

Avrupa Birliđi ve Üye Devletlerinin Sahipsiz Köpek Sorununa Yaklaşımları

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Öz

Bu çalışmada, Avrupa Birliđi ve üye devletlerinin sahipsiz köpek sorununu ele almada benimsediđi yaklaşımlar kapsamında sahipsiz köpeklerin tanımı, nüfus kontrol stratejileri ve sahipsiz köpeklere ilişkin yasal çerçeve incelenmiştir. Ayrıca, Avrupa Birliđi'nin sahipsiz köpeklerle ilgili geliştirdiđi politikalar, stratejiler ve yenilikçi yaklaşımlar, üye devletlerden örnekler verilerek analiz edilmiştir. Özellikle Hollanda gibi başarılı ülke örnekleri, sahipsiz köpek sorununu etkili bir şekilde ele almak için model yaklaşımlar olarak sunulmuştur. Avrupa Birliđi'nin sahipsiz köpek sorununa ilişkin geliştirdiđi mevzuatın, bu makalenin temelini oluşturan ülkemizde gelecekteki düzenlemeler ve uygulamalar için bir rehber olabileceđi öngörülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Düzenleyici çerçeveler, hayvan koruma, köpek refahı, mevzuat, nüfus kontrolü,

Approaches of The European Union and Its Member States in Addressing the Stray Dog Issue

Abstract

In this study, the definition of stray dogs, population control strategies, and the legal framework regarding stray dogs are examined within the scope of the approaches adopted by the European Union and its member states in addressing the stray dog issue. Additionally, the policies, strategies, and innovative approaches developed by the European Union concerning stray dogs are analyzed, with examples from member states provided. Notably, successful country examples such as the Netherlands are presented as model approaches for effectively addressing the stray dog issue. It is anticipated that the legislation developed by the European Union on the stray dog problem could serve as a guide for future regulations and implementations in our country, which forms the basis of this article.

Keywords: Animal protection, dog welfare, legislation, population control, regulatory frameworks.

Introduction

Recently, stray dogs have become a significant topic of public and media attention in our country, particularly with the passing of the "Law Amending the Animal Protection Law" No. 7527 on July 30, 2024. Officially enacted upon its publication in the Official Paper on August 2, 2024, the law has garnered considerable attention, especially due to the changes it introduced regarding the population control of stray dogs. These changes have sparked widespread

reactions and discussions across the country. Türkiye largely draws inspiration from European legislation and practices when drafting its animal rights laws. A prominent example of this is the Animal Protection Law No. 5199, which was enacted in 2004 and is based on the European Convention for the Protection of Animals. This study examines in detail the laws, developments, regulations, implementations, and examples related to stray dogs in the European Union and its member states, which Türkiye considers as a

model in drafting its legislation, in light of recent developments in the country.

Definition of Stray Dogs

According to the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code (2018), a stray dog is defined as "any dog that is not directly controlled by a person or whose movement is not restricted." Stray dogs are classified into three different types: wild dogs, which are feral versions of domestic dogs and are not directly dependent on humans; free-roaming dogs, which are not controlled or restricted by anyone; and owned free-roaming dogs, which have an owner but are not directly controlled or restricted. The definition was updated in 2022, changing "stray dog" to "free-roaming dog." According to the most recent terminology, a free-roaming dog refers to any dog, either owned or unowned, that is not under direct human supervision or control. This definition also includes wild dogs (Meli, 2022).

In the European Union, a stray dog is defined as one that is not under the continuous control or supervision of any person or caretaker and moves freely in areas outside of shelter or home. The legal differences between owned dogs and stray dogs are often unclear. Although legal experts treat animals as personal property, they note that animals differ significantly from production goods. These differences often lead to stray dogs being perceived as having a lower legal status, which complicates their management. Unfortunately, current property laws do not adequately reflect these differences and often categorize animals the same as goods. Dogs are a unique type of private property and differ in two ways: First, dogs can move freely and reproduce without requiring large capital investments; second, owners often value their dogs far more than their market value (Gueseva, 2013).

Strategies For Controlling the Stray Dog Population

"The most recommended and humane method for reducing the population of stray dogs is the 'Catch, Neuter, Vaccinate, and Return' (CNVR) method. Many studies support this view (Jackman and Rowan, 2007; Friz, 2020; Hiby et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2025)." In this approach, stray dogs are caught, neutered, vaccinated, identified, and finally returned to the place where they were found. In 1990, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Animal Protection Association published a report on the most effective combination of methods. This report emphasized the sterilization of at least 70% of the female dog population, education for the public and dog owners, and the registration of dogs and pet owners. It was noted that these three methods, when supported by sufficient resources, form the most effective combination (Sternheim, 2012).

There are many options for managing dog populations; however, the ethical, socio-economic,

political, and religious characteristics of the relevant country can affect the acceptance of these options, requiring different practices. Therefore, the principle of "One solution does not fit all" applies in the control of stray dog populations (The Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014). Successful stray dog management is achieved through a combination of factors. In Western societies, effective management requires a series of integrated strategies, including:

- a. Comprehensive laws regulating pet ownership, breeding, sale, and abandonment.
- b. Owner education through information and awareness programs to ensure responsible care.
- c. Environmental management with effective infrastructure and services like shelters, veterinary services, and sterilization campaigns.
- d. Mandatory registration and identification of dogs through microchips to trace ownership.
- e. Controlled breeding to prevent overpopulation and ensure responsible reproduction.
- f. Collaboration among government bodies, municipalities, veterinary clinics, and NGOs for effective implementation.
- g. The concept of ownership, which influences laws and attitudes toward stray dog control.

These strategies offer a holistic approach to controlling the stray dog population and improving animal welfare (Gueseva, 2013).

Legislation on Stray Dogs in the European Union

There are effective policies in Europe that can inspire other countries. The European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (1987) provides a detailed framework for developing national-level policies and legislation (The Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014). In 2022, the total dog population in Europe was approximately 106,364,000 with 68,620,000 of these dogs residing in European Union countries (European Pet Food Industry Federation, 2024). Although the EU is relatively developed compared to other regions of the world, it does not have a common and mandatory legislation that all member countries must adhere to regarding the protection, sterilization, population control, and identification of stray dogs. The way in which member states implement national legislation on these issues falls outside the EU's jurisdiction and remains under the authority of the individual member states (European Commission, 2024).

There is also no specific standard in European countries regarding euthanasia, which has been a focus of recent developments in our country. In countries with overcrowded shelters or limited resources, euthanasia is still used as a population control measure, and this practice applies even in some high-income European countries. The killing of abandoned dogs may reduce the problem for a certain period, but

it does not lead to long-term population reduction (Papavasili et al., 2022). If the root cause of the issue is not addressed, new dogs will take the place of those euthanized or placed in shelters, and naturally, the remaining population will produce new offspring to restore the population (Sternheim, 2012). The articles mentioned in the convention that concern stray animals are as follows:

European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals

A party, when it considers that the number of stray animals is a problem, should take appropriate legislative and/or administrative measures to reduce the number of these animals without causing unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress.

a) These measures should include the following requirements:

- i) If these animals are to be caught, the process must ensure that it is done with minimal physical and mental pain and suffering appropriate for the animal;
- ii) If the caught animals are to be kept or killed, these processes must be carried out in accordance with the principles outlined in this convention;

b) The parties agree to consider the following:

- i) Ensuring that dogs and cats are identified with some suitable methods (e.g., tattooing) that do not cause persistent pain, suffering, or distress, and that these numbers are recorded in a registry with the owner's name and address;
- ii) Reducing the unwanted reproduction of dogs and cats by promoting their sterilization;
- iii) Encouraging people who find a stray dog or cat to report the situation to the authorities.

Exceptions to the principles set forth in this convention for the capture, keeping, and killing of stray animals may be made, but only when it is inevitable within the framework of national disease control programs (Council of Europe, 1987).

Policies, Strategies, and Innovative Approaches in the European Union

Policies, strategies, and innovative approaches in the European Union have been shaped by the demand from EU citizens for the European Parliament to initiate responsible adoption campaigns for dogs and cats. There was also a call for a uniform legal framework for both pets and abandoned animals, as highlighted in various reports. On July 4, 2012, the European Parliament adopted a decision on animal protection and welfare strategies for the 2012-2015 period. This decision includes regulations such as animal identification and registration, strategies for managing abandoned animals, promoting responsible pet ownership, banning unauthorized shelters,

prohibiting the killing of abandoned animals without medical necessity, providing animal welfare education programs in schools, and imposing heavy penalties on member states that fail to comply with the programs. Additionally, the decision calls on EU member states to approve and integrate the European Convention for the Protection of Animals into their national legislation. In 2014, the Commission also approved a study on the welfare of dogs and cats concerning commercial practices (Papavasili et al., 2022).

In recent years, the EU has aimed to increase animal welfare by establishing common standards to address the problems caused by different practices among member states. In this context, practices such as mandatory sterilization, microchipping, registration, and increasing the qualifications of caretakers have been emphasized (Rasquinho, 2023). In 2024, the European Economic and Social Committee presented a proposal to the European Parliament regarding "Regulations on the Welfare and Traceability of Dogs and Cats." This proposal suggests that EU member countries enhance their cooperation with stakeholders and NGOs, make identification and registration systems mandatory, integrate all data into a single system across the union, implement strict regulations for breeders and sellers concerning licensing, registration, and adherence to welfare standards, and require digital sales platforms for animals to ensure accountability by verifying the seller's identity, the origin of the animals, and compliance with national animal welfare legislation. The proposal also recommends mandatory sterilization of shelter animals and owned hybrid animals (Council of the European Union, 2024).

Also, the European World Health Organization (WHO/EUROPE) Animal Welfare Platform was established in 2013 to improve animal welfare and ensure the implementation of WHO standards. Since 2014, the platform has prioritized the management of dog populations and the control of stray dogs. To date, eleven Balkan countries have aimed for full compliance with a common vision of dog population management by 2025 and 2030 through organized panels and events. The most recent of these, the fifth WHO Regional Stray Dog Population Management Workshop, was held in Croatia from July 4-6, 2023. The event was conducted with the support of the Regional Animal Welfare Center and co-financed by the European Commission, the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals, the Dogs Trust Foundation, and the International Animal Welfare Fund. Additionally, in 2016, the European WHO launched the "Be Their Hero" campaign in the Balkans, targeting future dog owners. This campaign aims to reduce the number of abandoned dogs and the problems caused by pets left on the roadside (World Organization for Animal Health, 2023).

Furthermore, with the increasing use of digital platforms for dog population control and welfare,

innovative network-based projects have emerged in Europe. For example, the EU-based "CARODOG" website (www.carodog.eu) promotes responsible dog ownership and contributes directly to the protection of pets. Another noteworthy example from the European region is the web-based dog registration system implemented in Italy's Molise region. This shared data system standardizes operational procedures at the regional level, offering innovative and user-friendly solutions such as multi-level access, detailed dog identity information, traceability, and SMS accessibility (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014).

The Europetnet (www.europetnet.com) system is also a database connected to national databases that links member countries and allows the tracking of animals using microchip numbers, independent of the national database where the animal is registered (International Companion Animal Management Coalition, 2019). Europetnet helps thousands of lost animals across Europe return to their owners every year by scanning both its own database and those of its member countries. Even if no result is obtained from the scan, Europetnet teams assist in finding the dog (Europetnet, n.d.). Furthermore, in the European Union, the transport of five or more dogs for commercial or private purposes is recorded by the TRACES (Trade Control and Expert System), which registers and controls animal traffic between countries and regions (Flemish Government, 2022). According to the European Union's pet travel rules, if a pet dog enters the European Union before its owner, the owner must travel to the EU within five days of the dog's arrival, referred to as the "5-day rule" (European Union, 2024).

Successful Country Examples in Addressing Stray Dogs in the European Union Netherlands

The Netherlands is one of the first countries in the world to officially have no stray dogs. This achievement was made possible through strict animal welfare laws and the implementation of "Catch, Neuter, Vaccinate, and Return" programs (Sawbridge F., 2023). In the 1800s, nearly every household in the Netherlands had a dog, leading to the emergence of a stray dog population. The first legal regulations regarding dogs were introduced during rabies outbreaks. Over time, the welfare of a dog became culturally seen as a reflection of the owner's well-being. Well-fed and well-cared-for dogs came to symbolize wealth, prompting the establishment of regulations and laws concerning pet welfare. The first animal protection association was established in 1864 in The Hague, and the first shelter opened there in 1877. In 1886, animal cruelty was made punishable by law. By 1962, the Animal Protection Law came into effect, and by the end of the 20th century, the Animal Health and Welfare Law was passed. These regulations prohibited the mistreatment and inadequate care of animals,

imposing fines and prison sentences for violations. Birth control methods for animals were also introduced, paralleling human birth control. Over the years, various groups, foundations, and coalitions advocating for animal rights and welfare have emerged. The high standard of living in the Netherlands also contributed to the elimination of the stray dog population. The country is notable for having one of the few political parties dedicated to improving animal welfare (Sternheim, 2012). Today, dogs are deeply integrated into daily life and culture in the Netherlands, with their presence in everyday situations becoming so normalized that they are widely accepted as valued companions (Ophorst et al., 2025).

Building on this strong foundation of animal welfare, the Netherlands has developed comprehensive systems and policies for managing and protecting stray dogs. Every adopted dog is registered and licensed, with licenses needing to be renewed annually. The rehoming and care of stray animals are managed through shelters, and regional adoption education programs are well-developed. Euthanasia is only applied to dogs for medical reasons or if they pose a threat to public health due to aggression (Tasker, 2007). Additionally, there is a special police force dedicated to animal welfare in the Netherlands. Local governments also impose high taxes on purchased dogs to encourage adoption from shelters (Escudero, 2020). Due to its early and progressive steps in animal protection and welfare compared to other European countries, the Netherlands has created a model that can serve as an example for the world.

Slovenia

Slovenia has achieved notable success in controlling its stray dog population, attributed to comprehensive legal regulations, effective practices, responsible pet ownership education, and increased public awareness. This success in maintaining a low stray dog population has positioned Slovenia as a model for other countries. The strategies implemented show that positive outcomes can be achieved by effectively combining multiple factors. To achieve this, several laws have been enacted to regulate pet ownership and curb the growth of stray dog populations. The first major law, passed in 1995, prohibited animal cruelty, followed by the 1999 Animal Protection Law, which criminalized the abandonment of dogs and imposed fines on violators. The 2002 Animal Shelter Regulation further expanded these provisions, specifying that veterinary clinics are not responsible for stray dogs. The responsibility for capturing stray dogs is assigned to animal shelter management. Once captured, stray dogs are kept in shelters for a 30-day waiting period before being made available for adoption, with this period extended to 90 days for pregnant or nursing dogs. All dogs are examined by a veterinarian within 24 hours of entering the shelter and receive necessary treatments.

Additionally, adopters are required to pay a daily shelter fee of 15 euros, along with vaccination costs (Tasker, 2007).

In 2003, Slovenia implemented a mandatory dog registration law, and microchipping became a standard practice. Under this system, dogs must be microchipped during their first rabies vaccination, with the microchip provided free of charge by the government. Dog owners are required to report any changes in their address or ownership within 72 hours. The 2005 Pet Welfare Regulation further restricted breeding and sales practices, allowing breeders and owners to breed dogs only once a year. The law limits individuals to owning no more than five dogs and prohibits the sale of pets at open markets, door-to-door, or at public events. Municipalities enforce leash laws, requiring dogs to be leashed in public places at all times. The Ministry of Agriculture actively supports vaccination and sterilization campaigns in rural areas. Moreover, animal welfare organizations, shelters, and volunteers run responsible pet ownership programs. Slovenia's legal system holds dog owners accountable for their pets' actions, and the country's high level of property rights protection is effective in reducing the stray dog population (Gueseva, 2013). Additionally, in March 2023, a political party proposed an amendment to the Animal Protection Act in the National Assembly, seeking to strengthen measures against animal neglect and abuse (Slovenian Press Agency, 2024).

The Slovenian public also plays a crucial role in this success. Rather than abandoning dogs, it is common practice to surrender them to shelters, which helps to reduce the stray dog population. Euthanasia may be applied to dogs that are not adopted within 30 days, or to those that are medically unfit, pose a public health risk, or display aggressive behavior. Independent sources report that 93% of dogs in shelters are adopted, while 7-8% are euthanized (Tasker, 2007). These efforts and regulations have established Slovenia as one of the leading countries in the world with the most comprehensive pet ownership laws and effective stray dog control systems (Gueseva, 2013).

Examples of European Union Countries with Insufficient Stray Dog Management

Italy

In Italy, the government provides legal protection for pets and has implemented measures to combat dog abandonment (Papavasili et al., 2022). Regulations mandate that all dog sales must include the microchip number, and for puppies, both the microchip number of the mother and a veterinary report are required (Tasker, 2007). Over the past three decades, Italy's approach to stray dog management has evolved from permitting euthanasia after three days of sheltering to enforcing long-term sheltering for dogs that are neither seriously ill, incurably sick, nor proven to be aggressive

(Passantino et al., 2007; Levi, 2019). However, the implementation of these laws and the overall management of stray dogs vary significantly across the country, due to regional differences in both regulations and resources.

While the Italian government has made agreements with shelters to provide free neutering services for abandoned and re-adopted dogs nationwide, the actual implementation of these services remains inconsistent. A notable exception is Pescara, a region in central Italy, where local authorities have enforced strict dog identification and registration regulations. As a result, this region has seen a substantial reduction in the number of abandoned dogs, as well as a decrease in the overall population of dogs in municipal shelters. For example, the dog population in shelters dropped from approximately 5,000 in 2004 to 2,300 by 2008. However, this success has not been replicated in other parts of Italy (Voslárová and Passantino, 2012). Many municipalities, particularly those with limited financial resources, face challenges in managing and maintaining municipal shelters. In many cases, these municipalities have entered into agreements with private facilities to manage stray dogs, leading to overcrowded shelters and diminished quality of care (Adriani et al., 2011; Papavasili et al., 2022).

Italy is home to over 1,000 shelters, some of which are primarily funded by public administrations or municipalities. The remaining shelters operate under a hybrid system, where privately-run facilities receive public funding based on the number of stray dogs they house. However, the conditions and facilities in these privately-operated shelters are often substandard, and the quality of care can be compromised. Furthermore, the more dogs a shelter accommodates, the more funding it receives, which inadvertently creates an incentive to avoid adopting out dogs. This funding model, combined with inadequate oversight and regulation, poses significant challenges to effectively reducing Italy's stray dog population (Pacella, 2023).

Romania

Stray dogs in Romania face widespread hostility, largely due to the absence of a government-led sterilization program, which leads to rapid reproduction. Abuse, including stoning, beating, maiming, shooting, stabbing, and poisoning, is prevalent (DogsToday staff, 2021). Although the government has established shelters, most are overcrowded, poorly sanitized, and lack adequate facilities for basic care, such as clean water and proper food handling. Additionally, some shelters lack essential medical services (Wink, 2017). Furthermore, efforts to control the stray dog population through killings have largely been ineffective. This issue can be traced back to forced urban migration between 1965 and 1989, which led to widespread pet abandonment

and contributed to the growing stray dog population (Wink, 2017; Eberlein, 2019).

In 2013, a law was passed that allowed the euthanasia of shelter dogs after 14 days, sparking criticism from Northern and Western Europe. Despite public appeals to the European Union and ongoing controversy, this practice has been legally sanctioned since 2001 (Wink, 2017; Papavasili et al., 2022). The lack of a consistent regulatory framework has further exacerbated the problem, as hastily adopted legislation has prioritized euthanasia over comprehensive, long-term solutions, often being enforced selectively. Rare instances of effective management occur when institutions and NGOs collaborate. The stray dog crisis in Romania reflects broader governmental inefficiencies, including poor public works, inadequate infrastructure maintenance, and financial mismanagement. Municipal funds are frequently allocated to companies with ties to local officials, reinforcing systemic corruption (Pencea and Brădăţan, 2015).

Conclusion

The stray dog issue, like in many parts of the world, is a complex problem addressed within the framework of animal welfare policies and laws in European Union (EU) member states. Various strategies have been developed to solve this problem, and the European Union and its member states are attempting to resolve it through diverse approaches and examples. The successful practices, models, and developments in Europe highlight the variety and scope of effective methods for addressing this issue. At the EU level, various initiatives have been undertaken to establish and implement standards related to stray dogs. However, it is evident that some member countries' national legislations have not fully integrated these initiatives. The efforts and strategies of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament on animal welfare and population control are encouraging member states to control stray dog populations and work towards a common framework.

Ultimately, the solution to the stray dog issue requires an integrated approach, supported not only by legislative and administrative changes but also by social awareness and education. The successful strategies developed by the European Union and its member states provide examples that Türkiye can consider while reviewing and updating its own legislation and practices. By evaluating these experiences and adapting them to the structure of the country and society, Türkiye can develop more comprehensive and effective solutions to the stray dog problem, which will positively impact both the welfare of the dogs and public health.

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