17–25 December 2013 and Its Aftermath

The Visible Effects of Pressure on Civil Society Organisations after the December 2013 Investigations

Author

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The Security Studies and Rule of Law Association (SRL Swiss) is a Geneva-based, non-profit, non-political civil society organisation established under Articles 60–79 of the Swiss Civil Code. The association works to protect human rights, strengthen the rule of law and assess whether security policies are compatible with fundamental rights.

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The investigations of 17 and 25 December 2013 and their aftermath altered the political climate in Türkiye. For civil society organisations (CSOs), the consequences were tangible. They affected how organisations were governed, how they were regulated and funded, and how their work was portrayed in public. Drawing on the academic literature, this article examines how those pressures arose and what effects they had.

For an association wishing to speak publicly about the investigations of 17 and 25 December, the first difficulty was deciding what it could say on the evidence available to it. A further question then arose: would asking what had become of the investigations be taken as a sign of allegiance to a particular political group? That possibility could influence decisions at every level, from a member considering whether to sign a statement to a municipality deciding whether to make a meeting room available. It is in those individual decisions that the effects of pressure on civil society can be traced.

The criminalisation of civil society organisations and the growing use of national security rhetoric

After the December investigations, the government in Türkiye increasingly characterised criticism of its conduct as a security threat. This approach extended to civil society. Organisations working on human rights, the rule of law, anti-corruption and freedom of expression were singled out in particular. Accusations that they had links to a "parallel structure", acted on behalf of foreign powers or worked against the "will of the nation" served, directly or indirectly, to criminalise their activities in public discourse. This weakened their public standing and eroded support for their work.

During this period, associations and foundations faced more frequent inspections and financial audits, greater pressure from inspectors, more extensive use of permit requirements and more bans on events. Although oversight is a legitimate regulatory function, the authorities exercised it selectively and disproportionately. Organisations close to the government were largely spared these measures. This undermined the principle that the law should be applied equally.

When a human rights association's report is described as "foreign-linked", the subject of debate changes. Time the association could spend explaining the official action it has documented goes instead into explaining who funds it and on whose behalf it speaks. Meanwhile, the public authority whose conduct is at issue may escape having to answer the question put to it. Stigmatisation can thus reverse the

direction of democratic scrutiny: the association seeking an account of official conduct is itself called to account.

The European Commission's 2026 Türkiye Report records that organisations receiving support from foreign donors and working on issues critical of government policies faced frequent audits and smear campaigns. In a small association, the person preparing the documents for an inspection may also be the person who receives reports of rights violations or monitors court hearings. Assessing the burden of an inspection therefore requires attention both to its frequency and to the work that has to wait while it takes place.

Restrictions on access to funding

After the December investigations, independent organisations and those critical of government policy faced the following financial pressures:

Public support and grants were cut off.

Partnerships with municipalities and public institutions were terminated.

Accessing international funding was portrayed as a suspicious activity.

Funding from abroad, in particular, was cited as evidence of alleged foreign ties. As a result, many organisations scaled back their activities or ceased operating.

An association's budget tells only part of the story of financial dependence. The rules governing the award of support matter just as much. In its 2014 Turkey Progress Report, the European Commission found that public funding lacked transparency and that the criteria for granting public-benefit status and tax exemptions were unclear. Without published criteria, an unsuccessful applicant cannot tell whether its proposal fell short or whether comparable applications were treated differently. That uncertainty also makes it harder to challenge the decision.

Consider a municipality that allows an association to use a meeting room free of charge. When that arrangement ends, no money disappears from the association's bank account. Yet to hold the same meeting, it must now pay rent, move to another neighbourhood or admit fewer participants. A loss that does not show up in the accounts becomes visible in residents' ability to attend. If accepting an overseas grant also invites public questioning of the association's loyalties, its board must weigh two costs: the work it will have to abandon if it declines the grant, and the pressure its members may face if it accepts.

Interference in governance and changes in leadership

During this period, pressure also extended to the internal governance of civil society organisations. The practices observed included:

- Efforts to secure places on governing boards for individuals aligned with the government.
- Indirect pressure on founders or board members.
- Pressure to resign or attempts to sideline those concerned.

Such interference weakened internal democracy, eroded organisational autonomy and turned associations into quasi-official bodies.

It would be misleading to read every change of board membership as evidence of interference. Members are entitled to hold their board to account and elect a different board at a general meeting. For the purposes of assessing autonomy, the question is whether members considering an alternative candidate fear that electing that person might cost the association its ties with public institutions. That fear can narrow the choices genuinely open to members even if the board remains in office. In an individual case, the minutes of the general meeting should be read alongside any explanation given by a candidate who withdrew and any demands made of the association at the time.

Self-censorship and withdrawal from public debate

For many organisations, pressure and uncertainty led to self-censorship. Its practical consequences included:

- Withholding critical reports and public statements.
- Avoiding events open to the public.
- Confining activities to technical or politically neutral matters.

This withdrawal weakened the role of civil society in public debate and rendered mechanisms of democratic oversight ineffective.

Self-censorship is particularly difficult to trace. A published report has a date, signatories and an identifiable audience. A paragraph removed from a draft or a meeting never announced may leave no trace visible to an outside observer. A decline in the number of statements an organisation issues over a year is not, in itself, proof of pressure. A more revealing approach is to compare the organisation's original programme with the activities it was able to carry out, and to hear from those who decided to defer an activity about why they did so. This

helps distinguish a voluntary change of priorities from a decision to step back out of concern for members' safety.

The cost of withdrawal is also borne by people who rely on an association to make their voices heard. For someone reporting a rights violation, the association is a point of contact that can record the complaint, compare it with similar accounts and seek a response from the public authority concerned. When an association can no longer do that work, a pattern connecting individual complaints may go undetected. This is why the aftermath of the December investigations matters for civil society. Alongside the question of which organisations survived, we must ask which questions people could still raise through them, and who could still obtain an answer.