance to express opinions on politically sensitive issues.

Türkiye’de faaliyet gösteren bir kurum aşağıdaki hangi ülkeden fon-para desteği alırsa bu sizi diğer ülkelere göre daha çok rahatsız eder?



14 Mayıs 2023 Milletvekili seçiminde oy verilen partiye göre dağılım %

| | Amerika'dan alırsa | Körfez Ülkeleri (Suudi Arabistan-Katar-Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri)nden alırsa | Avrupa Birliği'nden alırsa | Rusya'dan alırsa | Çin'den alırsa | Azerbaycan'dan alırsa | Fikrim yok/ Cevap yok | Toplam |
|-----------------|--------------------|--|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| AK Parti | 46,6 | 6,6 | 13,4 | 3,9 | 4,8 | 1,7 | 23,0 | 100 |
| CHP | 44,0 | 18,1 | 10,5 | 3,0 | 4,9 | 2,9 | 16,6 | 100 |
| MHP | 58,3 | 0,8 | 9,3 | | 2,8 | 0,2 | 28,6 | 100 |
| İYİ Parti | 52,3 | 19,9 | 4,4 | 1,4 | 8,9 | 1,8 | 11,4 | 100 |
| DEM Parti | 29,8 | 22,2 | 6,1 | 13,0 | | 0,3 | 28,6 | 100 |
| Diğer | 43,1 | 16,4 | 4,3 | 18,6 | 2,1 | 0,5 | 15,0 | 100 |
| ORTALAMA | 45,6 | 12,5 | 9,6 | 5,4 | 4,2 | 1,7 | 21,0 | 100 |

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These findings indicate a general indifference within Turkish society toward international funding, with this indifference decreasing notably among men, university graduates, and those in the 35–54 age bracket. Our research shows that the issue of foreign funding is often perceived through a state-centric and security-oriented lens. For example, public institutions receiving foreign funds trigger more discomfort than media outlets or civil society organizations.

A significant majority of respondents expressed discomfort with funding originating from the United States, the European Union, and Gulf countries, while funding from authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China evoked considerably less concern. This suggests that the project of supporting democratization through international funding has largely failed to resonate with the broader public. Rather than recognizing such funding as support for human development, social progress, or democratization, the public is either indifferent or openly skeptical. Consequently, the intended outcomes of these funding efforts appear limited in both effectiveness and reach. It is also important to emphasize that resources provided by authoritarian regimes are not widely perceived as problematic by the public.

When these results are compared with those from a separate study conducted by NOVASAM on perceptions of civil society in Türkiye, we find a high level of consistency. For instance, in the NOVASAM study, only 14% of participants reported having sufficient knowledge about civil society organizations (CSOs), and awareness increased with higher levels of education. Trust in NGOs, associations, foundations, and media outlets ranged between 30% and 35%. In contrast, trust in the military, police, judiciary, and public institutions ranged from 50% to 67%.

This suggests that public perceptions of institutions benefiting from international development funds are closely tied to a broader lack of awareness about the civil society ecosystem in Türkiye.

Moreover, it reflects a worldview that remains heavily oriented toward state authority rather than civic or participatory frameworks.

INTERNATIONAL FUNDING IN TÜRKİYE

In this section, we examine the ecosystem of international funding in Türkiye by presenting findings from an exploratory research effort. This study utilized publicly available sources to investigate the relationship between media organizations and civil society actors in Türkiye and the funding provided by foreign governments and international organizations.

Throughout this process, we encountered a significant challenge: while the transparency of democratic states often allows for public access to information regarding the content and allocation of their funding, this is not the case with authoritarian regimes. Due to the opaque nature of their governance structures, we were compelled to rely on indirect methods to trace the flow and impact of funding from authoritarian sources.

United States of America: The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and its international aid activities came back into public debate, particularly during Donald Trump’s second presidential term. Elon Musk, who was tasked with identifying unnecessary government expenditures, openly questioned USAID’s funding network, describing it as an inefficient resource transfer mechanism financed by American taxpayers. While this argument may seem reasonable within the framework of a public savings plan, it also implied a retreat from the U.S.’s global leadership role and its mission to promote democratic values.

Türkiye was among the countries affected by Musk’s proposed cuts. As a result, the names of several civil society organizations in Türkiye that had received USAID funding were made public. However, no Turkish media outlet was identified as having a direct relationship with USAID. Although an article published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* claimed that over 6,200 journalists and nearly 700 media outlets worldwide had some form of association with USAID, none of the documents released after Musk’s appointment mentioned media organizations operating in Türkiye.

That said, several pro-government and ulusalist media platforms in Türkiye frequently alleged that the Chrest Foundation operated as a front for the CIA. However, these claims have never been substantiated with credible documentation.

European Union: Although Türkiye’s accession process to the European Union has largely stalled in recent years, its candidate country status has ensured the continued provision of EU funds through official channels—often benefiting public institutions as well. A review of institutions supported by the EU shows a more institutionalized, project-based, and diversity-oriented funding approach. The supported initiatives generally fall under the following categories:

- Youth projects
- Climate-related projects
- Health projects
- Gender equality initiatives
- Projects focused on migrants and refugees

A noteworthy point here is the inclusion of public institutions (such as the District Governorate of Sandıklı) among the project beneficiaries. Additionally, several pro-government organizations—such as the ÖNDER Association of Imam Hatip Graduates, the Birlik Foundation, and TÜGVA—have also received shares of this funding. Since EU grants are distributed via Türkiye’s National Agency, this has enabled access to funds by organizations aligned with the government. For example:

- TÜRGEV, led by Bilal Erdoğan and Esra Albayrak, received €161,100
- TÜGVA received €114,150
- Ensar Foundation received €54,744
- Safa Foundation received €17,846, while its affiliate Verenel Association received €45,265
- Earth Children Association (Yeryüzü Çocukları Derneği), affiliated with the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, received €18,839
- The Orphans Association (Yetimler Derneği) received €51,525
- The İlim Yayma Society received €36,950

It should also be noted that individual European countries provide additional funds through their embassies or development agencies. Examples include Sweden’s SIDA and the Netherlands’ Matra programs. These funds are more frequently allocated to democratic opposition groups, based on prevailing social and political priorities, and are also commonly used to support independent and digital media platforms.

Russia and China: Authoritarian regimes also benefit from the advantages of globalization by supporting groups they perceive as ideologically aligned in other countries. Türkiye is no exception to this trend. A report by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) provides compelling insights into Kremlin-linked think tanks and influential public figures operating in Türkiye. According to the report, Russia’s propaganda apparatus in Türkiye is centered around a think tank called *United World International* (UWI), also known as *uwidata.com*. This organization includes well-known Turkish academics among its contributors.

Noteworthy foreign figures listed among its authors include:

- **Andre Vltchek**, a U.S. citizen who fled to Istanbul under allegations of spying for Russia and was later found dead under suspicious circumstances
- **Bartosz Bekier**, a politician from Poland’s pro-Russian neo-Nazi party
- **Dimitris Konstantakopoulos**, a foreign policy adviser to Greece’s former SYRIZA government and one of the architects of the EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement
- **Alexander Markovics**, chair of the Russia-Austria Friendship Association and head of Austria’s neo-Nazi Identitarian Movement
- **Abbas Aslani**, **Masoud Sadrmohammadi**, and **Alexander Azadgan**, affiliated with Iran’s Tasnim News Agency, the international media outlet of the regime’s clerical faction
- **Vavra Suk**, a politician from Sweden’s pro-Russian, neo-Nazi National Democrats
- **Caleb Maupin**, a senior figure in the Communist Party USA

In 2020, Facebook removed UWI from its platform after identifying links between the organization and Russia's infamous Internet Research Agency. The platform was reportedly co-founded by *Daria Dugina*, daughter of the prominent Eurasian ideologue *Alexander Dugin*, and financed by Russian oligarch *Konstantin Malofeev*. Malofeev, who has been sanctioned by both the United States and the European Union, is accused of funding Russian separatists during the 2014 Ukraine conflict and of supporting the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro. UWI's website features direct links to other pro-Russian outlets such as Sputnik, Geopolitics.ru, and Russia Today.

Meanwhile, the **People's Republic of China** has developed a close partnership with institutions such as the **Vatan Party** (led by Doğu Perinçek), the **Görev Foundation**, **Aydınlık Newspaper**, and **Ulusal Kanal**, a media outlet. At one point, Aydınlık even published a special edition devoted entirely to promoting China—an effort that could easily be interpreted as a propaganda tool. These political and media entities effectively operate as a lobbying network for China, even resembling a consultancy mechanism in matters of bilateral trade. For instance, the license authorization required by Turkish firms to operate in China is reportedly issued by companies affiliated with the Görev Foundation—making it a direct resource transfer mechanism. Additionally, past reports have suggested that China has paid for sponsored content in Turkish newspapers such as *Cumhuriyet*, publishing favorable news articles as part of its strategic communication efforts.

Gulf Countries: For many years, it was believed that the rise of Islamism in Türkiye was financially and ideologically supported by *Rabita*, a Saudi Arabia-based organization. Investigative journalist Uğur Mumcu conducted significant research into this subject. In the past, there were also close ties between the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, which helped Türkiye's Islamist movements develop connections with the Kingdom. However, following the Arab Spring, most Gulf states—except for Qatar—began to see the Muslim Brotherhood as a radical organization threatening their monarchies. As a result, Türkiye's pursuit of a Middle East policy rooted in Islamist motivations caused concern among the Gulf monarchies. This shift laid the groundwork for a deepening alliance between Türkiye and Qatar, which stood apart from the other Gulf nations.

Although the Türkiye–Qatar relationship has primarily evolved through military, geopolitical, and energy cooperation, humanitarian aid activities have also benefited from this partnership. Despite a fluctuating relationship with other Gulf countries, Türkiye has maintained diplomatic and operational ties, especially within the scope of humanitarian assistance programs aimed at Syria and the broader Islamic world.

The **Qatar Foundation** has gained visibility through its active support for programs assisting Syrian refugees in Türkiye, as well as its funding of post-earthquake relief projects. Similarly, **Qatar Charity** is partnering with the Turkish NGO **IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation)** on a housing project in Syria, which aims to build 1,400 homes. In 2016, the two organizations signed a five-year partnership agreement, and **INSAMER**, a digital think tank affiliated with IHH, published a comprehensive public report analyzing Türkiye–Qatar relations.

On the other hand, **Saudi Arabia** has supported Turkish-language versions of its media outlets, such as *Independent Arabia* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*, although their influence remains limited. Nevertheless, following the devastating February earthquakes, the **King Salman Humanitarian**

Aid and Relief Center launched a project to build 4,000 housing units across Gaziantep, Hatay, and northern Syria. In addition, a collaboration agreement was signed in 2018 between King Salman Foundation and IHH, allocating a budget of **\$4,390,829** for ongoing humanitarian activities in Syria. The close cooperation between IHH and the King Salman Foundation has not gone unnoticed. It appears that while the financing is provided by the Saudi foundation, operational implementation is managed by IHH teams deployed worldwide—a model of outsourced humanitarian service delivery.

Azerbaijan: In recent years, Türkiye–Azerbaijan relations have evolved beyond their traditional cultural and emotional ties into a deeper strategic partnership driven by economic and geopolitical interests. As a result, Azerbaijan’s influence on Turkish media and civil society has noticeably grown. Prominent Azerbaijani-funded entities such as SOCAR Türkiye, Haber Global, and Ekol TV exemplify this shift. What makes these institutions notable is not only their commercial presence but also their active involvement in both domestic and foreign policy narratives in Türkiye.

One of the most debated examples of this influence occurred during the 2023 presidential elections. Sinan Oğan, a candidate who garnered 5% of the vote in the first round and played a pivotal role in the election’s outcome, was reported to have close ties with SOCAR and Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev. Media coverage suggested that Oğan’s decision to endorse Erdoğan in the runoff was interpreted as a diplomatic gesture from the Azerbaijani state toward the Turkish government.

In another notable case, the SOCAR-backed television channel Haber Global aired street interviews from Armenia just before the elections. The program showed Armenians expressing support for opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, a move widely perceived as an attempt to alienate nationalist Turkish voters from the opposition. Similarly, Ekol TV, owned by Azerbaijani businessman Mubariz Mansimov, frequently aired internal disputes within the opposition, portraying it as unstable and fragmented.

A similar pattern emerged in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attacks and the subsequent deterioration of Türkiye–Israel relations. Azerbaijan maintains strong military and energy ties with Israel, with Azerbaijani oil continuing to flow uninterrupted to Israeli markets. Demonstrators protesting Israel’s actions even gathered in front of SOCAR’s offices in Türkiye, chanting slogans against the company. In response, SOCAR issued statements claiming that its oil exports were directed to international markets, not directly to Israel.

As such, SOCAR has increasingly become a target for Islamist groups in Türkiye, especially those more radical than the ruling AKP and believed to be sympathetic to Iran. These dynamics have placed SOCAR in a strategically sensitive position in Türkiye’s foreign policy, particularly concerning relations with Iran and Israel.

CONCLUSION

This report has aimed to examine the ecosystem of international funding in Türkiye, assess whether such funds effectively contribute to humanitarian and political development, and understand how this dynamic is perceived by the public. Through both public opinion research and open-source

archival investigations, we sought to answer these questions. The key findings of this study are as follows:

- International funds can serve both as mechanisms to support democratic civil society and media organizations, and, depending on the regime character of the donor country, as tools that undermine democratic institutions.
- Institutions in Türkiye that benefit from international funding are **not** widely perceived by society as agents of democratization.
- Contrary to common narratives, domestic institutions funded by international donors are **not** considered by the public to be responsible for the country's negative trajectory. In general, the Turkish public displays **low levels of interest** in the issue of foreign funding. From this perspective, it cannot be said that international funds have a substantial and broad impact on Turkish society.
- **U.S. government funding**, particularly through agencies like the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), tends to focus on humanitarian aid and supports NGOs working on issues such as diversity, inclusion, and equality.
- **The European Union** supports a more diversified portfolio of projects, often requiring tangible outputs that are publicly shared and evaluated.
- Funds from **democratic countries to media outlets** are usually channeled through private foundations or embassy-backed grants from European nations.
- Funds from **authoritarian regimes** such as Russia and China tend to support groups aligned with those governments' ideological agendas, often **nationalist** or **ulusalist (statist-nationalist)** factions. These funds come directly from Russian and Chinese state sources.
- Cooperation with **Gulf countries** is mainly carried out through Islamic charitable foundations, and their funding largely supports humanitarian projects in Islamic countries.
- **Azerbaijan**, by contrast, has significant influence over both domestic and foreign policy discussions in Türkiye through state-owned energy giant **SOCAR** and Azerbaijan-funded terrestrial media outlets such as **Haber Global** and **Ekol TV**. These institutions played a **noteworthy role in shaping narratives during the most recent presidential elections**.

We believe this report will serve as a valuable resource for many future studies. Our aim was to both map out the existing international funding ecosystem in Türkiye and to understand public perceptions toward development funds. However, we fully acknowledge the limitations of our work. In the coming period, it will be essential to investigate how *Türkiye-based donors* distribute and utilize development funds. Since the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, such funds have increasingly been framed in terms of *soft power* and *public diplomacy*, and substantial resources have been allocated from the central government budget. In this state-dominated funding landscape, the role of *private foundations* and *independent donors* remains underexplored.

Another promising area of inquiry would be to assess how recipient organizations respond during critical political or social moments, and whether their reactions align with the political agendas of their donors. While numerous national and international developments become the subject of public debate, the behavior of NGOs and media platforms receiving development funds during

such times is rarely examined beyond financial ties. However, it is possible that civil society and media organizations in Türkiye are more focused on *local priorities* and view development funding as a tool to pursue *context-specific goals*—rather than as a mechanism to reflect the political agendas of foreign donors.

In conclusion, this study should be seen as an initial attempt to pave the way for further research on such complex and sensitive topics. It is crucial that this report be regularly updated and expanded with new research questions. As we navigate an era of increasing skepticism toward globalization, the most vulnerable groups, including those benefiting from development funds, are likely to face heightened scrutiny and even security risks. The best way to counter these dynamics is through transparent, well-documented studies like this one that offer nuance and resist simplistic narratives rooted in propaganda or agitation.

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