

YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AS A SOFT POWER: TÜRKİYE AND GERMANY EXAMPLES



January 2026 No: 65



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The concept of “soft power,” first used by American political scientist Joseph Nye at the end of the 1980s, is defined as the act of persuading voluntarily without any coercion, in complete contrast to military forces, economic sanctions, and payment incentives that can be characterized as “hard power”. According to Nye, soft power elements are divided into three: Cultural, ideological, and institutional. In other words, “If a country’s culture and ideology are attractive, others become more willing while the country makes them do what it wants¹”. An example from South Korea can be given as an example of soft power. The “k-pop” culture, which has become popular in the country recently, is a cultural soft power. “K-pop” music has gained worldwide fame; therefore, curiosity about South Korea has increased. In this way, interest in music alone has increased curiosity over time, ranging from South Korea’s beauty products to their simple clothing styles, food, and understanding of beauty. People learn, accept, and try the country’s values without any sanctions. They even integrate it into their own lifestyles. As these values are learned, the person also becomes curious about that country’s language. Learning a country’s language is an important step in helping that country make itself visible. It spreads its culture without using hard power through applications such as Korean Cultural Centers and organized dance competitions, food competitions, etc. Similarly, Japanese culture, famous for its “manga” or “anime,” is similar to this; these examples can be increased. The Yunus Emre Institute, which teaches Turkish culture and language in Germany, and the Goethe Institute, which is active in Türkiye, appear as soft power actors. States show their own ideologies as more sympathetic and acceptable through soft power tools and make others do what they want without using hard power over other countries. Today, the field of soft power is growing gradually, especially thanks to developing technology. States can reach the citizens of other states through traditional media or social media without even having to open institutions in those states.

Today, the importance of soft power is increasing. Contrary to military power, economic pressure, and diplomatic threats, the cost of soft power is lower and it is more widely accepted at the international level. The fact that ‘gains’ acquired through tools of force and pressure are relatively short-lived and their acceptability is low, especially at the international level, also reduces the desirability of hard power. For these reasons, soft power has begun to be used more in many ways. The aim of this analysis is to examine the examples of soft

power mentioned above in Türkiye and Germany through youth civil society organizations. By evaluating the youth organizations of two politically and socially different countries like Türkiye and Germany in the analysis, it will be attempted to understand how and in which areas today’s youth organizations operate as soft power elements in different societies. Youth organizations are special as a soft power. Thanks to volunteering projects, exchange programs, workshops, and trainings, they both establish a cultural

¹ Academic Source. (n.d.). What is soft power? Definition and elements. Retrieved from: <https://www.akademikkaynak.com/yumusak-guc-nedir-tanimi-ve-unsurlari.html>

bridge and aim for young people to be more active and realize themselves. At the same time, they increase trust in their own societies or help young people make their voices heard at the international level. In this context, in our study, first, which youth CSOs are in Türkiye and Germany and in which fields they operate will be examined. As a second step, studies carried out in the fields of activity and then examinations through examples and comparative analysis will take place. Finally, the global and national effects of youth CSOs will be emphasized.

Youth Civil Society Organizations in Germany

When we consider youth CSOs in Germany, some focal points emerge. According to the report titled “Deutscher Bundestag, 17. Kinder- und Jugendbericht 2024”(German Bundestag, 17th Report on Children and Young People 2024) written about children and youth in Germany, democracy education and participation² begin for children and youth during school ages and play a major role in their participation in politics in the future. In the report, strengthening political education in schools is handled as a fundamental mechanism for the development of democratic citizenship consciousness. At this point, many youth CSOs in Germany emphasize young people’s participation in democracy. “Deutscher Bundesjugendring”(DBJR) (German Federal Youth Council), which gathers hundreds of youth organizations under its roof, mediates the representation of young people in parliament and their playing an active role in decision-making

processes. DBJR is one of the umbrella organizations aiming to have a say in everything from youth policies at the national level to policies made across Europe. DBJR, founded in 1949, is independent and has the official status to communicate directly with the parliament. Nearly 6 million children and young people involved in youth organizations are included in a wide network area thanks to this organization.³

At this point, besides DBJR, there are also some other organizations that mediate the representation of young people at the federal or local level and the decision-making processes. “Bundesjugendkonferenz” can be translated into English as “Federal Youth Conference” and is a platform that enables young people to come together directly with politicians. Their basic goals are to ensure that politics makes decisions by considering young people and to ensure that young people intervene in the decisions taken. It houses 14 million people between the ages of 12-27 under its roof. The issues they particularly emphasize are as follows: Climate laws, work and education opportunities, and decisions taken regarding rents. This conference is also supported by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. This conference, first organized in 2020, proceeds in a format of every year or every two years. This conference, organized with the participation of politicians, ministry representatives, and youth organizations, stands in an important place for youth participation.

² Deutscher Bundestag. (2024). 17. Bericht über die Lebenssituation junger Menschen und die Leistungen der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe - 17. Kinder- und Jugendbericht. Berlin, Deutschland: Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, p. 250. ³ Deutscher

Bundesjugendring (DBJR). (n.d.). Über uns (About us). Retrieved from: <https://www.dbjr.de/ueber-uns>.

³ Deutscher Bundesjugendring (DBJR). (n.d.). About us. Available at: <https://www.dbjr.de/ueber-uns>

Another organization aiming for democratic participation is the “Ring Politischer Jugend (RPJ)” (Ring Political Youth). RPJ proceeds similarly to youth councils in Türkiye. It offers the opportunity for democratic participation by bringing together young people from different political parties from every state. “Junge Union” (Christian Union Parties), “Jusos” (SPD), “Junge Liberale” (FDP), and “Grüne Jugend” (Greens) are some of them. The common point of these organizations is that they are youth organizations of a certain party. These youth organizations aim to have a say in state and city-oriented policies. They serve as a bridge between young people and parties on a state basis. In this context, party youth organizations play a role in the point of compromise between parties and in negotiation processes. They become united by organizing demonstrations and protests.

The strengthening of democratic and political participation requires not only involvement in political processes but also the protection of freedom of expression. At this point, another field of activity for youth organizations is freedom of expression. “Jugendpresse Deutschland” (JPD) is an organization working at this point. This organization, which can be translated as Germany Youth Press, houses young media employees, students, volunteers, and interns within its structure. This organization, which also houses student newspapers, provides training by organizing approximately 300 seminars per year. Even if the common point of their studies is Germany, this organization, which also gives importance to international visibility, can reach approximately 15,000 young media producers. Their basic goals can be defined as media literacy, freedom of expression,

and giving support to young media producers in disadvantaged regions. By organizing workshops such as “YouMeCon” in the German Federal Parliament, it serves as a bridge between professionals in the field of media and politics and young people. At the same time, creating a realistic experience for young people in the field of journalism thanks to the “Youth Press Card,” which they named “Jugend-Presseausweis,” is among its functions. JPD is also supported by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. It plays an important role as one of the largest youth organizations in Germany.

Another of the important youth organizations in Germany is “Naturfreundejugend Deutschlands” (Germany Young Nature Lovers). It is a young formation operating on the subject of environment and sustainability, which has gained importance in our country recently as well. It was founded in 1926 in Germany as an independent youth organization. Its roots go back to the “Naturfreunde” movement in the 19th century. The organization houses many local groups from 16 states. NFDJ, which adopts goals such as supporting environmentalist policies on the political plane, supporting environmental protection and sustainability activities, young people’s experiencing nature, and environmental education, also operates on issues such as equality, justice, and anti-fascism. Within the scope of the “Handeln JETZT!” (Act NOW!) project, which emerged with the cooperation of NFJD, NAJU (Naturschutzjugend im NABU) (NABU Nature Conservation Youth), and BUNDjugend, young people’s project ideas in the field of climate protection are supported. In addition to this, it makes various publications and organizes

summits for children. NFJD, like many other civil society organizations, is supported by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. NFJD is only one of the environmental organizations in Germany.

“BUNDjugend” (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland-Jugend) (German Association for the Environment and Nature Conservation – Youth), mentioned above, is the youth branch of BUND (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland), one of the best-known environmental organizations. It operates on similar issues with the other environmental organizations mentioned above. At the same time, international environmentalist organizations, for example, Greenpeace and WWF, also have youth branches in Germany. Other common formations are organizations that emerge through religious unity. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish youth come together to create organizations around mosques, churches, and synagogues. Almost every mosque has its own team, and this team has youth branches. These organizations generally aim for intra-organizational solidarity, cooperation, and living religion more actively. As an example, “Bund der Deutschen Katholischen Jugend” (German Catholic Youth Association) can be given as an umbrella organization for Catholic youth. It houses approximately 17 Catholic youth organizations within it. This organization, like other organizations, receives funding from the Federal Germany administration, and also receives membership fees and donations from the Association of German Dioceses. This organization pioneers young people and children in interpreting the world from a Christian perspective. The same thing can be said for other religious organizations.

Another example is “Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Evangelischen Jugend” (Protestant Youth Union). Within the scope of the Protestant Church, it houses youth organizations from every state of Germany within its structure. It has a similar operation. “Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland” (Muslim Youth in Germany) can be given as an example of Muslim organizations. It aims to gather Muslims coming from different ethnic backgrounds under its roof. The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Religious Affairs also has a similar organization. This subject will be examined under the next heading. Consequently, it is clearly seen that the common goal of religious CSOs, regardless of which religion or sect it is, is on social responsibility, political representation, and solidarity. Finally, the young formations to be handled are youth CSOs formed by minorities. Minority-origin youth organizations play an important role for immigrant communities in Germany. These organizations are important not only for keeping their own cultures alive and continuing them but also for establishing a bridge between two cultures. The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs Youth Branches (DİTİB) was founded in 1984 in Cologne. Here, the aim is not only religious but also to protect the Turkish identity. It plays an important role for the construction of values for especially third-generation Turkish youth born in Germany. Organizations formed by minorities are quite numerous. In Germany, which receives immigrants from a wide variety of countries, immigrants take part in these CSOs to establish a network among themselves and to be in solidarity. “Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland - Jugend” (Turkish Community in Germany Youth Branches), “Kurdische Jugend Deutschland” (Kurdish Youth Germany), or “Deutsch-Polnische Jugendwerk”

(German-Polish Youth Organization), and an umbrella organization “Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Immigrantenverbände in Deutschland” (Union of Immigrant Associations in Germany) can be given as examples of these. The general aim of such CSOs is to overcome the difficulties experienced by minorities through solidarity, to both be able to integrate into Germany and to protect their own identity, and to create a bridge between two cultures.

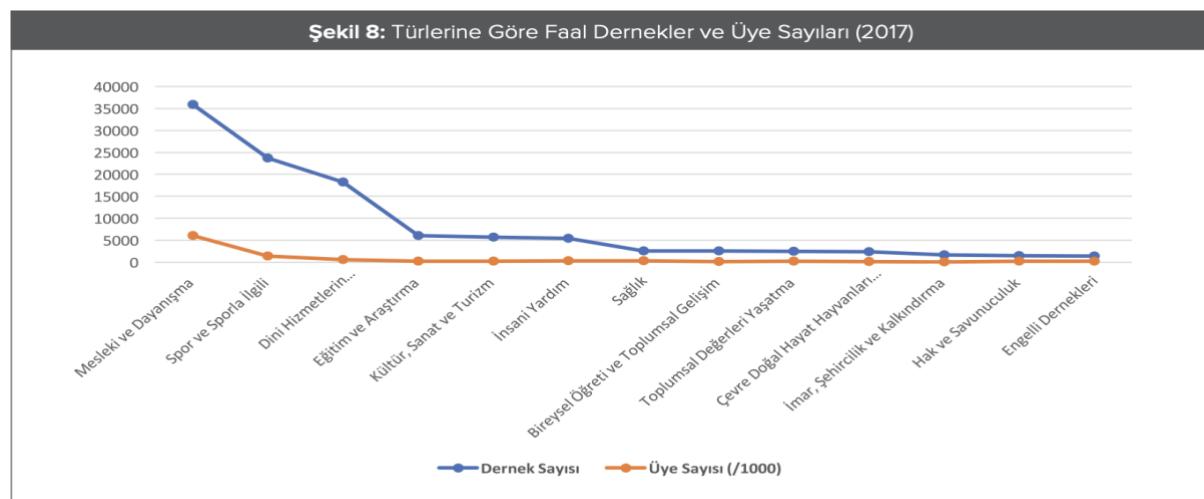
Youth Civil Society Organizations in Türkiye

When youth CSOs in Türkiye are examined, it is seen that “youth branches” constitute the majority of existing CSOs. As in the German examples, it can be said that CSOs in Türkiye are a good opportunity for young people to touch social life, politics, and many other areas of life. Within the “Türkiye Gençlik STK’ları Platformu” (Türkiye Youth CSOs Platform), which is an umbrella platform, there are 84 member CSOs, 150 stakeholder CSOs, 123 events, and 11 research studies. Similarly, the “Gençlik örgütleri forumu” (Youth Organizations Forum - Go-For), an umbrella organization, has been aiming to increase the national and international visibility of

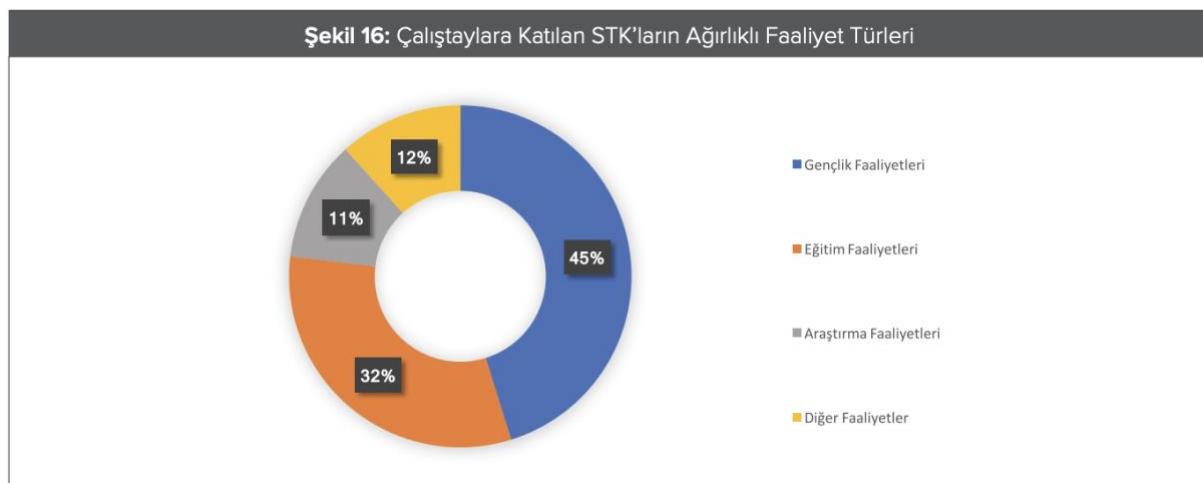
youth organizations since 2015. These two umbrella organizations house many local and national organizations within them. In this context, in which areas youth CSOs are most active in Türkiye will be examined through some examples.

The first heading to be handled is youth CSOs founded for the purpose of education, equal opportunity, volunteering activities, and professional solidarity. According to the “Türkiye youth CSOs profile” report made in 2018, professional and solidarity CSOs are at the head of the most common CSOs in Türkiye.

In this context, when Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı (Community Volunteers Foundation - TOG) is first handled, it is seen that it acts with the principle “Under the leadership of youth, under the guidance of adults”. TOG, founded in 2002, supports young people in producing solutions to social problems as volunteers by providing social responsibility training to youth. Although TOG is not a CSO founded by young people, its target audience and volunteers consist of young people. The main areas they operate in are: Child rights, culture and art,



Kaynak: T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü (www.dernekler.gov.tr)



ecology, animal rights, sustainable living, health, while also supporting equal opportunity with scholarship and mentorship support. It aims to mobilize community volunteer youth from all provinces of Türkiye. TOG claims that in 2024, they carried out social responsibility studies at the local and national level in 71 cities, 140 universities, and 146 TOG communities. In addition to this, it pioneers international projects.

The next CSO focused on social responsibility, where young people are mostly volunteers, is the “Çorbada Tuzun Olsun Derneği” (ÇOTUN)⁴. ÇOTUN, which does not only include young people but operates without distinguishing between different professions, education levels, and religions, basically aims to meet the basic needs of the homeless and create awareness. ÇOTUN claims to be one of the few CSOs related to homelessness in Türkiye. Since 2017, they have been carrying out food distribution in the Beyoğlu region every evening and exploration activities for homeless people in the Beşiktaş region from time to time, and activities in other districts of Istanbul,

especially Kadıköy, Fatih, Şişli, and Üsküdar, on certain days of the month. The association aims not only to meet the daily needs of the homeless but to reintegrate them into society, and aims to provide basic needs as the first step of this. They see homelessness as a housing problem and work on issues like building a house where the homeless can feel safe and finding jobs where they can rejoin society. In this context, they report that they need volunteers of all ages and identities.

Quite well-known “Kızılay” (Red Crescent) and “İnsani Yardım Vakfı” (Humanitarian Relief Foundation - IHH) appear with their youth branches. They were institutionalized later as “Genç Kızılay” and “Genç İHH”. The field of activity of Genç İHH and Genç Kızılay is quite wide. Without distinguishing between thought, language, religion, race, and gender; they aim to raise “conscientious” youth who are committed to national and moral values. In addition to this, they act as communities in universities and on a provincial basis. Both institutions target high school and university students and show similar activities such as disasters, aid campaigns, donation

⁴ “Our Story”, Çorbada Tuzun Olsun Derneği, <https://corbadatuzunolsun.org/hikayemiz>.

organizations, and awareness events. In addition to this, they aim to give young people gains such as leadership, teamwork, and social responsibility. Differently, while Genç Kızılay handles humanitarian aid more, Genç İHH is an organization built more on Islamic values. Also, while Genç Kızılay has blood donation activities, Genç İHH does not. Finally, as an example of professional CSOs, there are youth branches of various unions. Youth branches are not independent organizations; they are affiliated with the center.

Another heading to be handled is formations aiming at value transfer, identity construction, and protecting values. Formations similar to CSOs founded by minorities in Germany, which determine their basic goals as protecting their identity and transferring it, also exist in Türkiye. There are many CSOs highlighting especially national and moral values. As examples of CSOs founded by youth and run by youth, "Türkiye Gençlik Vakfı" (TÜGVA) and "Kültürlerarası İletişim Vakfı" (KİM) can be given. Of these two organizations, TÜGVA was founded in 2014 and appears in a wide spectrum as a field of activity such as; art, education, sports, technology, and social responsibility. They aim to raise productive, self-confident youth committed to their values and, in this context, organize summer schools, camps, workshops, and competitions. It appeals to a wide mass with its 400 thousand volunteers in 81 provinces. In addition to this, there are coffeehouses (kiraathane), innovation houses (icathane), and dormitories for young people. It is an effective organization both at the national and local level. It has representatives in every province and student clubs in universities. It is a state-supported formation. KİM, which is smaller-scale than

TÜGVA, was founded in 2010. Its basic goal is to introduce tourists visiting our country to Islam. They operate in various mosques in Istanbul, Konya, and Antalya. The majority of volunteers consist of university students, and they aim to explain and transfer Islam in almost every language. Their main activities include one-on-one introduction to Islam, distribution of Quran translations and informative brochures, various presentations, and hosting with treats in their centers. Their main source of income consists of donations and individual supports.

The final heading to be handled is climate organizations, of which we see examples frequently in Germany. The subject of climate, sustainability, and environment is among the popular subjects worldwide. There are many organizations displaying a climate-protective attitude in Türkiye as well. Among these, "Youth for Climate Türkiye" (Türkiye İklim için Gençlik), an organization run by young people, can be given as an example. This community is essentially an international organization and is supported by the Italian government and the United Nations Development Program. The goals of the Türkiye branch are also the same. They organize walks and actions to create climate crisis awareness. They especially aim for young people to lead and for environmental consciousness to be formed in youth.

Starting from the examples, CSOs in the two countries can be compared under these headings: Basic focal points, organizational structure, financing, effect as a soft power. When basic focal points are handled, it is seen that organizations in Germany focus on subjects of democratic participation and democracy education, struggle with climate change, and protecting values founded by minorities.

Organizations in Türkiye mostly focus on subjects of social responsibility and volunteering, professional solidarity, and construction and protection of values. As organizational structure, it is seen that organizations in Germany are independent and gathered under an umbrella organization. On the other hand, youth CSOs in Türkiye, although there are exceptions, generally continue their activities as “youth branches” of large organizations. In terms of financing; many CSOs in Germany are supported by the state. While there are CSOs supported by the state in Türkiye, there are also organizations providing financing through donations and sponsorship agreements. Their effects as soft power are different from each other. The participation of youth CSOs in Germany in the democratic process draws an image that will strengthen the democratic structure of the country. It plays an important role in creating an idea that the country is libertarian and participatory. This situation draws a voluntary image by preventing it from encountering resistance among the citizens of the country or in international politics. Since youth formations in Türkiye are built more on social responsibility and the construction of values, they are in a more emotional appearance compared to Germany. This situation leads to the construction of a trust in this direction both in its citizens and in international politics, which is “helpfulness,” one of the cultural elements of Türkiye.

Conclusion

As a result, CSOs play an important role in young people having a say in both countries. While youth CSOs increase the visibility of young people at both national and international levels, they also help them gain social responsibility. The

common denominator is young people doing volunteer-based work, supporting disadvantaged groups, solidarity, and participation in management. In addition to this, identity construction, value transfer, and professional solidarity also play an important role. The socio-economic conditions of the countries, different cultural structures, and state-civil society relations are different from each other. CSOs in Germany are directly supported by the state. In addition to this, CSOs in Türkiye are supported by both donations and sponsors. In Germany, more organization not affiliated with an upper organization is seen compared to Türkiye. In Türkiye, it is more common for the youth branches of already existing organizations to be institutionalized later.

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