Chapter 4 showed that the EU instruments have not always been successful in securing support for as well as interest in and involvement from civil society organizations in Turkey’s accession to the EU. Furthermore, the impact of these instruments on strengthening civil society organizations and improving the environment within which they operate has been rather limited. Hence, with their unexpected and controversial results, these instruments have, to a large extent, failed to serve the purposes set out by EU civil society policy. Having shown the troubles of EU civil society policy and its instruments, the question remains as to what is wrong with this policy. This book suggests two interrelated reasons, which are elaborated in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

Challenging the EU’s conceptualization of civil society

The first problem with EU civil society policy relates to its conceptualization of civil society. In a neo-Tocquevillian fashion, EU civil society policy links civil society and democratic political society, emphasizing the strongly positive role that civil society organizations play in facilitating democracy (see Chapter 2). Accordingly, the EU promotes legal and institutional reforms and uses financial, technical and political instruments to ensure not only the flourishing of civil society, but also that different actors assume an increased role in matters relating to Turkey’s accession process, so that they assist their country’s social transformation and/or prepare citizens for the upcoming accession (see Chapter 3). While doing so, EU civil society policy treats civil society as a neutral field and civil society organizations as a rather homogenous set of actors.

The way that the EU treats civil society and its actors is most evident in its use of financial, technical and political instruments. The overview of
the instruments of EU civil society policy in Chapter 3 reveals the inherent belief that their use will necessarily and always bring support for and/or engagement in the accession process. It is for this purpose that the EU, rather naively, expects that those civil society organizations that have benefited from any of the EU instruments would necessarily and always support, be engaged in or contribute to this process. Furthermore, the EU has been employing these instruments in pre-determined universal fashion, expecting to achieve the same results from all organizations with which it interacts.

However, the findings of the interviews with the 37 selected civil society organizations, as well as the overview of the contemporary social and political setting in Turkey, challenge this neo-Tocquevillian understanding inherent in EU civil society policy and the way it conceptualizes civil society. The unexpected and controversial results entailed by these instruments not serving the purposes set out by EU civil society policy provide key evidence of this. The case of the Lambda İstanbul Solidarity Association is a good example. As we have seen in the thematic analyses, the Lambda İstanbul Solidarity Association has benefited from the technical and political instruments of EU civil society policy. Indeed, it considers the support it received from the EU as instrumental to its cause, though it continues to be disinterested in Turkey’s accession process.

In that sense, civil society is a sphere of political struggle and contestation, in which its actors interact in variety of ways. Furthermore, civil society organizations are autonomous actors with ideological preferences that have connections and linkages with politics, and therefore engage in the political life. The interviewees have revealed a number of cases in which it is possible to observe the shift in the civil society organizations’ political allegiances and deeds depending on their political calculations. One group that shows this is those organizations that distance themselves from the West and their institutions in general, while at the same time endorsing the accession process. For instance, Özgür-Der, despite its strongly conservative base as well as activities stemming from causes that may often conflict with those of the West, nonetheless supports Turkey’s accession to the EU. This is because Özgür-Der regards the accession as a process that may give the opportunity to ‘weaken the repression of militarism over the state and over the society; and allowing for the establishment of a relatively legal, relatively transparent political order’ (CSO 26). This indicates that the expectation to curb secularist power draws conservative groups closer to accession process, despite their distance from, as well as the absence of interest in and interaction with, any of the Western institutions.