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Grassroots Familialism? NGO Mobilization and Neoconservatism in Contemporary Turkey

Sevgi Adak

- 1 In the ongoing debate about the authoritarian turn that has occurred in Turkish politics under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), familialism has been noted as one of the core components of the party's neoconservative authoritarianism (Yılmaz 2015; Akkan 2018; Atalay 2019). Familialist policies under the AKP have been analysed primarily in relation to social policy and as mechanisms of welfare distribution as part of a neoliberal economic programme. Scholars have argued that social policy in Turkey has been transformed through a 'state-supported familialism,' in line with the marketization of social care, welfare provisions and the health system (Buğra 2020). New instruments of social assistance were introduced by taking an idealized notion of the 'Turkish family' as a basis, and reinstating the role of women as care givers. As a result, the literature on familialism has focused predominantly on the services managed by the Ministry of Family and Social Services (hereafter, the Ministry of Family).¹ The incorporation of familialism into other policy areas – for example, religious services run by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, hereafter Diyanet), and the crucial role that municipalities have assumed in the distribution of social assistance – has also received some attention (Yaraş 2014; Kaya 2015; Adak 2021).
- 2 Less attention has been given, however, to the 'civil' channels through which family-centred discourses and policies are promoted and through which a religiously legitimized moral regime based on the sacredness of the family has been reproduced. By civil channels, I refer to the conservative NGOs that have proliferated in the last decade. Also referred to in the literature as 'faith-based organizations,' 'religiously motivated NGOs' and 'Islamic NGOs,'² these conservative NGOs have emerged with

varying organizational structures – some as associations, some as foundations, and yet others as more informal initiatives. While there have been a number of studies documenting the role of these NGOs in the allocation of resources, the delivery of welfare services and in ‘laying the ideational groundwork for conservative-neoliberal governmentality’ as partners of the Turkish state (Atalay 2019: 433), the analysis has so far been largely confined to relatively high-profile NGOs based in Istanbul and operating at the national level. Some of these NGOs also have close links to the upper echelons of the AKP, and in certain cases, to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself. Because of these ties, they are also often referred to as GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) (Kandiyoti 2016; Diner 2018). The best-known and therefore most analysed example in the field of gender and family is the Women and Democracy Association, or KADEM (*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği*), whose deputy chairman is Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar, President Erdoğan’s daughter. However, there are also numerous smaller conservative NGOs that focus, often exclusively, on women and family.

- 3 This article analyses familialism in contemporary Turkey by focusing on these civil channels, which create and circulate a new type of conservatism marked by a family-centred gender and moral regime. My aim is to map the terrain in which these family-oriented conservative NGOs operate by exploring the organizational structures they adopt, the type of activities they organize and the discourses they produce. Drawing on two examples – a national platform of family-oriented NGOs and a local association based in the province of Bursa – I argue that these NGOs, in close cooperation with each other through a flexible platform model, are central actors in what I call ‘familialist networks,’ which have emerged across the country. I also suggest that although pro-government conservative NGOs at the national level are not a novelty, there has been an effort to create similar institutions at the local level (in provinces other than the three major metropolises) and specifically around family-related issues. These local family-oriented NGOs are connected with 1) similarly conservative, national-level family-oriented NGOs mostly based in Istanbul, and 2) state and non-state institutions at the local level. It is through this complex web of connections, both at the national and local level, that family-oriented NGOs function as civil channels of familialism and neoconservatism.
- 4 The article consists of three main sections. The first section provides a brief discussion of neoconservatism and familialism under the AKP government and outlines the main characteristics of NGO mobilization around the family. In the second section, I focus on the Turkey Family Platform as a leading actor in the formation of a familialist network at the national level. In the third, I turn to the case of the Family Academy in Bursa, to explore the workings of a family-centred NGO at the local level. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the main argument, highlighting the role of family-oriented conservative NGOs in not only generating consent and support for familialist state policies, but also initiating policy proposals and mobilization, which ultimately sustain and reinforce the AKP’s neoconservatism.

Neoconservatism, Familialism and the Rise of NGO Mobilization under the AKP

- 5 References to family values and the ‘traditional Turkish family structure’ are certainly not new in Turkish politics, especially within the various strands of Turkish

conservatism (Sancar 2012; Özgün 2021). Nor is the centrality of the family in Turkey's approach to social policy. The country has been classified as a familialist welfare regime with limited public care and social assistance, similar to other Mediterranean countries (Buğra, Keyder 2006; Gal 2010).³ It has also been pointed out that significant changes occurred in Turkey's social policy with the introduction of neoliberal economic policies and the increasing influence of religious conservatism in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup (Göçmen 2014). This restructuring of the welfare regime both accelerated and acquired new dimensions after the AKP came to power in 2002.

- 6 The AKP's emergence out of a split within Islamist politics was marked by its intention to refashion itself as a 'conservative democrat' party. At the same time, it was keen to differentiate its interpretation of conservatism from more conventional forms by embracing reform and change, and emphasizing a commitment to a neoliberal economic vision, while also reiterating the importance of traditional and national values. Ertuğrul suggests that this was, from the start, an ideological positioning more like American neoconservatism, which adopts social and economic modernity with a future-oriented rhetoric while maintaining that it 'needs to be embedded in the traditional and religious values and morality of the society' (Ertuğrul 2012: 165). In fact, the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has been identified as the force behind the rise of a new right-wing politics in the US, with the 'strategic reinvention' of the family being the catalyst for this alliance (Cooper 2017: 21). The promotion of family values, in other words, emerged not only as a substitute for the welfare state but was also essential for creating 'a disciplinary container and authority structure' (Brown 2019: 93) that would submit people to a religiously defined moral order. Scholars have pointed to a similar convergence – of neoliberalism with a new type of religious conservatism – to explain the politics of the AKP, the most obvious manifestations of which can be seen in the areas of gender, sexuality, reproduction and family policies (Coşar, Yeğenoğlu 2011; Acar, Alnuok 2013; Dayı 2019).
- 7 The AKP's familialism has been shaped by a new understanding of the family, adjusted to meet a rapidly changing demographic and socio-economic scenario. Akkan argues that factors like the diminishing importance of the extended family and concerns around a decline in fertility have pushed the AKP to reconfigure care and social-assistance policies and to move towards a more explicit type of familialism, both institutionally and ideologically (Akkan 2018: 79). Change at the ideological level became especially apparent with the toughening of the Islamic tone of familialism following the consolidation of the AKP's authoritarian rule in the aftermath of the 2015 elections (Öztan 2021: 28). In other words, the AKP's familialism accompanied the transformation of the Turkish state according to a neoconservative authoritarian agenda. It is in this context that the explosion of Turkey's NGO sector can be understood.
- 8 Although it is difficult to find reliable statistics for every year, the official data indicates a sharp increase in the number of NGOs coinciding with the AKP's time in power. The number of active associations increased from 69,750 in 2004 to 121,081 in 2021, while the number of foundations reached 5,586 in 2021, from 4,532 in 2002.⁴ This trend in fact began in Turkey in the 1990s, with emerging conservative NGOs adopting crucial roles as providers of social assistance alongside the rise of political Islam, particularly as the Islamist Welfare Party came to power in key municipalities like Istanbul and Ankara. However, most of these NGOs (including some of the largest and

most active) were established after the AKP came to power, securing advantages and state support thanks to changes in tax legislation and the laws governing the operation of associations (Göçmen 2014: 98).

- 9 Although this increase in the number of NGOs – particularly visible since early 2010s – cannot be reduced to the proliferation of pro-government NGOs, it has without doubt been central to the AKP's attempt to create a new 'civil' society. As Kendir suggests, conservative NGOs not only play the role of a public-sector contractor that undertakes certain services, they are also essential as advocates of government ideology, generating consent for the policies of an authoritarian state (Kendir 2019: 71-72). This close relationship between state and NGOs is not peculiar to Turkey; a similar trend has been observed under neoliberal policies globally. In addition, a particular embeddedness of political power and NGOs emerged with the rise of government-backed NGOs, the most obvious examples of which can be seen in countries like China (Teets 2013) but also in countries like Poland and Hungary, which have experienced resurgent authoritarianism, and where pro-government, conservative NGOs play a critical role in supporting state policies, especially in the area of family and gender (Stubbs, Lendvai-Bainton 2020; Kováts 2020; Lendvai-Bainton, Szelewa 2021).
- 10 In Turkey, likewise, family and gender are where an increase in the number of conservative NGOs has been particularly noticeable.⁵ This should be analysed in the context of the central role that familialism assumes in the AKP's overall ideological positioning, as mentioned above. Seen from the perspective of the transformation of the AKP's gender politics, several crucial episodes have led to the absorption of women's rights issues into family policies. The symbolic turning point came in 2010, with then Prime Minister Erdoğan's declaration that he did not believe in gender equality but rather in the divinely ordained differences – and therefore roles – between men and women. This was followed by systematic pro-natalist family policies urging women to have at least three children, an attempted ban on abortion in 2012, which has since severely limited access to abortion in practice, and attacks on the penal code regarding provisions for child abuse, child marriages and sexual assault. In this political atmosphere, family-oriented conservative NGOs began to assume prominence in the public sphere, undertaking the groundwork for a religiously framed familialism, underpinned, increasingly, by an anti-gender and anti-gender-equality discourse (Çağatay 2019).⁶ In fact, the Protection of Family and Dynamic Population Structure Action Plan launched by the AKP government in 2015 not only concerned the systematization and acceleration of familialist policies but also secured the position of civil society as the partner of those policies.⁷ In addition to conservative NGOs established to focus specifically on family-related issues, many other NGOs that did not necessarily have family as part of their main agenda (such as associations for the disabled or for combating alcohol addiction) shifted to this policy area and became part of a network of NGOs formed around the claim that the family was under threat.
- 11 While most of these family-oriented conservative NGOs are based in Istanbul, there has also been a proliferation of such organizations in the provinces, in the form of relatively small local associations and initiatives running projects and campaigns focusing on a particular city.⁸ The collective impact of these family-oriented NGOs, whether nationally organized or local, within a big city or in a smaller province, can be seen in their collaborative campaigns on key issues, the most recent being the NGO campaign against the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating

Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention. Although never fully implemented after its ratification in 2014, the convention (and the law on domestic violence, known as Law no. 6248, drawn up to complement it) created discontent within Islamist and conservative circles from the start.⁹ In 2020 this discontent became a heated conflict, with the instigation of a campaign against the convention, openly attacking it for destroying the family, as well as national and moral values. At the centre of the furore was a group of conservative NGOs who demanded Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in a public declaration directed at President Erdoğan. The withdrawal was eventually completed by presidential decree on 20 March 2021, effectively bypassing parliament.¹⁰ Throughout the process leading up to Turkey's withdrawal, numerous other groups of family-oriented conservative NGOs also campaigned against the convention. This is the most recent and significant episode of conservative NGO mobilization to have taken place in the last decade.

- 12 Such mobilization seems to be based on a particular organizational model. Family-oriented conservative NGOs are connected to each other through platforms working in tandem, organizing joint events and running shared projects that focus primarily on women and young people. As will be discussed below, there are also often platforms within platforms, making it quite difficult to map the network precisely. This complexity, however, does not necessarily seem to entail a particularly bureaucratic operation. Instead, it provides a flexible structure that links various NGOs loosely enough to allow cooperation on multiple campaigns, while making it possible for each NGO to simultaneously pursue its own activities in its own location. Indeed, these NGOs themselves have noted that the recent rise of platforms as an organizational model reflects a desire for specialization, aiding the mobilization of human resources among organizations that specialize in specific areas, while also providing greater opportunities for expansion, recruitment and dissemination (Sunar 2018: 69). For example, the platform model has been identified as an effective NGO model in a project that was run in 2016 by a conservative women's NGO in Istanbul, the Istanbul Women's and Women's Organizations Association (*İstanbul Kadın ve Kadın Kuruluşları Derneği – İKADDER*). Funded by the Ministry of the Interior, one of the outcomes of İKADDER's 'Leading Women, Leading NGOs' project (*Öncü Kadınlar Öncü STK'lar*) was a booklet entitled 'An NGO Model: Platforms,' created to familiarize other NGOs with the platform model and to provide them with practical information on setting up an effective platform for themselves (Özer *et al.* 2016).¹¹ The platform model also provides an effective way of connecting with conservative NGOs in other countries. Turkey's major conservative NGOs are active within the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World (*İslam Dünyası STK'lar Birliği – İDSB*), which was established in 2005 at a conference organized by the Foundation of Volunteer Organizations of Turkey (*Türkiye Gönüllü Teşekküller Vakfı*) and with the support of the AKP government. One of the İDSB's six commissions is the Women, Family and Youth Commission, which organizes a regular Family Workshop in which several family-oriented Turkish NGOs participate.¹² At the heart of this national and international network of family-oriented NGOs is a platform in Turkey, the Turkey Family Platform, which undertakes the main coordinator role.

The Turkey Family Platform and the Formation of a Familialist NGO Network

- 13 The Turkey Family Platform (*STK Türkiye Aile Platformu* – TÜRAP) was established in 2012 to mobilize civil and voluntary initiatives that work to address what they identify as a major social issue: the disintegration of the family and the deterioration of family values in Turkish society. TÜRAP represents possibly the earliest and largest adoption of the platform model in this field. The centrality of the platform model in NGO mobilization can be observed in TÜRAP's own structure. While some of its units are organized as commissions, such as the Gender and Family Commission, others are organized as platforms – for example, the Turkey Children's Houses Platform (*Türkiye Çocuk Evleri Platformu*), the Turkey NGOs Child and Youth Platform (*Türkiye STK Çocuk ve Genç Platformu*) and the Turkey Platform for the Struggle against Addiction (*Türkiye Bağımlılıkla Mücadele Platformu*). In other words, TÜRAP, which is itself a platform of NGOs, hosts other national platforms of NGOs focusing on different areas, which makes the overall organizational structure quite complex. Moreover, although characterized in several TÜRAP documents as TÜRAP units,¹³ these platforms seem to operate with a fair degree of flexibility and can also be referred to as members of TÜRAP (in other words, separate platforms), with their own activities and websites or Facebook pages. Thus, TÜRAP's platform model, utilized in a way that allows several platforms to be positioned within or parallel to each other, facilitates a huge network of NGOs working around family-related issues. Given that there are also other platforms that are not part of TÜRAP but work in close coordination with it, such as the Turkey Interyouth Communication Platform (*Türkiye Gençler Arası İletişim Platformu*),¹⁴ the extent of this network of platforms becomes even more apparent.¹⁵ This network, however complicated, seems to provide flexibility in terms of organization and action, allowing a family-oriented NGO to belong to various platforms, or a platform to make public statements without necessarily involving all the NGOs under the TÜRAP umbrella. TÜRAP sits at the centre of this loosely woven network, aligning similar activities carried out by different NGOs, an example being pre-marriage courses, which are organized by several of its members.¹⁶
- 14 There are currently 68 NGOs listed as members on TÜRAP's website.¹⁷ While most of them are located in Istanbul, TÜRAP is keen to represent all regions of the country, and some provincial NGOs are particularly active within the platform. Notable among them are family-oriented NGOs from two provinces, Bursa and Konya. It is also important to note that some of the TÜRAP member NGOs that are active in a particular city are platforms themselves, such as the Women of the City Platform (*Kentin Kadınları Platformu*), based in the province of Kocaeli. Therefore, some member organizations represent a number of even smaller local NGOs or initiatives that do not necessarily have the status of an official association or foundation.
- 15 There are several different types of TÜRAP membership. Some NGOs are members of the Advisory Group (*İstişare Grubu*), which is TÜRAP's main decision-making body. There are also NGOs that are accepted as members with an accredited NGO status (*akredite STK üye*), which means that they are full members of the platform but not part of the Advisory Group. Both Advisory Group members and accredited NGOs participate in the General Assembly meetings of TÜRAP, which are held annually.¹⁸ The Advisory Group members also meet regularly at a separate deliberation meeting at least once a

year, organized and hosted by a member NGO in its home city.¹⁹ In addition, there are other NGOs that are not members of TÜRAP but hold participating, guest or observing institution status and belong to the platform's Communication Network. In 2013, one year after the establishment of the platform, there were already more than 300 NGOs within this wider network.²⁰

- 16 While some TÜRAP members are NGOs working directly in family-related fields, with the word 'family' in their official names, some also work in areas that are at first sight unrelated. Some are educational foundations, some are associations working for the prevention of drug addiction, and yet others are as diverse as the Disaster Emergency Relief Association (*Felakette Acil Yardım Derneği*), the Solidarity Association for the Blind (*Görmeyenler Kültür ve Yardımlaşma Derneği*) and an association for the Korean martial art of Hapkido (*Dünya Hapkido Derneği*). The core subjects around which the units of the platform are organized, however, reflect the key areas jointly targeted by member NGOs: Gender and the Family, Struggle against Addiction, Children's Houses, Women and the Family, Children and Young People, and the Disabled and the Family. TÜRAP is also explicitly tackling the 'increasing visibility' of homosexuality in Turkish society and the potential 'threat' this poses to public morality and to the family as an institution.²¹
- 17 As mentioned above, both the General Assembly and Advisory Group meetings of TÜRAP are organized in different provincial centres each year, reflecting the aim of the platform to connect provincial family-oriented NGOs with each other and to build local support for mobilization around family-related campaigns. In addition to creating and sustaining both horizontal connections (between family-oriented NGOs in different provinces) and vertical connections (between provincial and national NGOs), TÜRAP meetings – especially the General Assemblies – are also occasions for the platform to strengthen its ties with the Ministry of Family and with several other state institutions at the provincial level. In other words, these meetings not only allow TÜRAP to position itself as the representative of the 'civil' voice for familialism vis-à-vis central state institutions, but also to connect local NGOs with central and local public offices. All General Assembly meetings since TÜRAP's foundation have been attended by representatives of the Ministry of Family, members of parliament representing the province hosting the meeting (overwhelmingly from the AKP), and representatives of the province's highest state offices, such as governors, mayors, heads of local directorates of various ministries, and chiefs of police, as well as muftis and university presidents. The First General Assembly of TÜRAP, for example, was held in Ankara on 21 June 2013 and attended by 37 representatives from 31 member NGOs, plus 72 representatives from various guest NGOs, the media and state institutions, including the undersecretary of the Ministry of Family, the head of the Directorate of Family and Social Services of the Ministry of Family, the wife of the mayor of Ankara and mayors from subdistricts of Ankara.²² At the 5th Advisory Group meeting of TÜRAP, which was held in Samsun in 2015, there were 43 representatives from 15 member NGOs, but 136 participants from guest NGOs, local public institutions and provincial universities.²³ These included the mayor of Samsun, the vice-governor, the head of the Samsun Bar Association, various AKP members of parliament and faculty members from Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun's leading public university. In addition to General Assemblies and Advisory Group meetings, smaller-scale deliberation meetings are also organized at the local level among member NGOs of the same province.

- 18 TÜRAP also works closely with local governments and universities in developing and running family- and women-oriented projects. These joint projects then form another channel for TÜRAP member NGOs to strengthen their ties with the state, as some of them are run in collaboration with the ministries. Family-Focused Media Watch (*Aile Odaklı Medya İzleme Projesi*), for example, which was a project initiated by a TÜRAP member NGO – İKADDER – and adopted as a joint project by TÜRAP at its first deliberation meeting in Konya, formed the basis of a protocol signed by the Ministry of Family and İKADDER in January 2013. With this protocol, the project officially became a part of the ministry's Media Action Plan.²⁴ TÜRAP conducted several activities as part of the project, including a report identifying 'harmful' programmes on Turkish TV channels, which was then sent to the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the state agency that monitors, regulates and sanctions radio and television broadcasting as well as on-demand media services. The project was also funded by Ministry of the Interior, as part of the ministry's grant for 'protecting the family and cultural values.'²⁵ Another joint project taken on by TÜRAP members, the Lifelong Family Training Programme, was also endorsed by the Ministry of Family, and several trainings and conferences organized as part of this project were hosted or co-organized by local offices of the ministry in the provinces.²⁶
- 19 Although one of TÜRAP's principles is autonomy from political institutions, and it claims to maintain an equal distance from all political affiliations,²⁷ its relationship with the government is in fact a key area of activity. TÜRAP established a commission to follow legal developments in family-related issues²⁸ and it works closely with the Ministry of Family on several policies in this area, with some TÜRAP members and advisors serving on the advisory board of the General Directorate of Family and the Society of the Ministry of Family.²⁹ TÜRAP also plays a role in the ministry's Family Education Programme (*Aile Eğitim Programı* – AEP), with experts from among the TÜRAP members being trained as tutors on the programme.³⁰ The AEP has therefore been delivered by TÜRAP members, in addition to the ministry's own staff, reflecting the high level of government–NGO cooperation in the politics of family.
- 20 This cooperation, TÜRAP claims, has been built around the idea of a 'common wisdom' between the NGOs and the state to facilitate a better implementation of the government's family policies.³¹ It is, however, not limited to the policies devised by the Ministry of Family. With certain policies, an initiative may also originate with TÜRAP. For example, TÜRAP's Gender and Family Commission seems to have played a role in promoting the idea of introducing a family arbitration process for resolving conflicts between married couples. The commission started working on a proposal for the Ministry of Family in January 2015 to promote this idea.³² It then appeared in the 2016 report of the parliamentary research commission known as the Divorce Commission, established to analyse the causes behind increasing divorce rates in Turkey.³³ At the local level, TÜRAP member NGOs are also active in the Family Schools and pre-marriage courses organized by the local offices of the Ministry of Family and the Diyanet's Family Consultation Bureaus, in addition to similar courses that they organize themselves. They also collaborate with local mufti offices and Provincial Directorates of Education to initiate conferences, campaigns and training sessions on family relations.³⁴
- 21 Taken as a whole, projects, training programmes and campaigns run by TÜRAP and its member NGOs are based on a certain understanding of the ideal family, which is critical of both certain traditional norms that reinforce 'unhealthy practices' in the family in

the name of religion, and modernism that is promoted in the name of achieving gender equality. This also entails that the religious/Islamic dimension is filtered through a 'scientific' approach to the notion of family. A discourse of 'true Islam,' which is essentially seen to exist in harmony with a scientific approach to healthy family relations, is contrasted with a superstitious, incorrect understanding of religion based on certain traditional practices and beliefs. 'Correct' Islamic beliefs and practices, rooted in the family values of Turkish culture, are considered to be sufficient for building and maintaining harmonious family relationships, which are threatened, in TÜRAP's view, by modernist discourses of gender equality. The selective synthesis that TÜRAP discourse reflects, integrating religious, moral and cultural elements with certain 'modern' methods and principles, forms one of the distinctive features of the neoconservatism of the AKP era. While it accommodates a particular understanding of women's rights, which can also be traced in the discourse and activities of state institutions like the Diyanet (Adak 2021), this neoconservatism also aims to solidify traditional gender roles that associate women essentially with the family, the private sphere and care work. In other words, familialism as promoted by TÜRAP sits comfortably with the notion of 'gender justice' championed by conservative women's NGOs such as KADEM (Bodur Ün 2019; Arat 2021) and embraced by the AKP as its gender paradigm (Sarioğlu 2021). It enables campaigning against violence against women by mobilizing relevant Islamic references, while problematizing, sometimes quite deliberately, the potentially 'harmful' effects of women's employment on childcare, family structure and intergenerational relations within the family. Similarly, the familialist network that TÜRAP leads openly attacks non-heteronormative sexual identities, which are stigmatized as threats to the traditional family structure. In May 2020, TÜRAP was the leading organization behind the public declaration of 122 NGOs from 21 cities opposed to Pride Week.³⁵ In fact, TÜRAP has been one of the organizers of campaigns against the LGBTQ Pride March since 2013, arguing that it defies public morality.³⁶ Together with the recent campaign against the Istanbul Convention, such campaigns organized at the national level by platforms like TÜRAP have been key in enlisting both national and local family-oriented NGOs into a familialist mobilization.

Familialist Mobilization at the Local Level: The Case of the Family Academy

- 22 The Family Academy (*Aile Akademisi*), one of the most influential family-oriented NGOs active at the local level, started as an initiative set up by a group of Bursa-based psychologists, Islamic philosophy and theology scholars, and social workers. It was officially established as an association in 2012. It was one of the founding NGOs of TÜRAP and it plays a key role in shaping some of its units and initiatives. For example, TÜRAP's Family and Gender Commission was founded at the platform's third deliberation meeting held in Bursa following a proposal by the Family Academy. The first meeting of this commission was also based on a presentation by the Family Academy, which was critical of the concept of gender and the idea that gender roles are acquired through socialization.³⁷ Indeed, one of the first decisions of the Gender and Family Commission was to prepare a booklet compiling scientific research demonstrating the differences between men and women and explaining how these differences should be maintained to preserve the natural order of social relations. This

booklet, entitled 'Differences between Women and Men in Scientific Research,' was written by a team led by Dr Mücahit Gültekin of the Family Academy (Gültekin 2014).

- 23 The Family Academy also prepared the Strategic Plan for the same commission. The plan identified three strategies for tackling the negative effects of gender-equality policies on the family: questioning the scientific validity of the idea of gender equality; questioning culture that is predicated on the idea of gender equality; and analysing the results of gender-equality policies.³⁸ It should be noted, however, that the gender-critical analysis of the Family Academy does not claim that discrimination against women does not exist. Rather, it argues that discrimination does not stem from the 'natural' differences between men and women, and that it can be eliminated only if a harmonious balance between these different natures is maintained. 'Unhealthy' gender roles that lead to discrimination, in this analysis, stem instead from modernism, capitalism and consumerism, as well as some traditional beliefs and practices.
- 24 The rationale behind the establishment of the Family Academy is explained with reference to the 'dangers' that the family as an institution faces in Turkish society. Of these, an increase in divorce rates ranks highest, and leads, according to the organization, to the emergence of alternative family types, such as single-mother households or children living with stepfathers. These new family types endanger the 'innate/traditional' (*fitri/geleneksel*) family.³⁹ The Family Academy, therefore, aims to study the factors behind the deterioration of the traditional family unit, to tackle those factors, and to initiate projects that reinforce an understanding of family based on the cultural (read 'religious') values of Turkish society. These aims, in turn, shape the activities of the organization: conducting scientific research to be disseminated at the national level, and developing projects to help local families in Bursa. These activities fall into five main categories: Consultancy and Guidance Services, which include psychological counselling and family guidance; Educational Programmes; Academic Research; Monitoring Media and Family Policies; and Initiating Civil Pressure and Mobilizations.⁴⁰
- 25 The Family Academy has run several projects in Bursa since its establishment, including the Preventive Family Project (*Önleyici Aile Projesi*), Islamic Psychology Courses, and the Youth in Islam Project (*İslam'da Gençlik Projesi*). These projects mainly involved training courses, which were delivered predominantly by the academy's own members, but some of them also included partner institutions, such as the leading public university in the province, Uludağ University. The Youth in Islam Project, for example, which reached out to high-school and university students as well as teachers, involved academics from Uludağ University participating as session leaders. The project was also run in collaboration with the cultural activities unit of the Bursa Municipality (*Bursa Belediyesi Kültür A.Ş.*) as well as other local Bursa NGOs, including the Women's Culture and Solidarity Association (*Hanımlar Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği*).⁴¹ Delivered in three main parts, the project consisted of several seminars introducing the participants to the teachings of 'exemplary leaders' from the Islamic world, such as Hasan al-Banna and Ali Shariati, and issues as diverse as family life, politics and privacy. The courses offered as part of the project also involved alternative principles based on Islamic values rather than popular pedagogy or personal development terminology, with sessions given such titles as 'Trust in Values Instead of Self-Confidence,' 'Consciousness of Purpose Instead of Career' or 'Virtue Instead of Freedom'.⁴² The Family Academy also collaborates with the imam-hatip schools in

Bursa and runs several courses and seminars for teachers, students and parents.⁴³ Its Preventive Family Training, for example, was organized in 2018 at Şükrü Şenkaya Imam-Hatip Middle-School.⁴⁴ Another project of the Family Academy, 'Yes to Goodness, No to Evil,' a series of seminars and activities targeting middle-school students in Bursa, was also organized at an imam-hatip school in 2018.⁴⁵ The same project was run in 2020 in partnership with the Bursa branch of Turkey's pro-AKP teachers' union, *Eğitim-Bir-Sen*. The Family Academy also partners with imam-hatip high schools in Bursa as part of projects funded by the Ministry of Education.⁴⁶ It develops and publishes training materials primarily for children and teenagers, and provides consultancy and guidance services for parents, to help them deal with their children's performance at school and their moral upbringing. Some of the seminars of the Family Academy are broadcast live by the main provincial TV station, Bursa TV.

- 26 While the research activities of the Family Academy seem to be complementary to its training programmes and thus focus more on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of child development, and the social and psychological aspects of family life, the 'activist' side of the organization involves the scrutiny of state policies and national media outlets on issues related to family, and responding to them via campaigns. Two commissions within the Family Academy, the Media Monitoring Commission and the Family Policies and Legislation Monitoring Commission, were set up specifically for these tasks and they have issued regular reports. The latter commission, in particular, goes beyond monitoring the policies of the Ministry of Family and the legal framework on any issue related to the family – it also examines international conventions, UN documents, academic debates around family and gender issues, and the activities of the NGOs that work in these fields in Turkey. As such, the Family Academy, albeit an essentially local NGO operating in Bursa, positions itself as an institution that not only provides training and develops educational materials for the immediate community, but also assembles information, engages with academic debates at the national level, and scrutinizes government policies and responds to them. It was with this agenda that it also became instrumental in preparing the groundwork for the NGO campaign against the Istanbul Convention in 2020.
- 27 Although it had been quite active over the years within TÜRAP, the Family Academy had remained a relatively low-profile, provincial association. However, with its visible and vocal role in the mobilization against the Istanbul Convention, it achieved greater prominence. In fact, its involvement in the opposition to the convention dated back to 2013, when such opposition was still relatively scattered and unorganized. It can be argued that the Family Academy played a crucial part in not only disseminating critical views about the convention and its alleged 'harms' to society and the family, but also in the very formation of such views through its publications and its role within TÜRAP. The report it published in 2013, entitled 'Why Is the Family Disintegrating? Family Policies and the Istanbul Convention,' written by Dr Gültekin, was one of the earliest attacks on the convention (Gültekin 2013). The Family Academy also played a leading role in initiatives against the convention within TÜRAP.⁴⁷ Its members gave seminars as part of TÜRAP events, analysing the impact of the convention.⁴⁸ The initial report was followed by other publications by the Family Academy and its partner NGOs, criticizing the legal and institutional framework introduced to tackle violence against women after Turkey's signing of the convention (Çayır 2014; Gültekin, Şahin 2014; Gültekin, Şahin 2016). The Family Academy also published various short online brochures, such

as ‘What Is Gender Equality? Explained in 10 Points,’ ‘Why Should the Istanbul Convention Be Abolished?,’ ‘10 Confusing Questions and Answers about the Istanbul Convention’ and ‘10 Manipulations Frequently Used in Discussions about the Istanbul Convention,’ which were widely circulated and effectively used within various conservative and Islamist circles.⁴⁹ The Family Academy’s visibility in the campaign against the Istanbul Convention thus exemplifies how a provincial NGO, enabled by the networks that have emerged in the last decade, can not only function as a hub of familialism at the local level, but also have an impact at the national level.

Conclusion

- 28 In her speech at the 7th Deliberation Meeting of TÜRAP held in Kocaeli in 2017, Sedide Akbulut, the then head of the Diyanet’s Family and Religious Guidance Department, likened the family to a small-sized state, and the state to a big family.⁵⁰ The title of TÜRAP’s introductory brochure likewise resonates with this suggested affinity between the state and the family: ‘Turkey: A Big Family’.⁵¹ Deeply rooted in Turkish conservatism, such associations have nevertheless acquired new dimensions in the familialism of the AKP era. With classical conservatism becoming increasingly incapable of complementing neoliberalism, and in the face of shifting socio-economic and demographic dynamics, the AKP’s neoconservatism is based on a new notion of family, ‘a new imaginary construct that is molded by a combination of cultural conservatism and economic liberalism’ (Akkan 2018: 84). Like its counterparts elsewhere around the world, this neoconservatism not only endorses state power, grants it ‘the task of setting the moral-religious compass for society’ (Brown 2006: 697) and identifies the family as the key channel for this mission, it also mobilizes non-state actors – civil society – to counterbalance liberal and progressive forces (Bluhm, Varga 2019).
- 29 In the case of Turkey, state–civil society partnership is indeed highlighted in many policy documents relating to family politics. In this article, I have argued that one of the noteworthy aspects of Turkey’s NGO boom in the last decade has been the proliferation of conservative NGOs working in the field of family. These NGOs became particularly prominent with the escalation of AKP’s neoconservatism, initiating a familialist mobilization. This mobilization has also been characterized by an increase in the number of smaller, provincial NGOs, which have been instrumental in the dissemination of pro-family ideas and discourses. They are linked through an organizational model called the platform model, a complex yet flexible structure that accommodates several simultaneous campaigns and institutional partnerships within a broader familialist network that also includes central and local state institutions.
- 30 Family-oriented conservative NGOs like TÜRAP cannot be seen simply as instruments that disseminate AKP’s familialism, however. They prepare policy proposals and initiate campaigns that have political impact, such as the recent campaigns against the Istanbul Convention and the Pride March. They thus help to create a neoconservative repertoire that benefits the AKP. Similar to Atalay’s (2021) proposal that the relationship between the AKP and Islamic civil society is ‘mutually constitutive,’ allowing both to ‘expand and consolidate their respective domains,’ I argue that family-oriented NGOs create their own areas of influence, which can neither be reduced to AKP’s agenda nor be understood solely within the state co-optation of civil-society

framework. This is apparent not just in the impact that national-level platforms like TÜRAP have in family politics. It can also be observed in the space that family-oriented NGOs like the Family Academy in Bursa have managed to carve out for themselves at the local level. The role of such provincial NGOs in the formation of local as well as national campaigns and policy initiatives is facilitated by the links that have been established between national-level and local familialist NGO networks via the platform model. The Family Academy's impact, for example, was partly mediated through TÜRAP, which attests to the fact that the very structure of familialist NGO mobilization in Turkey allows initiatives to emerge from the local level. These provincial conservative NGOs should therefore also be seen as actors who shape and reinforce AKP's neoconservatism, rather than as insignificant local organizations or mere instruments of the AKP hegemony in the provinces.

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NOTES

1. The name of the ministry has changed a few times since its establishment in 2011 as the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, replacing the then State Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and thus removing 'women' from its name. The name was changed to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services in 2018, and in 2021, to its current form, the Ministry of Family and Social Services.

2. There is no consensus in the literature on how to characterize these organizations. All of these terms emphasize a particular aspect; I prefer to use 'conservative' as an overarching term, to reflect the variety we see on the ground, as not all of these NGOs are strictly faith-based, and the word 'Islamic' tends to obscure the fact that this is a global phenomenon not restricted to Muslim contexts.

3. For a discussion of how Turkey is classified in the literature on welfare regimes, see Powel and Yörük (2017).

4. Statistics are from the official website of the Ministry of the Interior's Directorate General for Relations with Civil Society (<https://www.siviltoplum.gov.tr/>) and the Directorate General of Foundations, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (<https://www.vgm.gov.tr/vakif-islemleri/vakif-istatistikleri/yeni-vakiflar>). Figures do not include the foundations established prior to the introduction of the Turkish Civil Code in 1926.

5. It is impossible to tell, based on the available statistics, exactly how many organizations work in the area of family. However, women compose the target group of 15% of the active foundations in Turkey, for example – the third largest group after children and young people, and the poor. There are 4,164 foundations whose activities focus on children and young people, 2,620 targeting the poor and 2,457 targeting women. See https://cdn.vgm.gov.tr/genelicerik/genelicerik_945_290519/09hedef-kitlesine-gore-yeni-vakiflarin-dagilimi-13.pdf. Accessed 10 November 2021.

6. For example, the Ministry of Education cancelled the Gender Equality in Education project funded by the EU and implemented in a few secondary schools between 2014 and 2016. Similarly, in 2019 the Higher Education Council terminated the Higher Education Gender Equality project, arguing that the concept of gender was not compatible with the values of Turkish society. Following this decision, several centres and programmes focusing on Women's Studies and Gender Studies changed their name to Family and Women's Studies Units, especially at the provincial universities.

7. For the plan, see https://sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/22AileninveDinamik_Nufus_Yapisinin_Korunmasi_ProgramiBASKI.pdf. See also the 10 Year Development Plan, https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Onuncu_Kalkinma_Plani-2014-2018.pdf. Accessed 21 November 2021.
8. There are no official statistics on the geographical distribution of family-oriented NGOs, but the increase in NGOs active at the provincial level seems to be a general trend. While 43% of the foundations in Turkey are categorized as national-level foundations, 22% are active at the provincial level and 27% at district level. See https://cdn.vgm.gov.tr/genelicerik/genelicerik_945_290519/08yeni-vakiflarin-hizmet-alanina-gore-dagilimi-202.pdf. Accessed 10 November 2021.
9. Ironically and rather paradoxically, Turkey was the first signatory to the convention in 2011. However, given that it was systematically disregarded in practice and ultimately rejected, several women's rights activists and feminist scholars have concluded that the AKP's initial support for the convention was a tactical move (Kurnaz 2021).
10. It should be noted that a few pro-AKP actors, such as KADEM, tried to defend the convention, at least initially, but they remained marginal and soon shifted their position to align with the new status quo.
11. For details of the project, see <https://ikadder.org/kategoriler/oncu/>. Accessed 22 November 2021.
12. The İDSB also organizes an international conference, the International Family Conference, the first of which was held in Indonesia in 2011.
13. See, for example, TÜRAP's Strategic Plan, 2017–2021, http://turkiyeaileplatformu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/turap_stratejik_plani.pdf. Accessed 22 November 2021.
14. Similarly, there are several platforms working in the area of youth. Another example is the Turkey Youth NGOs Platform (*Türkiye Gençlik STK'ları Platformu*).
15. Platforms that are TÜRAP members can also become members of other NGO platforms. The Child and Youth Platform, for example, is both a TÜRAP unit and a member of the Turkey Youth NGOs Platform, illustrating the intricacy of the platform structure. See *TÜRAP Bülteni* 10.
16. For example, see *TÜRAP Bülteni* 7.
17. <http://turkiyeaileplatformu.com/index.php/category/uyeler/>. Accessed 22 November 2021.
18. Summaries of all TÜRAP General Assembly meetings are available on the platform's website.
19. Briefs of all TÜRAP Advisory Meetings, held in different cities from 2012 to 2018, are available on the platform's website.
20. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 3, p. 1.
21. See, for example, *TÜRAP Bülteni* 4, p. 1.
22. <http://turkiyeaileplatformu.com/index.php/2013/06/22/i-genel-meclis-toplantisi-ankara/>. Accessed 23 November 2021.
23. <http://turkiyeaileplatformu.com/index.php/2015/11/07/v-istisare-grubu-il-toplantisi-samsun/>. Accessed 23 November 2021.
24. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 2, p. 4.
25. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 7, p. 8.
26. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 3, p. 6.
27. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 2, p. 8.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
29. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 5, p. 9.
30. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 7, p. 10.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
33. For the report, see <https://icisleri.gov.tr/399-sira-sayili-meclis-arastirmasi-komisyonu-raporu>. Accessed 1 December 2021.

34. For an example of such a collaboration in the Avcılar district of Istanbul, see *TÜRAP Bülteni* 8, p 11.
35. For the declaration and signatory NGOs, see <http://turkiyeaileplatformu.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/LGBT-KONULU-TURAP-BASIN-B%C4%B0LD%C4%B0R%C4%B0S%C4%B0.pdf>. Accessed 1 December 2021.
36. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 4, p. 5.
37. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 5, p. 4.
38. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 6, p. 3.
39. See <http://aileakademisi.org/node/9>. See also the publicity brochure of the organization, http://www.aileakademisi.org/sites/default/files/aileakademisi%20tan%C4%B1t%C4%B1m%20kitap%C3%A7%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1_0.pdf. Both accessed on 5 October 2021.
40. <http://aileakademisi.org/node/9>. Accessed 5 October 2021.
41. <https://www.bursa.bel.tr/haber/ibrahim-pasa-kultur-merkezinde-aile-akademisi-21780>. See also 'Bursa İbrahim Paşa Kültür Merkezi'nde Aile Akademisi,' *BursadaBugün*, 18 April 2016. <https://www.bursadabugun.com/haber/bursa-ibrahim-pasa-kultur-merkezi-nde-aile-akademisi-680964.html>.
42. <http://aileakademisi.org/proje/islamda-genclik-projesi-2>. Accessed 5 October 2021.
43. Founded as religious vocational schools to train imams, the number of imam-hatip schools increased steadily in Turkey from the 1960s onwards. Their graduates form the grassroots of the Islamic movement, a social base from which the AKP also draws its strength (Özgür 2012: 4).
44. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 13, p. 16. See also <https://bursa1.ebs.org.tr/manset/2721/ebs-bursa-akademi-aile-akademisi-basliyor>. Accessed 6 October 2021.
45. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 13, p. 16.
46. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 11, p. 30.
47. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 7, p. 6.
48. *TÜRAP Bülteni* 9, p. 14.
49. See 10 Maddede Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Nedir?, <http://aileakademisi.org/arastirma/10-maddede-toplumsal-cinsiyet-esitligi-nedir>; 10 Maddede İstanbul Sözleşmesi Neden İptal Edilmelidir?, <http://aileakademisi.org/arastirma/10-maddede-istanbul-soezlesmesi-neden-iptal-edilmelidir>; İstanbul Sözleşmesi ile İlgili Kafa Karıştıran 10 Soru-10 Cevap, <http://aileakademisi.org/arastirma/istanbul-soezlesmesi-ile-ilgili-kafa-karistiran-10-soru-10-cevap>; İstanbul Sözleşmesi Tartışmalarında Sık Kullanılan 10 Manipülasyon, <http://aileakademisi.org/arastirma/istanbul-soezlesmesi-tartismalarinda-sik-kullanilan-14-manipuelasyon>. All accessed 10 October 2021.
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ABSTRACTS

Familialism in contemporary Turkey has primarily been analysed as a crucial aspect of the social policy of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) government. The incorporation of familialism into other policy areas has also received some attention. Less

attention has been given, however, to the ‘civil’ channels through which this state-level familialism is supported and propagated. A network of family-oriented conservative NGOs has proliferated in the last decade, and this article looks at the campaigns they organize and the discourses they use to influence and foster familialism at the state level. Drawing on an analysis of a national platform of family-oriented conservative NGOs – the Turkey Family Platform – as well as a local association active in the province of Bursa, the article argues that this network of NGOs plays a crucial role in shaping and disseminating familialism under the AKP, functioning as civil channels of neoconservatism, not only at the national level but also increasingly in the provinces.

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Keywords: Turkey, AKP, familialism, neoconservatism, NGO, authoritarianism, gender politics

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