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OPEN DATA IN TURKEY: A PRACTICE-ORIENTED OVERVIEW

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Introduction

Open data published by official bodies is an often-overlooked part of the infrastructure of modern states. Information such as statistics, live public transport data, or an open registry of city trees can be used by state bodies to improve their services and reduce communication costs within the bureaucracy. If this data is shared with third parties, many stakeholders, such as journalists, economists, scientists, and civil society actors, can benefit from it, too. Data that was previously only accessible to experts can be visualized, existing apps can be improved, and areas of possible public participation can be highlighted. At the same time, open data is the foundation for any AI-driven development. Without well-described, structured, high-quality data, artificial intelligence cannot deliver meaningful results.

Making government data available to the public is not a recent phenomenon. Standards for open government data were established 20 years ago, for example, in the ten principles by the Sunlight Foundation[1] or the Open Definition[2] by the Open Knowledge Foundation. Meanwhile, many countries, cities, and local authorities have adopted specific guidelines covering essential requirements such as publishing information in machine-readable formats, invoking metadata standards, and using open licenses. These practices have become part of authorities' daily administrative work. This paper particularly examines open data produced by governments and public administrations that is published in open formats and under open licenses so anyone can freely access, share, and use it for any purpose.

This policy brief discusses the current state of open data in Turkey. It approaches the topic from different angles: First, by using rankings and reports by international organizations to give a broad overview of Turkey's initiatives. Then, it examines the legal framework and institutionalization of open data on different levels of government. Turning to the practical side, the paper provides an analysis of the existing data portals and available metadata within Turkey's open data ecosystem. In addition to the analysis of the existing literature, laws, and data portals, interviews with data activists, scholars, and public officials served as background for this paper. The goal of this policy brief is to produce the first practice-oriented overview of open data in Turkey to lay the foundation for a more comprehensive examination in the future.

Turkey's Open Data Initiatives from an International Perspective

Open data extends beyond mere government transparency and can exist in a variety of political environments. An example of this is the international Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, which is active in more than 70 countries. Projects associated with the initiative range from open urban woodland management in Buenos Aires to creating laws defining data policy in Armenia.

Turkey became an OGP member country in 2011,[3] creating its own action plan for open government policies with the participation of civil society. However, after completing its first action plan, Turkey did not engage with the OGP commission again, resulting in its membership being frozen in 2016.[4] No further initiatives occurred thereafter. This ceased operation is reflected in the results of a well-established ranking: In the Open Data Inventory by Open Data Watch,[5] which examines the availability of statistical data, Turkey was ranked 8th overall in 2015 and fell to 65th in 2024.

One of the more comprehensive recent international examinations of Turkey's open data endeavors is the 2026 OECD Open, Useful and Re-usable Data Index (OURdata),[6] which compares the efforts of the 36 member governments to design and implement national open government data policies. While such rankings often only provide a limited reflection of real-world practice, they can still serve as a starting point for analysis. In the 2026 index, Turkey ranked last among OECD member and associated countries in all categories—from data availability and accessibility to government support for data reuse—and even fell behind its 2023 results.

Such results lie in stark contrast to the digitalization of government services in Turkey. Most of the communication between the Turkish state and its citizens is already happening in the digital sphere. This, for example, is reflected in the EU's yearly eGovernment Benchmark, which also includes Turkey as an accession candidate country. In 2024, Turkey scored 83 points, while Germany achieved 66, with the EU-27 average standing at 76 points.[7] Some research has suggested a correlation between a high level of e-government services and open government initiatives.[8] However, according to the expert interviews conducted for this paper, the digitalization of most state–citizen interactions did not lead to big changes to the infrastructure at the backend. Authorities' countless administrative systems have not yet been streamlined, nor is there a comprehensive data governance or data management tool that would make the communication between different official actors as well as the sharing of data easier.

Examining the Legal Framework (Or Lack Thereof)

Legal frameworks often play a significant role in the provision of open data. This is especially true in the context of the European Union: The translation of European regulations, such as the Open Data Directive on the re-use of public sector information[9] or the INSPIRE directive[10] for establishing an infrastructure for spatial information in the European community into national law was one of the main drivers for progress in the field in Germany, for example.

Regarding personal data protection, Turkey's Personal Data Protection Law (KVKK) largely aligns with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).[11] However, while policymakers have paid attention to the protection of personal data—which gained constitutional status in 2010[12]—the same cannot be said for the usage of non-personal data. Neither the EU's decades-old open data legislation nor the Data Act and Data Governance Act implemented in recent years have been adopted by Turkey. In fact, examining Turkey's data laws is a brief exercise: To this day, there is no significant, comprehensive legal framework for open data in the country.

Still, one of the main transparency instruments to obtain information from the state is the Turkish Freedom of Information Act. It was modeled after similar approaches in other countries and took effect in 2004. On paper, freedom of information is a success in Turkey. In 2010, freedom of information was even granted constitutional status,[13] and according to numbers published by the Presidency of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in 2024, more than two million freedom of information applications have been filed.[14] The application can be conveniently completed via the Turkish e-government app CİMER. However, according to the International Press Institute, which tries to

keep track of information obtained by journalists and activists through the Freedom of Information Act, the law has proven to be a paper tiger in practice. The law states that if an authority must make extra effort to obtain the requested information, it is not obligated to provide it. As analyses by the International Press Institute have shown, authorities sometimes simply do not respond to freedom of information requests or ignore court orders without facing any consequences.[15]

For map-based or geographic information system (GIS) data, there are some legal specifications, albeit they do not follow open data principles. In 2020, Law 7221 was introduced, establishing new regulations for the use of geographic data. The law generally requires a permit from the General Directorate of Geographic Information Systems, which is part of Turkey's Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, for the collection, production, sharing, or selling of any data that includes location information. According to the law, public institutions must share geospatial data free of charge with other official entities. However, as some legal scholars have rightly pointed out, sharing geospatial data with parties outside of public institutions is only possible if a fee for access is charged, even for non-commercial users.[16] Yıldırım and Çömert discern that "The laws and regulations issued for geographic data in our country prevent GIS data from becoming open data, and also prevent the creation of new data by combining open data with geographic data."[17] Furthermore, in a context where open data is not yet enshrined in law, this encourages official bodies to charge fees for publishing data and to use restrictive licenses. According to official numbers, more than five million dollars in revenue was generated in this way in 2025. By law, these funds may only be used within the scope of the national spatial data infrastructure.[18]

Mapping the Institutional Framework

FEDERAL LEVEL

In the absence of a legal framework for open data, the question arises of who would actually be responsible for institutionalizing it. In a highly centralized country like Turkey, such an initiative would be expected to come from the central government, yet currently there is neither an official open data body nor even an existing open data portal.

The Digital Transformation Office of the Turkish Presidency was introduced in 2018. In addition to adapting administrative processes to new technologies, its objectives included "cooperation between institutions, production and collection, storage, and analysis of data."[19] According to Şahnagil et al., there were plans for a "National Data Dictionary" that included standards and definitions for the data used by public institutions.[20] However, similar to the creation of a national open data portal under the domain veri.gov.tr by the Digital Transformation Office,[21] these plans were never realized. One problem may have been the governing structure. As an office affiliated with the presidency, it lacked the power to require other ministries or agencies to adhere to standards or provide data.

In 2025, the Digital Transformation Office of the Turkish Presidency was dissolved overnight, and most of its responsibilities, including (open) data, were transferred to the newly formed Cybersecurity Directorate. The actual implementation remains unclear at the time of this research. One notable change from the previous structure is the establishment of a cybersecurity board comprising the president, vice president, relevant ministers, and heads of public institutions. This new board may give greater weight to digital policies.[22]

On May 5, 2026, the board gathered for the first time under the chairmanship of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and put data on the agenda. Beyond vague platitudes, such as "data possesses value beyond its mere technical utility" and is "important for digital sovereignty," no concrete details have been made public.[23] At the same time, assigning responsibility for data management and open data to a cybersecurity agency indicates a security-focused approach. Furthermore, it creates the problematic notion that all public data must be protected and establishes a blending of two sets of policies that have little in common except for their involvement with digital information.

Compared to most other European countries, Turkey was quite late in introducing a National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) to manage, publish, and monitor geospatial data. In 2019, Presidential Decree No. 49 set the groundwork by establishing an official Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Board, which convenes under the chairmanship of the Turkish Vice President. Law 7221, passed in 2020, defined the NSDI's scope of action and provided its legal basis. Five years later, in January 2025, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change launched the national geospatial platform tucbs.gov.tr.

The General Directorate of Mapping, a government agency under the Ministry of National Defense, is the central authority for defining borders, creating topographic data, and distributing maps. This agency also provides official geographic location names and border lines, which is particularly important in a country with disputed Aegean Sea delimitations and a history of renaming places with previously Greek, Kurdish, or Armenian name origins. A connection to the military and defense sector is not uncommon for topographic data. In the EU, for example, Italy and Greece have similar institutions.

METROPOLITAN LEVEL

Over the last five years, some of the main drivers of open data have been metropolitan municipalities, particularly in Izmir and Istanbul. Unfortunately, this momentum has stalled. While the Izmir open data team appeared to have been dismantled or was operating with limited resources at the time of this study, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality faces different challenges. The entire administration is under scrutiny; Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu is in jail, and hundreds of municipal workers are facing charges. Some of the charges are directly data related—including allegations that the mayor sold personal data obtained via the city app "Istanbul Senin" on the darknet.[24]

Under İmamoğlu, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality updated its data management, taking the first steps toward open data structures by creating a portal and a smart city strategy.[25] This 2030 Smart City Strategic Plan envisages data-supported decision-making in city management and the creation of a data ecosystem for stakeholders and citizens. At the same time, the plan published in 2021 critically reviewed the progress made thus far, noting that coordination and data sharing are lacking.[26]

Examining Available Data Portals and Metadata

Finding open data in Turkey is not an easy task. Typically, data can be accessed either from a single point of entry or in thematically organized portals, such as geospatial, mobility, or statistical data portals. As mentioned above, the single national data portal, veri.gov.tr, has yet to be established. In the meantime, open data activists have made several attempts to make data published by different state sources locatable in repositories.

Unfortunately, these community-based solutions are not streamlined or interconnected, so sites such as "Türkiye Açık Veri Dizini," "Türkiye ve Türkiye ile İlgili Açık Veri Portalları," or "Açık Veri Kaynakları"[27] are driven by individual users with only sporadic updates.

METROPOLITAN PORTALS

Istanbul's data portal, data.ibb.gov.tr, served as a model for most metropolitan municipalities' open data portals. As previously mentioned, Istanbul created its own Metropolitan Municipality Open Data License, which is based on Creative Commons licenses. Many other municipalities seem to have copied this approach, creating a confusing number of licenses for open data in Turkey. The data portal offers over 40 application programming interfaces (APIs) that allow users to automatically fetch data. This is important infrastructure for modern applications. However, the available APIs on the data portal do not deliver real-time data but rather mostly static data, such as the locations of public transportation stops without showing live arrivals. In Istanbul, other APIs with access to live data exist, for instance, the "İBB Cep Trafik" app that uses current traffic data, but these are not accessible via the city's open data portal.[28]

SMART CITY PORTAL

In 2023, the Federal Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change created ULASAV, a smart city data portal.[29] ULASAV harvests data shared on the open data portals of metropolitan municipalities and hosts data from other, smaller municipalities. Although it is one of the most comprehensive data portals in Turkey to date, it lacks basic information about metadata standards or an open API.

The portal revealed another significant issue: Due to a lack of coordination, almost all contributing municipalities created their own data licenses. As Yıldırım and Çömert correctly point out, this creates unnecessary confusion about the terms of each license, especially when combining information from different datasets: "If each municipality defines its own open data license, 1,003 different open data licenses will emerge."[30]

FEDERAL PORTALS

The absence of a national data portal is also reflected by the lack of metadata standards. Metadata is information that defines and describes data to ensure mutual understanding within and between institutions. National data portals usually serve as metadata portals that enforce a metadata standard for data providers, such as geoportals, ministries, and other authorities. To publish data, especially if it is harvested automatically, the data must align with the metadata standards of the receiving portal. The platform that most closely resembles a national metadata portal is the aforementioned smart city data portal ULASAV. However, in the absence of national data standards, a dataset about parks and green spaces from Tekirdağ may have different attributes and field titles than a similar dataset from Manisa.

The Turkish Statistical Institute's (TurkStat) portal provides a single point of access for statistical data and offers a wide range of metadata. However, this does not necessarily mean that the desired information is easy to find and reuse. As highlighted above, in 2024, Turkey ranked 65th in the Open Data Inventory. The ranking acknowledged a broad coverage of thematic fields, but the data lagged behind in areas such as metadata quality, accessibility, and open licenses.[31] This was reflected in the anecdotal references during the interviews conducted for this paper. According to one data journalist, the availability highly depends on the subject: while, for instance, construction data is quite accessible, household income data and related socioeconomic information in a higher

granularity than the national or regional level would be nearly impossible to get. Furthermore, data from the official TurkStat web application,[32] which maps statistical information from the regional to the grid level, can only be exported as a static image, not as a machine-readable file. Additionally, another data activist complained that TurkStat focuses on publishing data according to the European NUTS-2 standard for regions, whereas the most meaningful data for Turkey is at the provincial level, which corresponds to the NUTS-3 standard.

GEODATA PORTAL

The new national geoportal, tucbs.gov.tr, was launched in 2025, replacing the previous web application, atlas.gov.tr. The geoportal includes a metadata catalog, data request forms, a data-sharing matrix system, and information for data providers—what it does not feature is actual open data. Access to data is only available via a personal e-government account login, which goes against basic open data principles and makes a thorough examination within the scope of this paper impossible.

The General Directorate of Mapping provides the web application atlas.harita.gov.tr for topographic data, orthophotos, and basemaps. Access is open, but again, no raw geospatial data is available; the website only allows users to export static map images.

Focus: Geospatial Data in Practice

As mentioned above, geospatial data in Turkey is subject to certain regulations and has more defined specifications than other data types. Unfortunately, the metadata is not available in a machine-readable format. As an accession country, Turkey is not required to publish data that complies with the European Union's INSPIRE spatial information infrastructure. Yet, other non-EU countries, such as neighboring Georgia,[33] are already doing so and are even implementing the 2024 regulation on high-value datasets. One item available for every dataset in Turkey is the "geospatial data sharing matrix," introduced with Law 7221. It indicates for each entity, from citizens to private companies, under what circumstances geospatial data can be shared.

Geospatial data is typically the most standardized and widely available type of open data. In Turkey, however, the current legal system makes innovative projects using location data difficult. For instance, a startup that might want to collect its own sensor data and display it on a map in a self-developed application would first have to obtain official permission, pay a fee, and allow the authorities to use its data and software for free. This negatively impacts commercial activities and the overall sharing of data with third parties, including civil society initiatives that aim to visualize information on maps. In practice, at least in the noncommercial sector, not much has changed so far. According to a volunteer active in the open mapping community, the rules are only partly enforced by authorities, and if they do not directly deal with the government, there are several gray zones. At the same time, the strict regulations on paper have been a sword of Damocles over geodata projects. If the authorities are not happy with a map application or visualization, they may invoke the law to set boundaries.

Turkey's Open Data Ecosystem

DATA CULTURE IN ADMINISTRATIONS

When asking about open data in Turkey, a common reaction is, "Open Data—is there any?" Without a legal basis for publishing open data, the elephant in the room is why authorities would make data openly available on their own. During several interviews with public officials, it was implied that they would not share the data with other state bodies

unless required by law to do so. Requests for data from individuals seem possible on a case-by-case basis, though. This gatekeeping of information based on personal networks hinders the development of an institutionalized way to publish data automatically.

The politicization at all levels in Turkey plays a decisive role here. Municipalities leaning toward the opposition may be reluctant to share information with government institutions controlled by the ruling party. Following this logic, information that could portray political or administrative figures negatively is withheld rather than published. This applies to nearly every subject, ranging from data about a municipality's production of subsidized bread to the number of complaints about street animals submitted through the local e-government app.

Adding to this is the lack of data literacy within administrations. Without institutional support and executive-led change management, open data remains a pipe dream. The city of Istanbul, for example, has its own open data team. Compared to the size of the metropolitan municipality, their scope of action is limited if open data is not enforced as a goal for the entire administration. At the most basic level, this requires sustainable data management in order to store, share, and reuse data within the administration before publishing it for third parties. Judging from the interviews, however, there is currently no infrastructure in place to achieve this.

Lastly, from a data culture perspective, the legal rules for geospatial data set a negative precedent. Currently, this is the only legally defined way of officially sharing data with third parties, and it uses an overly restrictive license that charges a license fee. Administrations tend to follow existing patterns of behavior, particularly when dealing with practices that have not yet become widespread. Thus, in the absence of any other directive, the example it sets is not helpful at all when it comes to open data.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Following the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, the impact of data activists and digital civil society groups became apparent. Thousands of volunteers helped map buildings and roads in support of the ongoing disaster response.[34] Meanwhile, other projects are underway to improve preparedness for future earthquakes. For instance, in partnership with a university and a district municipality in Izmir, activists are collecting housing data, such as number of stories and building conditions, to improve disaster response and prediction. Overall, city planners and mapping-focused groups, such as Yer Çizenler and the local OpenStreetMap chapter, are among the most active and organized entities in Turkey's open data ecosystem.

Another field that makes use of open data is ecological activism. For instance, Polen Kolektif[35] combines official data with its own collection of recently opened mining locations throughout Turkey. Although data-journalistic approaches to ecological issues have emerged in recent years, they have yet to appear in the Turkish mainstream media.

Besides these use cases, there is comparatively little collaboration among scientists, civil society, and journalists to promote open data in Turkey. The Open Data and Technology Association (AVTED), which is based in Istanbul, is currently the only active organization dealing with open data at the institutional level. AVTED publishes a monthly newsletter and regularly presents video lessons about open data. The organization has also created an index providing an overview of open data in municipalities from 2022 to 2024, which has been discontinued for now.[36] However, AVTED's work is rather academic and focuses less on implementable steps for authorities. This is also reflected in its policy suggestions, which remain general and only briefly touch upon the federal level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While many governments have become increasingly data-driven and have adapted legislation to support open data, Turkey has shown little progress in the last decade. In the absence of any centrally enforced policies, some metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul have moved forward—albeit on a still relatively slow level. Like in many other areas in Turkey, the politization of (open) data stands in the way of meaningful cooperation, which is essential for introducing a comprehensive data management system or standards. Naturally, an increasingly authoritarian regime will be less inclined to share any information that could undermine its position, or any information at all. The inclusion of data policies under the umbrella of the Cyber Security Agency could mean that the topic will be increasingly dealt with from a security point of view; on the other hand, the management of data and the enforcement of standards, which is important groundwork for the publication of open data, could receive more political attention. Still, under the current legal circumstances, the publication of open data boils down to the goodwill of individual civil servants.

Considering the high level of politization, unclear legal framework, and limited availability of open data, civil society data activists are in no easy position. This makes it all the more commendable that the OpenStreetMap community, for example, played such an important role in the aftermath of the earthquakes in 2023. Given the limited resources available, greater cooperation between the scientific community, civil society, and, for example, progressive-leaning municipalities would be a step in the right direction. A useful first step would be to streamline existing endeavors that try to make the available open data locatable in absence of a state-hosted solution.

Municipalities could contribute to this effort by abstaining from defining their own data licenses and instead use internationally recognized open data licenses, such as Creative Commons Zero (CC 0) or Attribution (CC-BY) licenses.[37] One answer to having only limited resources for open data on both the user and provider side could be to facilitate greater cooperation. Authorities interested in publishing data should seek out exchanges with data users from science or civil society to determine which data in which formats are actually of significant relevance. Instead of trying to open everything at the same time, a focus on important data in good quality—e.g., the locations of disaster assembly zones, live traffic data, or waste statistics defined by different stakeholders—would be a first step. Here, a resource-efficient approach could also be applied to data obtained by non-state actors. Data sharing between journalists, scientists, and activists should be enabled. One project moving in this direction is the Bilgi Edinme Hakkı Platform by the IPI,[38] which enables the uploading and sharing of data obtained via the Turkish Freedom of Information Act. To improve open data policies on the national level, keeping the EU-accession process open and following examples from neighboring countries like Georgia may offer a glimmer of hope.

It goes without saying that more research into digital policies is needed in Turkey. This paper is one of the first to deal with the genesis of open data policies and their current implementation. Due to the scope of the research, many topics were only briefly touched on. A better understanding of the involved federal agencies, as well as insights from public officials who have implemented these policies, could contribute to a deeper analysis of the problems and a roadmap to improve data culture and competencies within institutions.

Notes

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Bilgi_Edinme_Genel_Raporu.pdf. It is debatable, though, whether all of these can be considered freedom of information act applications in the sense that they are requesting direct government documents/information, or whether simple questions to agencies are also counted. For perspective, in the United States, a country with well-established FOI-culture, less than 400,000 applications were recorded in 2024: https://www.foia.gov/reports.html.

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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