Estonian Academy of Arts

THE WORK OF A RIFT:

Kanal İstanbul and Turkey's Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Egemen Mercanlıoğlu

Supervised by Kaija-Luisa Kurik, Keiti Kljavin and Sean Tyler

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ABSTRACT

Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* was touted as a paragon of neoliberalism and a burgeoning democracy until the late-2000s. Two decades later, the positive portrayals of the country have decidedly shifted. Turkey is now considered to have retreated from neoliberalism; an emblematic case of authoritarian turn. However, this thesis rethinks authoritarian governance as the kernel of the Erdoğan-led AKP's brand of neoliberalism. It does so by focusing on a to-be-built urban megaproject, *Kanal İstanbul*—a 45-kilometer long man-made waterway, aiming to locate İstanbul as a signature node in the global web of flooding money and commodities. Using the megaproject as a lens, the thesis shows how neoliberal reforms in the early-2000s have propelled İstanbul and the construction sector as financial growth generating engines of the country. Subsequently, these reforms have buttressed contemporary coercive governance structure and a megaproject spree in the city. Finally, the thesis briefly explores a recent but growing counter-hegemonic contestation against Erdoğan and *Kanal İstanbul*, posed by Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of İstanbul. The thesis does not give a final verdict but explores whether or not this challenge proposes an alternative to authoritarian neoliberalism.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, the Justice and Development Party.

ECOC: The European Capital of Culture.

EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment.

EU: The European Union.

IMF: The International Monetary Foundation.

IMM: *İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi*, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality.

SOEs: State Owned Enterprises.

TOKİ: *Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı*, the Mass Housing Authority.

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CHAPTER I – Introduction

I.a Prologue

Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip *Erdoğan*, was the prime minister in 2011 when he pledged a trio of integrated megaprojects for *İstanbul*[1]. His *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party; AKP in its Turkish acronym) was campaigning for its third term in office with the election campaign centered around İstanbul's development. "Stability shall continue, İstanbul shall grow" was the slogan. Bearing the stamp of Turkey's "Vision 2023"—the promise of making the country the world's 10th largest economy by the Republic's centennial—İstanbul was to host the Third Bosphorus Bridge (the Third Bridge or the Bridge hereafter), and the New İstanbul Airport (the İstanbul Airport or the Airport hereafter); both were planned to be the widest, tallest, biggest of their kinds. Erdoğan promised an additional project; a project that shall "eclipse the Bridge and Airport in cost, scale, and controversy" (Hincks 2020). At a meeting area crowded with journalists, mustached businessmen, and pious AKP constituency, Erdoğan unveiled the last pillar of his trio of megaprojects a few weeks before the upcoming elections: an artificial waterway running parallel to the world-known Bosphorus. Erdoğan named this *Kanal İstanbul* and dubbed it his "crazy project"[2].

"This is the biggest project of our glorious history," roared Erdoğan on the day he disclosed *Kanal İstanbul*. 400 meters in width, 25 meters in depth and spanning 45 kilometers from south to north, *Kanal İstanbul* will, indeed, become one of the largest maritime engineering projects of all time (Kersley 2021). The 25 billion USD megaproject will start at the mouth of a naturally formed Küçükçekmece Lagoon in İstanbul proper on the Marmara Sea coast and go north until it reaches the Black Sea (see map 1). Erdoğan's revealed objective was to reroute increased sea traffic away from İstanbul's much-prized Bosphorus—the naturally formed waterway that bisects İstanbul between Europe and Asia. In years gone by, the historical canal became one of the world's busiest energy corridors. Thousands of tankers carrying 140 million tons of oil and other hydrocarbons (Yackley 2018) make up a significant portion of the 43,000 civil and military vessels that passed through the Bosphorus in 2020 alone—a dwarfing number in comparison to the Panama and Suez channels (Eldem 2021). However, despite being one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, Turkey cannot make a buck out of the Bosphorus because of the 1936 Montreux Convention that ensures free-passage of non-military vessels. What is more crucial to Erdoğan's argument are potentially ecological and life-threatening risks posed by tankers carrying hazardous materials. Involving a dozen sharp turns and ferocious currents, the Bosporus passage is indeed harrowing. The sinuous waterway has been the site of more than a thousand accidents since the 1950s with multiple spills of crude oil, gasoline, and other chemicals. The projected increase in sea traffic by 2050 and potential risks that come with it prepared the ground for the Erdoğan-led AKP to argue for a new waterway. *Kanal İstanbul* would mitigate navigational hazards from Turkey's prized city and generate huge toll income.

These are half of Erdoğan's ambitions. Next to mitigating potential risks and obtaining toll revenues, Erdoğan's plan for *Kanal İstanbul* involves the construction of two new towns along the planned sea route. Aptly named "New İstanbul", the new towns are planned to be dotted with logistical centers, luxurious hotels and hospitals, sea ports, smart apartment complexes, high-rise condos, and mass housing units. Following a curving line from south to north, the new axis of urban development penetrates into

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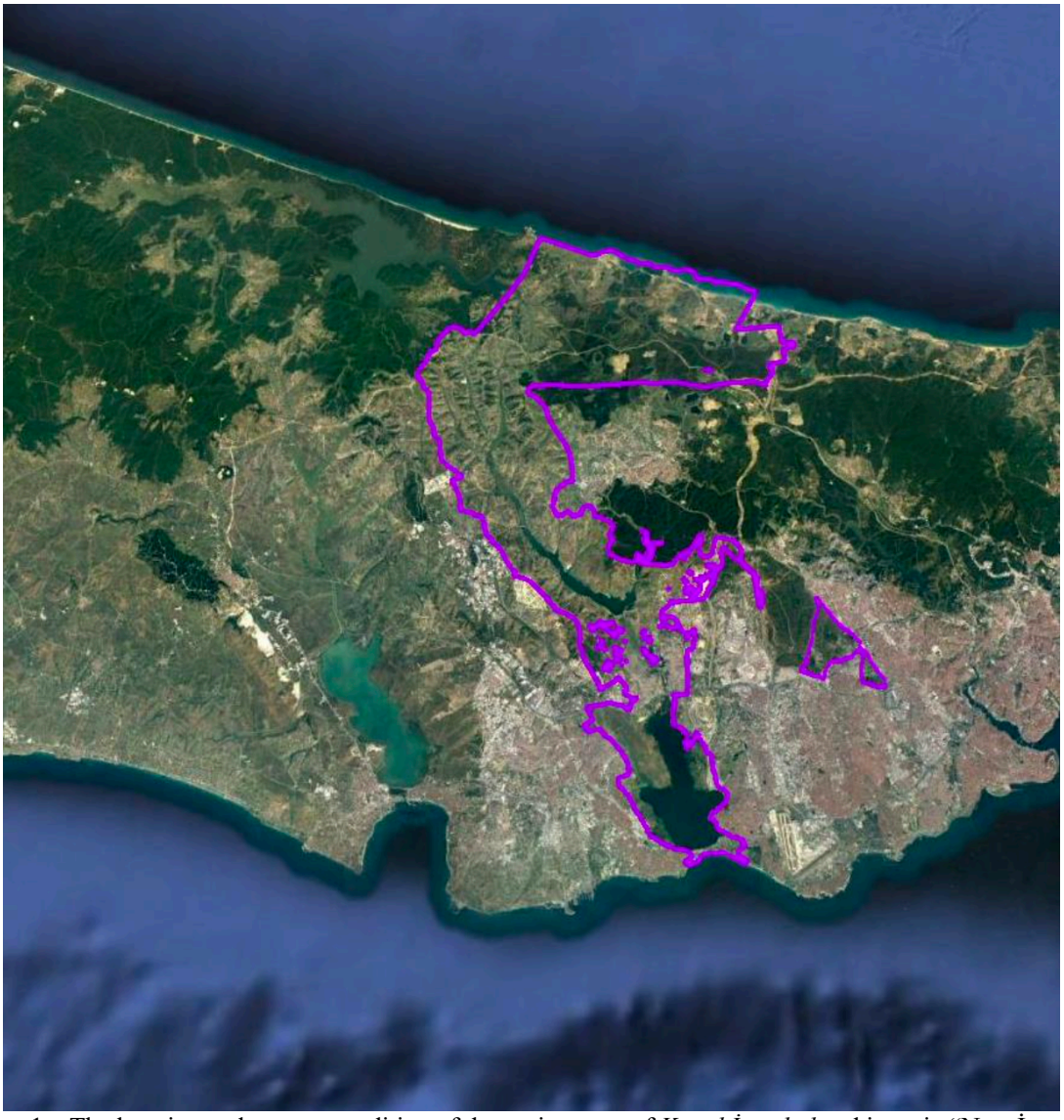
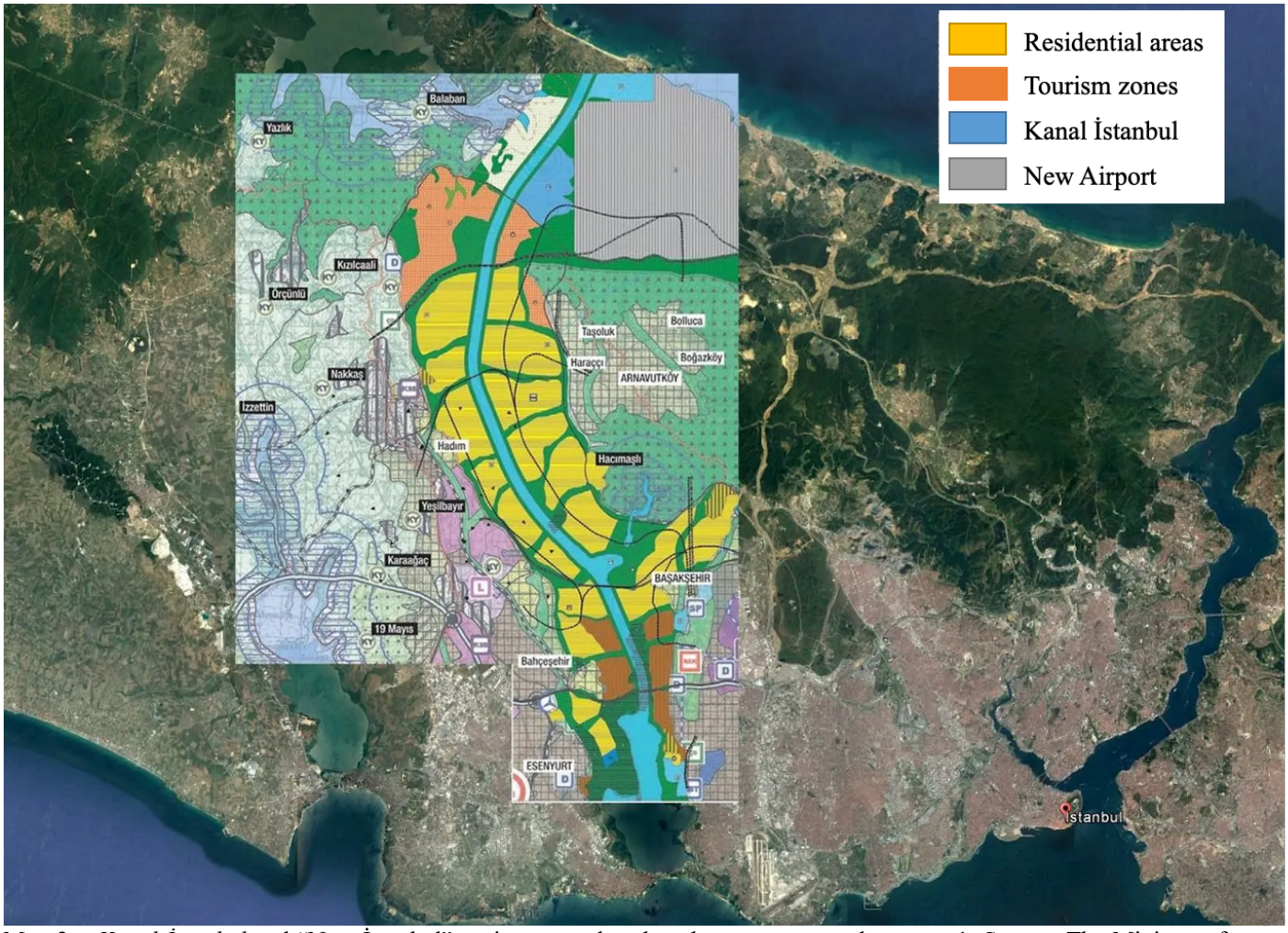
[1] This thesis uses Turkish special characters whenever it refers to proper nouns such as *Erdoğan* or *İstanbul*. For institutions, however, official English versions are used and Turkish special characters are usually—not always—avoided.

[2] "It means crazy, wow, in a good sense," as explained by the head of Turkey's general directorate for press in an interview with the New York Times (Gall 2018).

the diverse landscape of northern İstanbul: the epicenter of İstanbul's megaprojects and home to the last remaining forest areas, farmlands, marshes, freshwater resources. Often referred to as "the lungs of the city", the north provides 30 percent of İstanbul's densely populated European side's drinking water. Here, a sheer 80 percent of İstanbul's agricultural activities are being carried out. As of 2022, only 4,5 percent of the area is residential. *Kanal İstanbul*, with its twin project "New İstanbul", is set to open 45,000 hectares for development, pulling İstanbul's lifeblood into the folds of the construction industry.



Map 1 – The location and current condition of the project area of *Kanal İstanbul* and its twin "New İstanbul" projects. Source: Istanbul Environmental Plan at 1/100,000 scale, prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization.



Map 2 – *Kanal İstanbul* and "New İstanbul" projects are placed to the area presented on map 1. Source: The Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. Prepared by author.

Precisely here intervene the critics, for whom *Kanal İstanbul* is not a crazy project, but a project of a frenzied leadership. Over the past years, the project has drawn a fierce backlash guided by independent experts from a variety of disciplines, warning of unbearable environmental and financial burdens of Erdoğan's megaproject. Hydrologists warn about the project's heavy impact on the city's potable water supply, for starters. According to the project's approved Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA 2019), more than 30 percent of the current freshwater supply will be destroyed, as the "crazy canal" will completely envelop the Sazlıdere Stream, and potentially contaminate the Terkos Lake with sea water—two major reservoirs of the city of 16 million people (Kersely 2021). Oceanographers anticipate a huge inflow of nutrient-rich water flowing from the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea should *Kanal İstanbul* be completed. Triggering the growth of algae and other cellular organisms, connecting two seas by a man-made canal could end up disrupting a delicate ecosystem—potentially making Turkey's prized city stink of rotten eggs in the short term, and leading to the ecological destruction of the Marmara Sea in the long run (Saydam 2015). Seismologists are extremely worried about turning İstanbul's densely populated European side into an island, built atop one of the world's most active fault lines. An imminent İstanbul-centered earthquake could kill more than 30,000 people, experts argue, and opening a huge sum of land for development should only make things worse (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020). Meanwhile, economists debate the unpredictable cost of the project and its possible unbearable burden on Turkey's faltering economy. Political scientists fear a heightened geopolitical tension with Russia with respect to

the Montreux Convention, which restricts the passage of non-Black Sea battleships—e.g. the United States—through the Bosphorus (Morvan 2011). As a water management expert from İstanbul's Boğaziçi University acutely diagnosed, "Erdoğan is messing with far too many things." (Author's interview, February 2022).

Expert criticism did not cease the megaproject, however. Since 2011, *Kanal İstanbul* has been on top of the incumbent AKP's political agenda. Wedding neoliberal policies with a nationalist discourse—peppered with the idea of reclaiming a nostalgic past of imperial divineness—Erdoğan cast *Kanal İstanbul* as the symbol of the rising power of what he calls "New Turkey": a new era that started when Erdoğan successfully married formal democracy and conservative Islam to expand Turkey's integration with globalist capitalism (Tuğal 2021). The new era was launched after Erdoğan dismantled the "Old Turkey"—associated with the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal's secularism[3], invented to erase Islam from politics and cultural life (Yeşil 2016). Erdoğan himself was originally coming from an Islamist political tradition—the Welfare Party—that was not only scorned and alienated by the pro-establisment forces of the time, but was also suspended by the secularist military in 1997. Erdoğan, the mayor of İstanbul at the time, was imprisoned. Thus, when the Erdoğan-led AKP took power in 2002, they positioned themselves as an agent of "subaltern democratization" (Nas and Yel 2013), pursuing the European Union candidacy and achieving high rates of economic growth. This neoliberal hegemony was to dynamite the "Old Turkey" and its spatial footprints. The new one was to be launched out of the old's debris, championed by a megaproject spree in İstanbul.

As it turned out, *Kanal İstanbul* was not only about transforming İstanbul materially. It was also about moving Turkey to a new era symbolically and ideologically. On the one hand, when the megaproject was announced, buildings and spaces from the early-Republican era in downtown İstanbul—associated with the "Old Turkey"—have been progressively scheduled for demolition (Di Giovanni 2017). The most renowned case is that of Taksim Square's tiny urban park, Gezi Park. The latter was supposed to be razed for a pre-existing Ottoman landmark, planned to be retrofitted as the largest shopping mall ever built in downtown İstanbul. On the other, the AKP's plans to transform İstanbul took its most draconian form when Erdoğan announced his crazy project, *Kanal İstanbul*—a utopic gesture of spectacular size and cost with high economic ambitions to celebrate the beginning of the "New Turkey". The megaproject was, thus, rhetorically constructed as the guarantor of an imaginary nationhood; a social contract between the government and its subjects.

Built on the wreckage of the old regime, wheeled onto İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization and the globalizing construction sector, Erdoğan's megaprojects and his social contract were exclusionary. They were to produce new forms of socio-ecological-economic inequalities rather than bringing collective prosperity. Therefore, these large-scale ventures provoked counter-hegemonic challenges, making urban and rural spaces the setting and the stake of the struggle. This upsurge in place-based movements has provided broader oppositional politics with a repertoire, tactics and a perspective that was best exemplified in Gezi Park Uprisings (Erensü 2016): the largest urban rebellion in Turkish history and one of the most substantial movements of the global 2011-2013 movements of square (Tuğal 2022). Although that movement failed to form a political party of its own, the so-called "Gezi spirit" still continues to influence oppositional politics, as it produced the necessary infrastructure for the once fractured dissidents to band together against Erdoğan. The opposition's most emblematic success story came in the 2019 İstanbul local elections. By consolidating groups from a variety of political causes, the

[3] A particular mode of laicism in Turkey, emerged with the birth of the Republic of Turkey. Secularism was part of modernizing a "backward country" and detaching it from the Ottoman Empire's cultural roots—the most significant linkage being Islam.

opposition's rising star Ekrem İmamoğlu became the mayor of İstanbul—disrupting Erdoğan's 25-year-long stint in the city—by appealing to voters' desire for inclusive governance, bread-and-butter concerns and pitting against *Kanal İstanbul*. The new mayor cast Erdoğan's megaproject as the last straw of what he calls "the order of waste": an order of only a handful of elites, callously ripping off the people (Esen and Gümüşçü 2019). Since his landslide victory, İstanbul's new mayor has scaled up his opposition against *Kanal İstanbul* with his own counter-campaign of "Either the Canal or İstanbul". As the Republic of Turkey's centenary and the presidential election of 2023 is approaching, İmamoğlu has turned Erdoğan's crazy project into a battlefield for the country's leadership. Galvanized by İmamoğlu's support, numerous organizations have banded together to form a rainbow coalition that supposedly echoes the Gezi Park Uprisings as many of the same sections of society are involved (Busch 2020). Should İmamoğlu's opposition gain traction, pundits argue it could easily dent Erdoğan's constituency for the upcoming elections (Busch 2020).

Home to some 85 million and sprawled between three coastal areas, *Kanal İstanbul* is carving a *rift* through Turkey, materially, symbolically and ideologically. At the same time, the megaproject challenges popular analyses that oppose rule-based neoliberal policies versus authoritarian populist regimes, based on an assumed incompatibility between these governance structures. Although neo-Ottoman fantasies and a nationalist rhetoric envelop Erdoğan's discourses on *Kanal İstanbul*, the latter aims after all reinforcing İstanbul's attractiveness for the finance capital. Using *Kanal İstanbul* as a lens, this thesis proposes an alternative narrative about Turkey's neoliberalization under two decades of the AKP rule, in which neoliberal reforms have buttressed contemporary coercive governance and a megaproject-fueled urbanization. The İstanbul mayor's opposition is a curious case in terms of thinking how Erdoğan's brand of neoliberalism could or could not be contested.

I.b. From Urban Transformation to Megaprojects: İstanbul's Authoritarian Neoliberal Urbanization

It has become habitual to single out Turkey's president Erdoğan as the populist *par excellence* whose authoritarian rule should warn Western democracies (Müller, 2016). Yet, this was generally not the case until the summer of 2013, when the government violently suppressed the Gezi Park Uprisings: an impromptu event where millions of civilians staged massive demonstrations against the AKP's neoliberal management of space. Up until then, Turkey was touted as a "paragon of neoliberalism," expanding its integration with globalist capitalism (Tuğal 2022) and a "burgeoning democratic power," pursuing European Union membership (Borsuk et al. 2022). From once being championed as the deliverer of "civilianisation, democratization, freedom of belief and equality of opportunity" (AK Parti, quoted in Tansel 2019, 205), Erdoğan abruptly became the country's "New Sultan" (Çağaptay 2017).

A scholarly consensus has emerged, as a result, that diametrically opposed the AKP government's "golden era" associated with the image of a liberal reformist agent to the contemporary authoritarian moment punctuated by modalities of repression. This analysis was fundamentally flawed for it likened the AKP's neoliberalizing institutional reforms of the early-2000s to democracy. As a result of this misconceptualization, the populist authoritarian strand in "malicious Erdoğan" is uncontested today, while the neoliberal strand is often overlooked and ignored (Müller 2016, Biebricher 2020). While not rejecting the contemporary regime's ever-detrimental authoritarian modality of governance especially since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, a closer inspection reveals that authoritarianism has always been plugged into the Erdoğan-led AKP's neoliberal agenda. In other words, it is and it has always been the harmony between neoliberal reforms and repressive mechanisms that complete modalities of the AKP's neoliberal governance (Alemdaroğlu and Erensü 2018). The most tangible avenue to tease out

the intermingling of authoritarianism and neoliberalism is urban policy-making in İstanbul, as the city's transformation has been the backbone of the AKP's neoliberal hegemony, most notably at the aftermath of financial downturns.

"Every crisis produces its own city" writes Annalena Di Giovanni (2017, 107). Restructuring the economy often turns cities into financial products, acting as agents of decompression whereby states protect and salvage markets through the dislocation of immovable assets and citizens (Di Giovanni 2017). Invariably, such neoliberal recoveries end up shrinking decision-making mechanisms in the name of economic necessity (Bruff 2014). Home to some 16 million citizens, sprawled between Europe and Asia, İstanbul reflects this trajectory.

When the massive earthquake hit İstanbul and the wider Marmara region at the turn of the millenium, it paved the way for the 2001 financial crisis—the worst in the post–Second World War era (Erensü 2016). Turkey's post-crisis formula predicated upon deepening preexisting neoliberal policies with the assistance of the IMF and the EU. What was needed was a comprehensive overhaul of the financial system and political institutions under a strong leadership to avoid a populist pushback against austerity measures. The perfect opportunity presented itself in November 2002 when an enraged electorate was called to the polls. Organized at a time when inflation soared to a whopping 61 percent—costing 2 million workers to lose their jobs—the 2002 general elections saw the hollowing out of almost all establishment parties. Founded only a year ago, the AKP came to office with a landslide victory, forming a single party government. Since then, İstanbul has been the arena of a globalist order. Harnessing the risk of an imminent İstanbul-centered earthquake as an invisible infrastructure, the AKP's objective was to morph the historical city into being "the engine and signifier of an economic growth fuelled by real estate development, signature megaprojects and a reconfiguration of the urban commons" (Di Giovanni 2017, 108). Although the AKP was by no means the first government to exploit İstanbul, the pace and scale of the city's spatial transformation was unprecedented under Erdoğan's supervision in no small part to the EU-supervised legal and administrative reforms. It was thanks to the latter that the AKP has placed İstanbul's urban transformation at the heart of its socio-economic agenda. To set large capital into motion and to firmly locate Turkey as a top investment destination, the AKP turned its gaze to non-commodified and not sufficiently commodified urban and rural spaces: former industrial sites, state-owned lands and pastures, rivers and streams, forest areas, and big cities' historical and *gecekondu*[4] neighborhoods. Thus, "the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use" (Smith 1996, 65) could be amended. The post-2001 crisis recovery era has witnessed İstanbul's morphology wavering from government-controlled Mass Housing Authority's early ventures into public housing on the outskirts of the metropolis to the reinvention of heritage and tourism in the city center under the EU-modeled common-sense neoliberalizing reforms in urban governance.

Then came the second and a more global financial crisis: the 2008 financial meltdown—the greatest recession in world economic history since 1929 (Tooze 2018). This crisis has created an entirely different economic and political environment in Turkey, forcing Erdoğan and his AKP to tighten the hold over the country's financial resources by re-politicizing technocratic regulatory bodies to keep neoliberal political economy intact. For İstanbul, the country's post-2008 crisis recovery translated into redesigning the whole northern İstanbul as the epicenter of urban megaprojects. The latter resists easy definitions. But one could take them as large-scale, multidimensional and multi-scalar infrastructures that cost whopping sums, take ages to build, concern a range of stakeholders from public to private, and usually maintain

[4] *Gecekondu*—literally meaning "built overnight" (Buğra 1998, 307)—is a type of informal dwelling, which emerged in the 1960s during İstanbul's industrial expansion due to the lack of a traditional welfare state, capable of producing housing infrastructure for laborers.

some sort of an iconic design component (Santamaria 2019). While invoking social returns was the main motivation behind megaprojects in postwar Western welfare states, their objective, in neoliberal context, rests fundamentally on getting further integrated with the global economy in the name of international economic competitiveness (Swyngedouw et al. 2002). That is to say that megaprojects are the catalysts and infrastructures of globalist neoliberalism, in which "capturing a share of the world's mobile wealth" and "becom[ing] attractive to international capital" is crucial (Santamaria 2019, 278).

According to scholars such as Swyngedouw (2009), Macleod (2011) and Jessop (2002), megaprojects under neoliberal capitalism shun ideological debate between different visions of society—a core trait of neoliberalism's presumed tendency to depoliticize construction sectors and the field of urban policy-making (Tuğal 2022). Such arguments do not reflect the reality in the Turkish context, especially regarding *Kanal İstanbul*. Quite the opposite, Erdoğan's crazy project and other megaprojects—the Bridge and the Airport—have all come about when the AKP government shifted away from rule-based technocratic governance towards repoliticization of urban governance by dramatically re-centralizing decision-making processes. It was precisely this executive centralization that enabled the government to play a productive role—not only an entrepreneurial role—seeking to boost financial growth and attractiveness of İstanbul for finance capital, while also significantly boosting employment opportunities. But it is not only through material benefits that Erdoğan's megaprojects strive for popular consent—the glam is equally central. Indeed, iconic infrastructures have been cast as elements of realizing the telos of the nation. In contrast to generalizations over neoliberal megaprojects, Erdoğan's large-scale ventures are explicitly ideological and political (Tuğal 2022).

Up until recently, "neoliberal" has been the term through which critical scholars made sense of the AKP-supervised transformation of İstanbul. However, the sensitiveness of Erdoğan's megaprojects to ideological and political imperatives made scholars questioning to what extent Erdoğan's megaprojects can be labeled "neoliberal" (Madra and Yılmaz 2019; Öniş 2019; Tuğal 2022). Yet, the existing literature on what made İstanbul's transformation "neoliberal" has always been partially convincing. David Harvey, for instance, takes neoliberal ideology as a class-based project (Harvey 1989) and calls the "entrepreneurial logics" as the defining characteristic of speculation and construction-driven neoliberal urbanism. According to him, (i) frequent use of public-private partnerships, (ii) speculation-motivated urban transformation, and (iii) localized and fragmented approaches to development are the distinctive traits of neoliberal urbanization. Similarly; Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez's (2002, 579) article on megaproject-driven policy-making in the European Union emphasizes how neoliberal urbanization engendered institutional fragmentation, paralleled by a significant shift from public input to expert input which ends up with diminishing the "role of the public in general and of traditional organized groups in particular, with a consequent loss of democratic accountability".

While the AKP government's involvement in megaprojects are well beyond the scope of Harvey's "entrepreneurial logics," fulfilling private interests and attracting finance capital are still the most important objectives of Erdoğan's large-scale ventures. And much in line with Harvey's framework, İstanbul's megaprojects have been financed through public-private partnerships. Similarly, İstanbul's development projects are fragmented as acutely explained by Swyngedouw et al. (2002), yet planning functions and decision-making mechanisms have never been more centralized, the role of critical expertise has never been more minimized. For these reasons, I propose that "authoritarian neoliberalism" is a much more appropriate term for Turkey, where the state's coercive capacities operate in conjunction with the private capital "to the point that the separation of the two is a non-viable analytical tool." (Bruff 2014, 115). This theoretical framework provides a more productive avenue to trace *Kanal İstanbul* from the years of İstanbul's transformation under the EU's supervision to the years of megaprojects to interrogate how neoliberal restructuring of the state's administrative and legal branches in urban policy-

making have buttressed the deployment of its coercive apparatuses to secure the continuation of contested megaprojects (Tansel 2018). By focusing on reform and repression as complementary modalities of neoliberal governance, this thesis goes beyond treating neoliberal urbanization as a political process, shaped by the withdrawal of non-market forces and subsequent decentralization of decision-making processes as argued by Harvey (1989) and Swyngedouw et al. (2002). On the contrary, İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization under two decades of the AKP rule consists of a "retrenchment of government actors over decision-making powers" (Di Giovanni 2017, 112) to implement and secure neoliberal projects. If there is a shared pattern between İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization and the neoliberal ideology, it is that nothing is left to the chance of the market's *laissez-faire*—the topic that will be discussed in chapter II.

I.c. Contesting Megaprojects and Authoritarian Neoliberalism?

In their seminal article on the role of megaprojects of Europe's neoliberal urbanization, Swyngedouw et al. (2002) posit that megaprojects do not generate resistance and conflict. In fact, the authors define the lack of (grassroots) contention against large-scale ventures as one of the most conspicuous features of neoliberal megaprojects—this indicates how important "local growth coalitions" (Swnygedouw et al. 2002, 567) are in legitimizing megaprojects. Similarly, Orueta and Fainstein (2008) argue that urban megaprojects are unlikely to be seriously challenged by popular struggles. The rhetoric of global competition in the West, and the telos of rise to power in non-Western contexts are the elements that foreclose the possibility of major contentions *vis-à-vis* megaprojects.

This binary logic—growth vs. contention—does not work fully in the Turkish context for Erdoğan's megaprojects have ignited neo-Ottoman fantasies, (inter)national growth coalitions and enormous contention. In fact, Erdoğan's large-scale ventures in İstanbul triggered Turkish history's largest urban rebellion, and one of the most substantial revolts of the global 2011-2013 movements of square (Tuğal 2022): the Gezi Park Uprisings. The famous revolt erupted on the day the ground was broken for the Third Bridge—the first of Erdoğan's trio of megaprojects for İstanbul. Having emerged against the AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism and its footprints on a variety of geographies—from gentrified city-centers with urban transformation projects to rifted hinterlands with megaprojects—the Gezi Park Uprisings made 4 million people revolt against the AKP's neoliberal management of space.

The underlying story the uprisings have revealed was the gradual dissolution of the Erdoğan-led AKP's presumed consensus over real estate and mega infrastructure-led economic growth policies. Being less capable of producing hegemonic aura around his megaprojects, Erdoğan strives for consent exclusively within his own constituency—making the authoritarian strand embedded in his brand of neoliberalism more visible and malicious. As Ian Bruff (2014, 116) put it, "authoritarian neoliberalism does not represent a wholesale break from pre-2007 neoliberal practices, yet it is qualitatively distinct due to the way in which neoliberalism's authoritarian tendencies…have come fore through a shift…away from seeking consent for hegemonic projects."

Precisely this creates opportunities and avenues to contest authoritarian neoliberalism. If the Gezi Park Uprisings in the summer of 2013 was one spectacular instance of contestation, another significant challenge against Erdoğan's regime came to the fore when the opposition's rising star Ekrem İmamoğlu beat the AKP candidate in İstanbul's 2019 local elections. Since his landslide victory, İmamoğlu has been pitting against *Kanal İstanbul* with his own counter-campaign of "Either the Canal or İstanbul"; a motto that highlights potential ecological risks in Erdoğan's megaproject that might cause the end of

İstanbul. The mayor calls Erdoğan's construction-fueled political economy the "order of waste": a regime that is under the service of a few elites, ripping off the people of their resources and future.

On a final note, the thesis pays attention to the mayor's counter-hegemonic project, shaped in and around *Kanal İstanbul*. Unpacking some of the elements in this programme requires briefly drawing on the concept of left-populism: a political project that has been embraced by a wealth of European political movements and championed by some scholars on the Left as the most viable candidate for challenging crumbling neoliberalism (Fraser 2019). Indeed, the thesis positions the oppositional mayor's "Either the Canal or İstanbul" campaign against Erdoğan's authoritarian governance because the new mayor challenges the AKP's non-inclusionary governance regime and the social and environmental injustices their megaproject-fueled political economy engenders. While İmamoğlu's challenges against *Kanal İstanbul* attempts to speak to the urban poor and to those yearning for inclusionary decision-making mechanisms, it is important to question if this opposition points to a new political horizon beyond neoliberal political economy. This thesis cannot give a final verdict. But it makes a modest attempt at exploring some of the tensions in the mayor's counter-programme against *Kanal İstanbul*.

I.d Methodology and Outline

The methodology for this dissertation is a mixed one. On the one hand, it includes a thorough theoretical reading. The thesis particularly draws on various theories of neoliberal ideology and political-economy, neoliberal urbanism and populism to make sense of İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization under two decades of the AKP rule. The aim here is to bring political theory to the realm of urbanism. On the other hand, the methodology includes an explorative case study of *Kanal İstanbul* and it is here where a mixture of applied methods come to play. Because the empirical investigation focussed on three main techniques: (i) fieldwork on foot, where several walking practices were performed at different times along the 45-kilometer long *Kanal İstanbul*; (ii) planned and unplanned semi-structured interviews were conducted during these walks with scholar-turned-activists, locals and one municipality official; (iii) the space was documented through the means of photography for documentary purposes (see appendix B for a sample of images), which will be exhibited in the master students' final exhibition that annually takes place at the Estonian Academy of Arts; and (iv) qualitative document and discourse analysis were conducted, where legal and policy documents pertaining to *Kanal İstanbul* and the İstanbul mayor's speeches against Erdoğan's megaproject were examined.

I should open up the purpose of doing the fieldwork by walking along *Kanal İstanbul* because walking was the main methodology of the dissertation. Everything else supporting the empirical investigation—from interviews to photography, and even policy analysis to a certain extent—revolved around the walking practice. What I planned to get from the walking experience was primarily about developing a fuller and deeper understanding of the site (Babbie and Benaquisto 2002) where *Kanal İstanbul* will be built. Here is a good moment to briefly clarify my position as the author of this dissertation—a topic I shall be more explicit in chapter III. I am an İstanbulite. I was born and raised in the metropolis that straddles Europe and Asia, surrounded by two seas, Black and Marmara. Having lived all my life in İstanbul, I had the opportunity to witness my city's transformation and how central its commodification has been to Erdoğan's neoliberal political economy. The process of completely commodifying the city started as early as 2003 from poor neighborhoods in the city center with a peculiar form of housing: *gecekondu*—a triple-headed product of İstanbul's industrial expansion, rural migration and the lack of a traditional welfare state. My parents and I were tenants of one of these shelters, literally meaning "built-overnight", and we were among the first displaced citizens of the AKP's urban transformation programme. The anger, fear and the sense of insecurity this experience had disseminated deeply impacted

my political opinions and ideology. When the Erdoğan-led AKP started embarking on a wealth of megaprojects in the city, it was only natural to me to join the popular struggles at the Gezi Park in downtown İstanbul. I was and am against the AKP's political economy: neoliberalism—to me a political ideology that seeks to commodify, marketize and financialize things to exchange them globally.

While being politically and intellectually connected to *Kanal İstanbul*, I was completely unfamiliar with the physical site of the megaproject. Hence, the idea of walking. The location of *Kanal İstanbul* is located more than 30 kilometers west from the city, at the outskirts of the metropolis, an area called northern İstanbul. The area is one of the last remaining rural areas of the city of 16 million citizens, as well as the epicenter Erdoğan's megaprojects—the Bridge, Airport and *Kanal İstanbul*. Still, a number of villages are dotted in northern İstanbul, surrounded by freshwater resources, marshes, agriculture and pasture lands and forest areas. Because of these "natural assets", the region has been referred to as the "lungs of the city". And yet, walking *Kanal İstanbul* defies this popular imagination. Because, until recently, northern İstanbul was also dotted with coal, lignite and sand mines—materials that have powered İstanbul's street lights, heated households and shaped İstanbul's building stock. This thesis does not open up the discrepancy between how northern İstanbul is constructed today in popular imagination and the material history of the area which is as old as İstanbul's history of urbanization. But still, highlighting this discrepancy is important for explaining my objective behind walking *Kanal İstanbul*, because these were the nuances I was hoping to discover in the first place. As it turned out, northern İstanbul was not an untouched natural body of land, but a topography of juxtapositions: past and future, infrastructure and superstructure, wealth and poverty, urban and rural.

Moreover, walking *Kanal İstanbul* opened up opportunities that cannot be fully planned beforehand. During my walks, I have been stopped and interrogated more than once by local security forces: the gendarmerie, police and private security guards. Since I was clearly not a member of the communities in the villages and neighborhoods I was walking in and around, locals too were disturbed by my presence; leading some of them to approach me in an aggressive manner. It is important to underscore that *Kanal İstanbul* is a big topic for the international media agencies from the Reuters to the New York Times and other international media outlets whose İstanbul correspondents frequently visit the field. Equally important is how central a topic *Kanal İstanbul* is in the leadership battle between Erdoğan and the mayor İmamoğlu as the 2023 presidential election is looming on the horizon. That was why the security forces and locals were curious, threatened and/or disturbed—depending on their position regarding *Kanal İstanbul*—by my presence: they wanted to know if I was working for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, on behalf of İmamoğlu, or if I was a correspondent of the well-known media outlets. Although intimidating, these interactions have provided invaluable insights. For one, they shed some light on how everyday life echoes contemporary coercive and authoritarian modalities of the Erdoğan-led AKP, especially in the contested territories of megaprojects. As I walked *Kanal İstanbul*, I experienced the scope of increasing censorship and surveillance of citizens. Indeed, a number of times I was blocked from taking pictures of buildings, farmlands, animals and so on. More to my analysis was that these random interactions allowed me to ask questions back to those who interrogated me, after convincing them that I was "harmless". In total, 13 unplanned interviews were conducted with local citizens, using the semi-structured interview technique. The latter was useful because of its flexibility to explore different points in a conversational manner. However, I should note that I targeted specific discussion topics for these unplanned interviews—e.g. how already constructed megaprojects in northern İstanbul (the Bridge and the Airport) have affected the means of production and reproduction; what are local citizens' coping mechanisms, how the government have been articulating economic development as the general interest of society, and whether or not the idea of development justifies the shouldering of mostly negative costs. These loosely formulated questions trace how the AKP's neoliberal governance

has operationalized neoliberal reformism and repressive authoritarianism as complementary modality of their governance.

All in all, walking has offered me the opportunity to provide an alternative narrative from the ground regarding the Erdoğan-led AKP's neoliberal authoritarianism. That's why the chapter where I unpack *Kanal İstanbul* is titled "Walking *Kanal İstanbul*". The chapter puts across the story of me walking in the path of the megaproject, doing interviews, delineating the geography and attempting to lay bare the main traits of Turkey's authoritarian neoliberalism: (i) executive centralization, (ii) accumulation by incapacitation, and (iii) neoliberal developmentalism. Next to walking and conducting interviews, official documents, laws and regulations pertaining to *Kanal İstanbul* were examined. These documents both pertain to administrative reforms such as the Municipality Law in 2005, the production of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization in 2011, as well as various urban transformation legislations from 2003 to 2012 and the legislations that restructured Turkey's Mass Housing Authority from 2004 to 2012. Together, these documents make up the legal infrastructure of *Kanal İstanbul*. The chapter III, Walking *Kanal İstanbul*, is concluded by a brief discussion of the mayor's counter-hegemonic movement, "Either the Canal or İstanbul".

This introduction is followed by the second chapter, embarking on the theoretical framework that guides the thesis. The chapter discusses the contemporary moment, where right-wing populist discourse and authoritarian governance structures are wedded to neoliberal ideology. By exploring neoliberalism through a historical-theoretical approach, the thesis hopes to rethink neoliberalism as a system of thought that does not mean less state involvement. On the contrary, the neoliberal ideology places great importance on state power as guarantor of functioning markets (Biebricher 2020). Focusing on *Kanal İstanbul* and İstanbul's neoliberal restructuring is an important contribution to the discussion on neoliberalism's presumed tenuous rapport to authoritarianism. Using the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, the thesis focuses on Erdoğan's megaproject and the İstanbul's transformation from the years of the European Union-supervised neoliberalizing reforms in the urban policy-making to the contemporary moment punctuated by a megaproject frenzy under deepening authoritarianism. In doing that, the thesis shows how neoliberal reforms in the early-2000s have resulted in an executive centralization, which is the primary mechanism through which contested projects are being implemented and secured. Drawing on *Kanal İstanbul*, the thesis shows that the Turkish government's extensive involvement in megaprojects does not necessarily represent a break from neoliberalism (Orueta and Fainstein 2008; Madra and Yılmaz 2019; Öniş 2019). It rather shows that, in neoliberalism, nothing is left to the chance of the market's *laissez-faire*—the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER II – Theoretical Framework

II.a. The Crisis of Neoliberal Hegemony and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism: An Irreconcilable Relationship?

In 2009, the United States president Barack Obama made a speech at Turkey's Grand National Assembly. The president praised Turkey's renowned cultural monuments and beautiful beaches, and congratulated Erdoğan for successfully integrating Islam and free-market capitalism (Tuğal 2021). Being a champion of consistent economic growth and the only Muslim country bidding for a EU candidacy, Turkey, as affirmed by the US president, was "a model partner" (Tuğal 2016). Two years later, in November 2011, Erdoğan decorated the Time's cover, touting Turkey's "pro-Islamic leader" for having "built his nation into a regional powerhouse" (Time 2011).

Once hailed as a "paragon of neoliberalism" (Tuğal 2022), and a "burgeoning democratic power" (Borsuk et al. 2022), eulogies to Turkey were quickly replaced by criticism and frustration starting from the summer of 2013, after the government's violent suppression of the Gezi Park Uprisings—an impromptu event where millions of civilians staged massive demonstrations against the AKP's neoliberal management of space. Not only did the government's democratic credentials disappoint liberal observers, but also Erdoğan's secession from the rule-based neoliberalism with the delayed arrival of the 2008 global financial crisis rifted the "Turkish Model" (Tuğal 2016). As the relationship with international technocracy and finance capital soured, Erdoğan embraced a right-wing populist discourse from Gezi Park Uprisings forward. The final nail in the coffin came in 2017, when Erdoğan founded the presidential regime *à la Turca*—doing away with popular representation and the parliament, and instead ruling through issuing decrees by the power of law. As the Turkish model was crumbling, Erdoğan was put on the Time's cover once again for a special issue in May 2018. This time he was not alone, sharing his real estate with the likes of Putin, Orbán, and Duterte (Time 2018).

Images 1-2. Erdoğan and his Turkey was once celebrated as a "model partner". Nowadays, Turkey's president is depicted as one of the poster boys of authoritarian leadership. Source: Time 2011; 2018.

Opposing Erdoğan's earlier image of a liberal and democratic agent of reform against his contemporary governance through repression—shaped by the corrosion of the rule of law, employment of the state's naked power to suppress dissidents and increasing entanglement between state power and private capital—some scholars suggest that Erdoğan's Turkey has retreated from neoliberalism and democracy, and took an "authoritarian turn" (Bermeo 2016; Çağaptay 2017; Çalışkan 2018; Esen and Gümüşçü 2020; Levitsky and Way 2010; Müller 2016; Özbudun 2015). However, this burgeoning literature does not highlight that when Erdoğan and his party were widely appreciated in the late-2000s, Turkey was the world leader in mass criminalization of dissent, outpacing Iran and China (Yeşil 2016). These scholars also miss that the deepening of authoritarianism in Turkey is not peculiar and it maps onto the global hegemonic crisis of neoliberal ideology. Since at least the 2008 global financial meltdown, neoliberalism's economic and political dominance has been in the process of crumbling (Tooze 2018). Not only have the post-crisis recovery formulas seen the tumbling of pro-market policy paradigms—e.g. quantitative easing programmes to relieve global financial circulation—but also a range of political leaders and movements with authoritarian tendencies have emerged. Movements that speak on behalf of "the people" have either ousted incumbents or have won majorities in parliaments (Jäger and Boriello 2020).

In the face of the upsurge in right-wing populist movements, a substantial interest has emerged in the possible defeat of neoliberalism. The main driver of this interest was the opinion that neoliberalism spawned populism and thus created its own gravedigger (Watkins and Seidelman 2019). The American philosopher Cornel West's reaction against Donald Trump's election was a good example of this front. His op-ed piece that appeared in the Guardian provided a blunt summary of the argument: "The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang." (West 2016). In the same year, the readers of the Guardian saw Martin Jacques coming to a similar conclusion with regard to the Brexit referendum. His op-ed piece reported the upsurge of populism that had just swept Britain out of the European Union and brought about "[t]he death of neoliberalism and the crisis of western politics" (Jacques 2016). The common denominator between the two assessments is the presumed incompatibility of right-wing authoritarian formations with neoliberalism's unfettered individual freedom, creative hedonism and deregulated markets (Biebricher 2020). There is, however, significant room for skepticism. Authoritarianism and neoliberalism might not be intrinsically linked to each other, "but even less are they inherently opposed to one another." (Biebricher 2020, 1).

In the last decade, scholars have pointed out that there has been a systematic inclination in the neoliberal thought toward resorting to authoritarian solutions to implement market-based policies (Biebricher 2020; Brown 2019; Bruff 2014; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Olsen 2019; Slobodian 2018). Therefore, instead of declaring neoliberalism's death in the hands of authoritarian populist regimes, it is urgent to rethink avenues in neoliberal ideology that makes the amalgamation between authoritarianism and neoliberal political economy possible. Doing this demands greater attention to what is meant by neoliberalism. On that note, I follow what Callison and Manfredi (2020) proposes and take the neoliberal project not as a matter of path dependency, but as a resilient and mutating ideology that responds and adapts in the face of political economic crises. Was not the latter what launched the neoliberal project in the first place? The next section revisits the roots of neoliberal ideology following a historical-theoretical approach.

II.b. What Is Neoliberalism? A Historical-Theoretical Definition

The term neoliberalism has been central in politics for almost half a century now, and yet the term remains hotly debated. It appears that various efforts at defining the concept as a policy package do not allow scholars to agree on a common understanding of what neoliberalism is (Birch 2015). Moving from

this analytical challenge, some political theorists and historians of ideas have paid attention to the context in which this political economic idea emerged in the first place (Biebricher 2019; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Olsen 2019; Slobodian 2018; Springer 2015; Peck 2010). This historical-theoretical approach provides important clues to formulate a working definition.

The context of the birth of neoliberalism was the crisis of classical liberalism in the 1930s as a result of the recurring economic crises which culminated into "The Great Depression". These economic and subsequent political crises have challenged liberalism in two ways. First, they conducted Keynasianism's rise to become the dominant economic paradigm. Second, they engendered the ascent of illiberal zeitgeist from fascism to communism. Although these political movements were diametrically opposed to one another, they certainly agreed in their rejection of liberalism and in their commitment to "collectivism" (Biebricher 2020).

Against this state of affairs, the first generation of neoliberal thinkers convened in Paris in August 1938 for the Colloque Walter Lippmann (Peck 2010). The participating intellectuals agreed on the deep crisis of liberalism and the need to develop a new project that wouldn't restore classical liberalism as it is, but overhaul and modernize the latter. As Rüstow—the originator of the term neoliberalism—said: "... we seek the responsibility for the decline of liberalism in liberalism itself; and, therefore, we seek the solution in a fundamental renewal of liberalism" (Rüstow, in Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 170). This fundamental renewal included abandoning some of the *sine qua non* notions of liberalism to confront capitalism's structural crisis, including that of *laissez-faire* (Biebricher 2020). The market still remained to be a crucial point of reference in new liberalism, but the kernel of the new order was to focus more on producing infrastructures within social, political, and legal spheres on which functioning markets could rely (Slobodian 2018). In other words, what was at stake to neoliberal thinkers was establishing functioning markets and guaranteeing its protection from popular demands (Biebricher 2020).

The neoliberal project has to be understood as a reactive body of thought, launched against the rise of masses. The neoliberal ideology is more about statecraft—that is how to govern—than economics (Slobodian 2018). The next section sheds some light on why and how neoliberal thinkers recover authoritarian statism as a more adequate governance structure for the new liberalism than democracy.

II.c. Authoritarianism in Neoliberal Thought

Freidrich Hayek—one of the founders of the flagship think-tank of transnational neoliberalism, the Mont Pélerin Society—once famously told to a Chilean newspaper that he preferred "a liberal dictator to a democratic government lacking in liberalism" (El Mercurio 1981 quoted in Biebricher 2020). The interview was conducted at a time when the country was under military rule. Elsewhere, Hayek followed up his commentary on the Chilean case and admitted that putting in effect neoliberal reforms required restricting and even suspending democracy (Hayek 2003, 124). Indeed, the neoliberal project was premised on state power and adequate governance structures that guarantee the perpetuity of functioning markets—a task that could foster authoritarian solutions and governance.

Turkey's first acquaintance with neoliberal reforms in 1980 lays bare neoliberalism's tenuous relationship with democracy. At the time, the country was severely hit by the ensuing oil crises in the 1970s. For a hydrocarbon-deprived country like Turkey, the crisis translated into a growing import bill and subsequently to hyperinflation due to the foreign exchange crisis. The government's initial response to the deepening crisis culminated in an economic restructuring programme, dubbed January 24th Decisions: a version of the so-called Washington Consensus. Penned by a World Bank technocrat Turgut Özal, the programme directly targeted laborers by suppressing wages and privatizing state-owned

enterprises—the biggest employer for labor—to decrease public expenditure (Rodrik 1990). The January 24th Decisions encountered a fierce backlash from the Left and trade unions, leading to street violence. It turned out that the neoliberal restructuring programme cannot be put in effect in the context of a representative democracy. Indeed, in the early hours of September 12 1980, a communiqué was broadcasted on the radio by the Turkish military junta. With the slogan of "placing Turkey in its deserved place in the changing global order", the military suspended democracy to implement the January 24th Decisions. The junta violently punished any insurgents against the neoliberal restructuring policies. Some 650,000 people were detained and tortured; 108 prisoners condemned to death penalty; more than one million people were blacklisted (Söyler 2015, 132).

The Turkish case was not an epitome of "pure" neoliberal ideology of "free society" versus "messy" implementation practices—an oft-cited dichotomy in the literature on neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Bruff and Starnes 2018). Because it was neoliberal thinkers themselves who argued for restricting democracy through authoritarianism, technocratic rule and other forms of self-binding rules in the first place. Take ordoliberalism and its emphasis on the notion of "strong state", for instance, which emerged as a critique of democratic pluralism under the Weimar Republic. In the face of an ignorant electorate, who pursued nothing but their own interests since their political and economic judgment were clouded, ordoliberals opted for insulating the state from masses through authoritarian governance to ensure the competitive order (Biebricher 2020).

One finds textual evidence in Röpke's—one of the spearheads of ordoliberal thought—magnum opus "International Economic Disintegration" (1942) which interestingly speaks to the Turkish case. Röpke—an emigrant scholar in İstanbul at the time he started writing the book—argued that in a country where principles of liberalism were not established—such as Turkey—promoting economic development could only be achieved through a "positive dictatorship" (Röpke 1942, 256). Different from tyranny, "positive dictatorship" was an issue-based authoritarian regime for implementing necessary reforms in the economy. Countries like Turkey could follow this recipe, which would allow their governments to embark on a dual role of a regulator and entrepreneur acting with the market system (Röpke 1942).

Röpke's recipe for new liberalism is, in fact, very contemporary. An epitome of the blueprint can be found in the Erdoğan-led AKP's revitalization of the government-controlled Mass Housing Authority in the early-2000s—the kernel agency in propelling the construction sector. Founded in 1984 by Turgut Özal—the author of the 24th January Decisions—as a credit-dispensing mechanism for housing production, Erdoğan equipped the Authority with exceptional planning and financial powers. These were made possible by neoliberalizing reforms in urban policy-making under the European Union conditionality—a topic that will be discussed in length in chapter III. Using the EU carrot, Erdoğan made the Mass Housing Authority both a regulator of the housing market and an entrepreneur which can form and facilitate public-private partnerships in large-scale urban transformation projects. Not only that the Authority became the most powerful urban developer with its enormous planning capacity, its operations were also shielded from any political oversight following the EU-supervised policy package, advocating for insulating neoliberal reforms from popular contention (Kuyucu 2017).

In the end, it appears that the politics of reform remains a politics of the extraordinary that could require a temporary authoritarian regime (Hayek 2003), or a positive dictator(ship) (Röpke 1942). In other words, implementing neoliberal policies has made neoliberal thinkers turn to actors or events that could destroy the established order (Biebricher 2020). Disruptors like military coups or authoritarian political leaders such as Orbán, Duterte, Erdoğan and others are the catalyst of neoliberal change that neoliberal thought has driven toward. Bruff (2014) has aptly conceptualized this amalgam of neoliberalism and authoritarian leadership as "authoritarian neoliberalism".

II.d. Authoritarian Neoliberalism

The above analysis reveals that "neoliberalism as an ideology … is fundamentally about the coercive, non-democratic and unequal reorganization of societies" by authoritarian states and global corporations/organizations (Bruff 2017). According to Slobodian (2018), the neoliberal project entails (i) designing state institutions to encase markets, and adequate governance structures to insulate globalist capitalism from popular demands; and (ii) rehauling the world as a space of competing actors where capital, goods and in some cases people can freely move.

Adequate government structures can both be established by supra/inter-national entities like the European Union, International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (WTO) as Slobodian's work (2018) on the history of neoliberalism highlights, or such governance structures can be implemented through authoritarian state practices—often under the supervision or influence of the aforementioned organizations—as evidenced by Mirowski and Plehwe's work (2009), focussing on the influence of supra/inter-national organizations' influence in non-Western countries. The IMF's "structural adjustment programme", for example, was what kickstarted Turkey's liberalization—albeit executed by the military junta which crushed the labor movement to facilitate market-friendly reforms and Turkey's integration into the world market (Akçay 2018).

It is precisely the possibility of embarking on an authoritarian governance structure that makes neoliberalism such a resilient and mutating ideology in the face of changing political economic conditions. This reminds Poulantzas' commentary on "authoritarian statism" (Poulantzas 2008). While the latter certainly relies on brute coercive state power, this governance modality's usefulness lies in its capacity of reconfiguring state and institutional power in such a way that their practices and policies can be insulated from social and political dissent. Writing at the onset of the neoliberal turn under Reagen and Thatcher, Poulantzas describes "authoritarian statism" not as "a transitional form on the road to" a neoliberal state, but rather as "the new 'democratic' form of the bourgeois republic in the current phase of capitalism." (Poulantzas 1978, 208-209). Especially since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, Poulantzas' take on authoritarianism echoes even more.

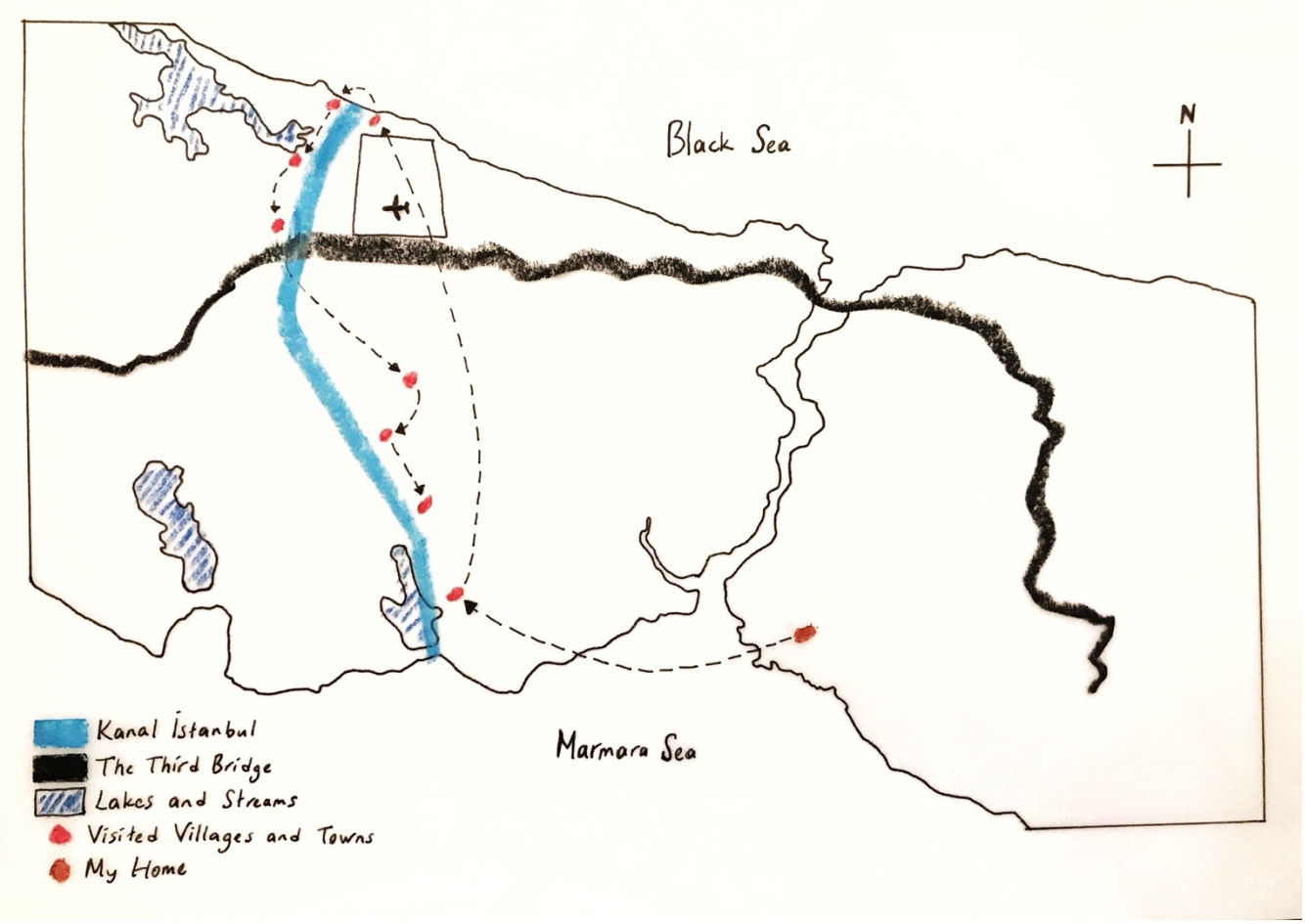
As right-wing populist leaders and their authoritarian political leadership are wedded to neoliberal policies, the term "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Bruff 2014) is fast gaining currency in critical social sciences. While the negative ramifications of neoliberal recovery policies in the post-2008 era condemned masses to austerity regimes and thus shrunk neoliberal ideology's capacity to garner popular consent, the subsequent rise of authoritarian politicians indicates not the emergence of post-neoliberalism, but entails a much more coercive version of neoliberalism (Bruff 2014). In his "States of Discipline" (2017), the Turkish scholar Tansel defines authoritarian neoliberalism as an amalgamation between authoritarian leadership with judicial amendments and reforms that enable governments to limit the avenues in which their neoliberal policies can be challenged. On the one hand, authoritarian neoliberalism operates through mechanisms and practices that seek to insulate the state power from social and political debate and participation by centralizing decision-making power (Bruff 2014). On the other hand, authoritarian neoliberalism is "marked by a significant escalation in the state's propensity to employ coercion and legal/extra-legal intimidation" (Tansel 2017, 3). Therefore, authoritarian neoliberalism results in the "curtailment of so-called formal liberties" (Poulantzas 1978, 203-204). These new political constellations are no alien to neoliberal governmentality. Nevertheless, authoritarian neoliberalism marks a significant shift away from consensus-based strategies to a model of governance in which dominant social groups are less and less interested in co-opting dissent through forms of political compromise. They, instead, "opt for the explicit exclusion and marginalization" of oppositional political and social forces (Bruff 2014, 116).

İstanbul's urban transformation and the field of urban-policy making under two decades of the Erdoğan-led AKP rule epitomizes the lessening of neoliberalism's hegemonic aura—that is the shrinking capacity of states to garner consent for neoliberal policies. In the early-2000s, Erdoğan embarked on a draconian urban transformation programme in İstanbul with the supervision of the EU's "Local Administration Reform Package". Erdoğan and his AKP co-opted (potential) dissidents using the people's willingness to be part of the EU and by providing a contingent empowerment for local municipalities by authorizing them to designate "[urban] transformation zones" (Tansel 2018). However, the ramifications of the 2008 crisis required Erdoğan and his AKP to tighten the hold over the country's financial resources and embark on a wealth of megaprojects by centralizing the executive branch in urban policy-making. They first created a new ministry in 2011 which became the sole authority in urban governance—overstepping municipalities and other stakeholders—and they promulgated a new urban transformation law in 2012 that confirmed the supremacy of the new ministry—therefore the government—and thus built a legal and administrative firewall around future ventures across İstanbul. Indeed, Erdoğan's *Kanal İstanbul*, as will be discussed in the next chapter, was made possible by these two legislations. And when finally people revolted against the AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism in summer of 2013 at the Gezi Park, Erdoğan marginalized protestors as "enemies of the nation", and disciplined insurgents with police batons and tear gas.

Turkey was under a lingering state of emergency since the Gezi Park Uprisings, until Erdoğan founded his "Turkish style" presidential regime in April 2017—equipping himself with exceptional executive and legislative powers. In an interesting twist of fate, Turkey, whose adventure with neoliberalism kickstarted with a military coup and a subsequent state of emergency in 1980, was proclaimed the harbinger of post-neoliberalism when Erdoğan became the president in 2018 under yet another state of emergency (Erensü and Madra 2020). True that Erdoğan shifted away from rule-based technocratic governance and centralized the decision-making processes in a number of policy fields, including urban governance. But do these changes mean that Turkey is no longer neoliberal? Focussing on *Kanal İstanbul* and urban governance in İstanbul, the next chapter traces the AKP governments' constitutive role in the production of construction-fueled neoliberal order in the last two decades.

CHAPTER III – Walking *Kanal İstanbul*

Some 30 kilometers west of İstanbul's much-prized Bosphorus lie a diverse landscape, straddled between the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea. A 45-kilometer-long journey across a curving line from Küçükçekmece Lagoon in İstanbul proper to the Lake Terkos—adjacent to the Black Sea shoreline—takes one through modest working-class neighbourhoods, rows of luxurious high-rise buildings of gated elites, draconian mass housing towns and the last remaining villages of the metropolis. Here, the Sazlıdere Stream has come to slake İstanbulites' thirst for hundreds of thousands of years, sharing its territories with Yarımburgaz Cave—an ancient settlement of 400,000 years. The marshes and agricultural fields, feeding the city, offer occasional sights of "botanical magic" (Byfield 2016, 71 quoted in Kentel 2019, 156)—rifted apart by masses of concrete and steel. Northern Forests cover the hilltops. This is the epicenter of the city's wildlife, as well as the bottleneck of thousands of excavation trucks, carrying construction materials. Highways and bridges run over water basins to connect recently built megaprojects to the city and global commodity markets. This is a topography of juxtapositions: past and future, infrastructure and superstructure, wealth and poverty, urban and rural. This is the path of *Kanal İstanbul*: a 25 billion USD artificial channel, linking the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea to create a new axis of urban development, stimulate foreign investments and tourism, and firmly locate İstanbul as a global logistical center. This curving line is also my walking path.



Map 3 – My journey along *Kanal İstanbul* and all the visited sites. Drawn by author.

On an unseasonably hot February 2022, I decided to do something insightful for my fieldwork and I resolved to walk *Kanal İstanbul* in several intervals—sometimes by myself, sometimes with my mother. I took inspiration from a bunch of scholar-turned-activists. Among them was Serkan Taycan, a trained civil engineer and photographer. In 2013, in the immediate aftermath of the Gezi Park Uprisings, Taycan embarked on an artistic mapping and walking project between the Black and Marmara Seas. The project was later put on display for the 13th Istanbul Biennale and morphed into a participatory artwork that seeks to raise consciousness of the dramatic transformation of İstanbul's periphery. Although drawing a bunch from Taycan, my approach is slightly different. For starters, I was there not so much for artistic purposes. I did photograph my walking journey but this was rather for documenting the space—a vast space—whose destruction seems to be imminent. The main intention behind walking was to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of not only the field itself (Babbie and Benaquisto 2002), but also the political environment circumscribing the country. To a certain extent, walking was a resistance—against an undulating topography, my own body and the sense of insecurity owing to the increasingly pressing and visible authoritarianism in the country.

And precisely here I have to confess, and this time I need to be more explicit than I was in chapter I: I am against Erdoğan and his construction-driven neoliberal hegemony. It is not only that I am ideologically against this accumulation regime, it is also that I have had personal struggles with it. My struggles began as early as 2003 when my parents went bankrupt due to the 2001 economic crisis, forcing us to move into one of many gecekondu neighborhoods in the city. After the AKP took power in 2002, they immediately embarked on a huge campaign of demolishing these informal settlements, claiming they were "cleaning the city from tumors surrounding it" (Erdoğan 2006 quoted in Baysal 2013). Being tenants, my parents and I were among the first kicked-outs. Here we met police batons and tear gas for the first time, and witnessed in person the authoritarian premises of the regime's political economy. The second wave of my personal struggle came in the early-2010s, when the AKP started aggressively promoting privately-owned small hydropower[5] developments in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea Region—the region where my family originally comes from. Having spent most of my summer holidays in the area, I personally witnessed how virtually every bit of waterbody was put on sale—turning my motherland into a construction site and ripping the villagers off of their sources of (re)production. The latter has triggered the emergence of the Black Sea Uprising Platform [Karadeniz İsyandadır Platformu] to which I joined—a platform created by the villagers and expanded rapidly to metropolitan areas owing to the vast kinship organizations of Black Sea villagers in big cities. For İstanbul, this synergy translated into forming coalitions between other ecologist groups, struggling mostly against Erdoğan's megaprojects—the Bridge, Airport and *Kanal İstanbul*. And thus came the third wave of my struggle. On a May afternoon in 2013, I found myself sitting at a tiny urban park in downtown İstanbul to protest the groundbreaking ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge. This tiny park was called the Gezi Park: the epicenter of the largest urban rebellion in Turkish history.

The following sections are a mix of my visual notes and observations which have been deeply influenced by my positionality that I explained above. As I walked, I made some maps as sketches and then remade them at home. But I rely mostly my words and my camera to ground the research for the case study. Along my walking route, I have also met and interviewed scholar-turned-activists, a municipal official and some 13 citizens—some supporting the crazy project and some vehemently opposing it. It was locals'

[5] In contrast to large dams, small hydropower plants do not rely on reservoirs to produce electricity. Instead, they exploit the vertical distance between two sections of a river by directly capturing the kinetic energy embedded in the velocity of flowing water. In the early-2010s, the AKP utilized green energy incentives from international organizations to commodify the rural lands, streams and lakes in the countryside.

insights, however, that stuck the most. My position and these inputs guide the below discussions that were put across with a "story-telling" tone of voice. I wanted to give myself, interviewees, geography and non-humans enough space to speak for themselves. Hence, the choice of writing style.

"Walking *Kanal İstanbul*" starts with exploring the history behind the legal framework of the megaproject to tease out how neoliberal reformism under the supervision of the European Union and coercive modalities of authoritarianism have come to operate hand in hand with the Erdoğan-led AKP's neoliberal political economy. This discussion is of crucial importance to locate Erdoğan's megaproject as an interface of authoritarian neoliberalism. The chapter then moves on to open up nuances of the accumulation model that has emerged from the AKP's megaproject frenzy in northern İstanbul with the insights of locals I met along the route. The third discussion topic explores how Erdoğan's megaprojects seek to garner consent both by producing material social benefits in the form of employment and glam through the iconic infrastructures that promise raising the nation's financial capacity to the level of Western counterparts. The final section presents a recent counter-hegemonic movement that has emerged against Erdoğan's *Kanal İstanbul* under the leadership of İstanbul's new mayor from the oppositional party. In this final section, the mayor's discourses and alternative policy and urban governance proposals will be opened up to tease out if all these point to a new horizon beyond the AKP's neoliberal hegemony.

Image 3. A dog walking by the Sazlıdere Stream, soon to be envelopped by *Kanal İstanbul*. Photo taken by author.

III.a. Dialectics of Reform and Repression: Executive Centralization and Kanal İstanbul's Legal Infrastructure

My journey to walk *Kanal İstanbul* started at the Marmaray—a mass rail transportation network that connects İstanbul's European and Asian sides with a tunnel under Bosphorus—one of Erdoğan's much-touted megaprojects. On a Thursday morning in February 2022, I descended at the Küçükçekmece station located near the district's naturally formed Lagoon—the exact point where the megaproject meets the Marmara Sea. At a picnic table in a sliver of a park, I spent an hour waiting for my interviewee.

Across the park were rows of luxury villas and high-rise condos, bizarrely neighboured by swathes of gecekondu buildings—courtesy of İstanbul's industrial expansion in the lack of a welfare state. Behind the table, a rooster and a few hens were pecking the crumbs of leftovers of a picnic fare. They must have entered the park through a hole in the park fence—probably created deliberately by the owner of the chicken run next to the park. A few meters away from me, two private security guards were eyeing me quizzically. I must have been an odd sight, carrying a camera and taking pictures of mundane things on a Thursday morning—a potential foreigner, perhaps a journalist. "Where to?" one of the guards asked in English. "*Birisini bekliyorum*" [I'm waiting for someone] I replied, in Turkish. Seemingly baffled by the fact that I was a Turk, the other guard patronizingly advised me not to take pictures at a public park. "Haven't you heard anything about the right to privacy?" Any attempt to explain seemed futile. A few minutes after this small encounter came my interviewee. "He is with me," he reassured the "bosses" of the public park and invited me to his office, overlooking the Küçükçekmece Lagoon. My interviewee is an official at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, headed by the main opposition party's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. Since he asked for anonymity, I shall call him Mr. A.

Over a dozen tulip-shaped glasses of tea, our conversation with Mr. A went on for a good two hours, taking us to many topics. Among them was how and why the megaproject spree had started in the early 2010s and the legal infrastructure that assured swift implementation of much-contested projects. "April 27, 2011 was the date Erdoğan announced his crazy project to the public," said Mr. A, adding that the story of *Kanal İstanbul* actually goes back to 2006, when Turkey's European Union alignment policy reforms in urban governance gave birth to the Istanbul Metropolitan Planning Unit (the Planning Unit, or the Unit hereafter). The Unit was established by the AKP mayor of the time, Kadir Topbaş, as a hub for young experts, scholars and intellectuals, planning future interventions across the city (Di Giovanni 2017). It turned out that Mr. A was working as an expert at the Planning Unit. Operating as a subsidiary of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM, or the Municipality hereafter), the Unit was preparing a comprehensive environmental plan at 1/100,000 scale with respect to the European Union's local governance principle of sustainable development. "The plan was by no means perfect," admitted Mr. A. "However, it [environmental plan] did at least set an aim for İstanbul by restricting construction activities in the Northern Forests to protect our 'lungs' and water resources. Future developments should have been on the east-west axis of the city, as it has historically been the case.".

The master plan Mr. A explained was promulgated in 2009 and pompously defined by the AKP mayor as İstanbul's "constitution". "Thanks to the master plan prepared by the input of hundreds of scientists and other rational reforms in urban planning, the city won its candidacy to become the European Culture of Capital in 2010," Mr. A told me. "But the [environmental] plan turned out to be a stillborn child," he added. Indeed, only a few weeks after the plan was put in effect, Erdoğan announced his plan to build a third bridge over the northern tip of the Bosphorus—a project restricted by İstanbul's environmental plan. "This came as a shock to everyone working at the Unit," recalled Mr. A. "We staunchly opposed the project at the proposed location. But our opposition had little to none effect," he added. Erdoğan's

announcement for a third bridge was quickly followed by the plans to construct a new airport at the heart of Northern Forests and then by his infamous crazy project a few months later. These developments meant the virtual abolishment of the master plan. In protest, Mr. A resigned from his post at the Unit the day after *Kanal İstanbul* was announced to the public.

Why did the same government who had prepared a plan that put northern İstanbul under protection, decided all of a sudden to embark on a series of megaprojects that will rip apart İstanbul without any public deliberation? This question has been hunting the minds of observers at home and abroad who seem to be baffled by Turkey's changing fortunes: from once being a "model partner" as s a paragon of neoliberalism (Tuğal 2022) to backslide into authoritarian statism in the space of a few weeks (Fuller 2016; Esen and Gümüşçü 2020; Erensü and Alemdaroğlu 2018; Yeşil 2016). Significant number of pundits respond to the question, holding the very common and somewhat cliché hypothesis of "power corrupts". A 2016 Huffington Post (Fuller 2016) article was an epitome of this argument: after a decade in power, Erdoğan lost his touch and grew power-hungry, argued the author—a sickness that leaders of "less developed democracies" in non-western parts of the world frequently suffer. I posed the same question to Mr. A. His response did also echoe a similar pattern. Emphasizing that the abolishment of the master plan was just a teaser of the rampant authoritarianism that was to define the post-2010 era, Mr. A also argued that Erdoğan was poisoned by his own power. "I don't know what happened but something happened to him around 2010," Mr. A responded. "He virtually destroyed everything they [the AKP governments] achieved [in the early-2000s]".

My intention is by no means getting into polemics with Mr. A, but I certainly do not agree with him. Because, diametrically opposing Erdoğan's so-called "golden era" against his contemporary authoritarian image risks correlating the AKP's neoliberalizing institutional reforms in the early-2000s—under the supervision of the International Monetary Foundation (IMF) the European Union (EU)—to democracy. In fact, it is more accurate to rethink the AKP-penned reform strategies in the "golden era" as the base upon which the post-2010 megaproject spree and more repressive urban governance modality were constructed.

Rethinking reform and repression as mutually reinforcing modalities of the AKP's brand of neoliberalism requires one to explicate the different political-economic conditions that the 2001 and 2008 financial crises have produced and what they meant for İstanbul's urban governance. To start with the earlier crisis, it is crucial to underscore that it took place in a global macroeconomic environment of quantitative easing. Before the AKP took office, Turkey had already accepted the IMF's structural adjustment programme, which entailed freeing the central bank from politics, targeting inflation and privatizing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to secure foreign investments (Erensü and Madra 2020). When Erdoğan took the premiership, all he had to do was to commit to the IMF and scale up the efforts to become an EU member state. This allowed the AKP to promote the country as a safe haven for foreign investors.

In the field of urban governance, these efforts translated into embracing the EU's so-called "Local Administration Reform Package" (Kayasü and Yetişkul 2014). This reform programme put great emphasis not only on common-sensical legal and institutional reforms regarding municipal governments, but also on an urban transformation agenda especially in İstanbul—a metropolis where 65 percent of the housing stock was estimated to be covered by low quality and informal housing stock (Di Giovanni 2017), dubbed gecekondu. The devastating 1999 Marmara Earthquake, which killed some 20,000 people, was a bitter wake up call and equally a golden opportunity for the shrinking construction sector to demolish and redevelop gecekondu neighbourhoods to shake off the bottlenecks the industry was dealing with after the earthquake (Kuyucu 2017). From a rent gap theory perspective (Smith 1996), transforming informal settlements on public land offered a huge amount of potential unrealized urban land rent, waiting

to be incorporated into capitalist accumulation circuits (Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010). The most important thing that needed to be sorted out was producing a suitable legal and administrative infrastructure for swiftly implementing urban transformation projects.

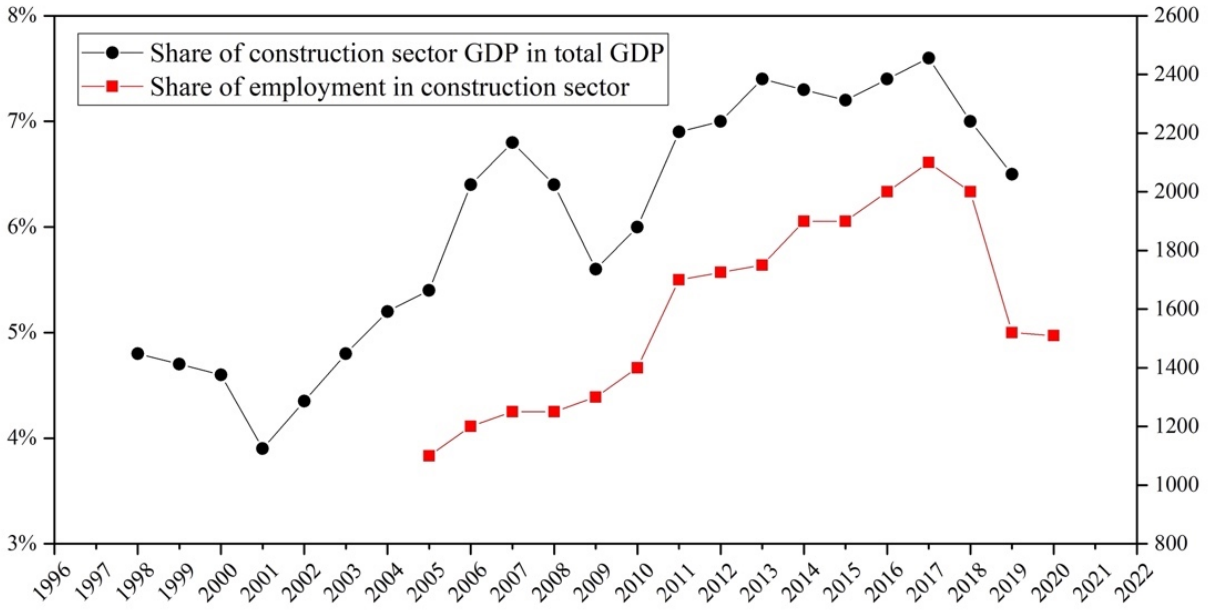
As with all neoliberalizing reforms, the challenge of enforcing market discipline on the poorest segments of the society is weathering the electoral backlash (Akçay 2018). Responding to the challenge, Erdoğan-led AKP put forward a bifurcated strategy. First, the AKP efficiently utilized the EU carrot to buffer potential societal opposition against its urban transformation agenda. Within the scope of EU alignment policies, the government, in 2005, synchronously passed the Municipality Law (No. 5393) and the "Law for the Reuse of Timeworn Historical and Cultural Property with Restoration and Protection" (No. 5366); commonly referred to as the "Gecekondu Transformation Projects" (Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu 2008, 15). Hand in hand, these two legislations established the legal framework for the AKP's draconian urban transformation programme, while providing a contingent empowerment for local municipalities by authorizing them to designate "transformation zones" (Tansel 2018). The reason this decentralization was ostensible (Tansel 2018, 9) was because the actual execution of transformation projects were to be managed by the government-controlled Mass Housing Authority (TOKİ in its Turkish acronym and the Authority hereafter). This links us to the AKP's second response: executive centralization—a form of state deliberation whereby decision-making powers are concentrated within the central government (Tansel 2018).

Image 4. A *gecekondu* neighbourhood by the banks of the future *Kanal İstanbul*. Photo taken by author.

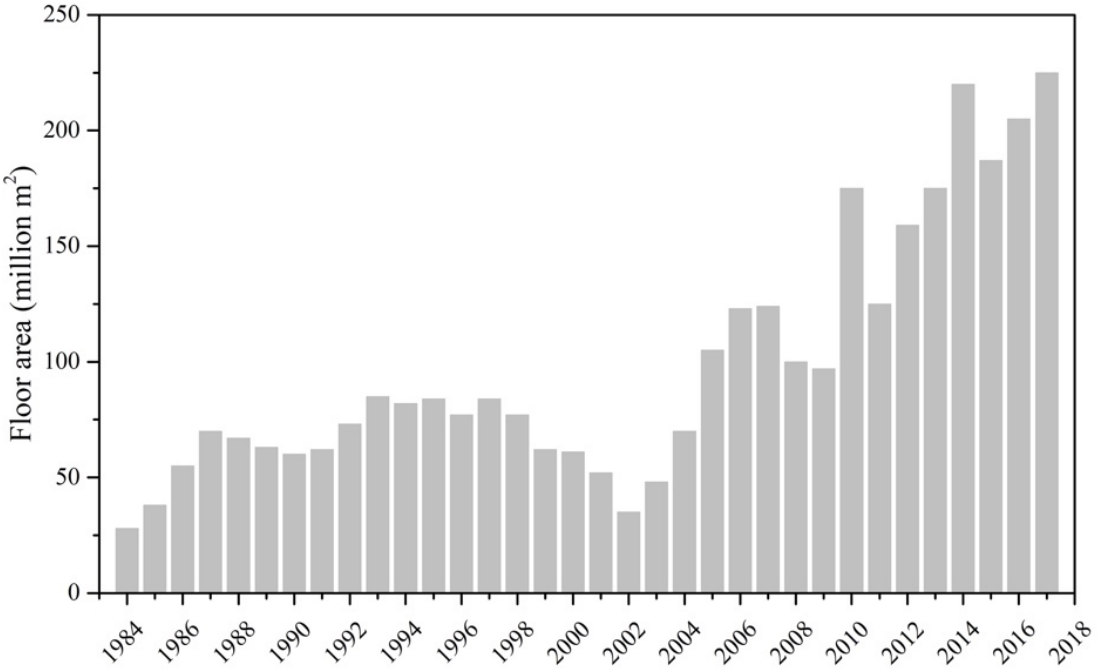
Throughout the early-2000s "the rational reforms in urban planning" that Mr. A mentioned and the decentralization attempts in urban governance—e.g. the establishment of the Istanbul Metropolitan Planning Unit Mr. A was part of—were contradicted by the government's eagerness to appropriate the

rapidly rising urban rent in İstanbul and other major cities (Kuyucu 2017). A fundamental step towards appropriating the "rent gap" was Erdoğan's revival of the TOKİ—formed originally in 1984 as a credit-dispensing mechanism for housing production. Following a series of legal and administrative changes incentivized by the EU, the Authority was equipped with planning and financial powers to become an institution with extraordinary competencies—capable of (i) requesting the ownership of Treasury land to provide mass housing; (ii) expropriating any land or property owned by real or legal entities once an area is declared "transformation zone" by the relevant municipality; (iii) facilitating public-private partnerships in large-scale urban transformation projects; and of (iv) establishing private firms and financial trusts operating in the construction sector—e.g. the Emlak Real Estate Investment Trust (Emlak REIT hereafter), a subsidiary of TOKİ, traded in Istanbul Stock Exchange Market (Kayasü and Yetişkul 2014; Di Giovanni 2017; Kuyucu 2017; Tansel 2018; Tuğal 2022). Not only that the Authority became the most powerful urban developer with its enormous planning and implementation capacities, its operations were also shielded from any political oversight following an amendment to the management of public finances in 2005 which relocated TOKİ's financial resources to a "special budget" and its political accountability solely to Erdoğan's office (Kuyucu 2017; 2020; Tansel 2018, 7).

It turns out that the mismatch between reform—e.g. decentralizing municipalities—and repression—e.g. igniting the government-controlled TOKİ—was the very engine behind the Erdoğan-led AKP's large-scale urban transformation leap. The latter did not only heighten the scope and pace of the commodification of land, but it crucially prepared the right environment for the construction sector to roar its supremacy both as the growth-generating engine of the country and as a massive employment reservoir for the unemployed labor—waved off by the IMF-supervised privatization programme for the SOEs in the early-2000s (Akçay 2018; Tansel 2018; Tuğal 2022). This means that despite enforcing market discipline on urban poor through privatization and urban transformation programmes, Erdoğan's AKP sustained their ability to produce consent among the working class by facilitating more employment opportunities in the construction sector. At the same time, after the government passed the "Mortgage Law" in 2007, the TOKİ has built swathes of new apartment units at İstanbul's outskirts and sold them to the displaced citizens—as a result of urban transformation projects—with low-interest rate mortgages. Thus, not only displaced urban poor were co-opted as homeowners, but also non-commodified hinterlands of the city were pulled into the real estate sector. Taken together, neoliberalizing reforms in the early-2000s have buttressed an unprecedented commodification of land in İstanbul, disciplined the urban poor, and propelled the construction sector to become a growth-engine and employment reservoir (see graphs 1 and 2).



Graph 1. Urban transformation programme and TOKİ's increased building permits propelled the construction sector to make up significant portion of the GDP. Thanks to the privatization of the SOEs under the IMF's supervision, the construction sector also became the most important employment area. Prepared by author. Source: The Turkish Statistical Institution and Tuğal 2022.



Graph 2. TOKİ was the state apparatus behind the AKP's urban transformation programme. Graph 2 shows how TOKİ's building permits have increased since 2005. Thanks to the increased scope of building permits, the construction sector was propelled to become Turkey's GDP producing engine. Source: Turkish Statistical Institute and Tansel 2018.

Then came the second and a more global financial crisis: the 2008 financial meltdown—the greatest recession in world economic history since 1929 (Tooze 2018). This crisis has created an entirely different economic and political environment in Turkey. The problem was that the country's primary coping mechanism against financial crisis consisted in greater integration into the world economy (Kuyucu

2017) by attracting foreign liquidity, found in abundance in the early-2000s. When the US Federal Bank's Ben Bernanke announced in 2010 that the US was to increase its interest rates, the end of the Turkish economic miracle began—the flooding foreign capital was no more. And thus a dilemma emerged. If the traumatized and devalued Turkish Lira was to be rescued, the Turkish Central Bank had to raise interest rates—a decision that would have killed the construction industry. The sector was highly dependent on imported materials, cheap credits, and credit-led expansion of domestic demand, all of which required minimum interest rates (Özden et. al 2017). Overcoming these challenges required Erdoğan and his AKP to tighten the hold over the country's financial resources and embark on a fully-fledged executive centralization in the management of macroeconomy by re-politicizing technocratic regulatory bodies; most notably the Central Bank.

For İstanbul, the country's post-2008 crisis recovery translated into redesigning the whole northern İstanbul as the epicenter of urban megaprojects. The latter were promoted as the guarantors of Turkey's financial sovereignty. Indeed, if İstanbul and the construction sector were to be sustained as growth engines of the country, the scope of earlier "Gecekondu Transformation" schemes had to be significantly scaled up towards "a more attentive use of non-commodified spaces" (Di Giovanni 2017, 120). İstanbul's European Capital of Culture (ECOC) bid in 2010 was the decisive moment for this new era of megaprojects. At the time, as Mr. A explained, the planning authority was devolved to the Planning Unit, which put northern İstanbul's water basins, forest areas and agricultural lands under protection by restricting construction activities in and around the region. However, using İstanbul's ECOC bid as a springboard, the AKP initiated the process of "re-branding" (Di Giovanni 2017) the whole city through a trio of megaprojects: the Bridge, Airport and *Kanal İstanbul*.

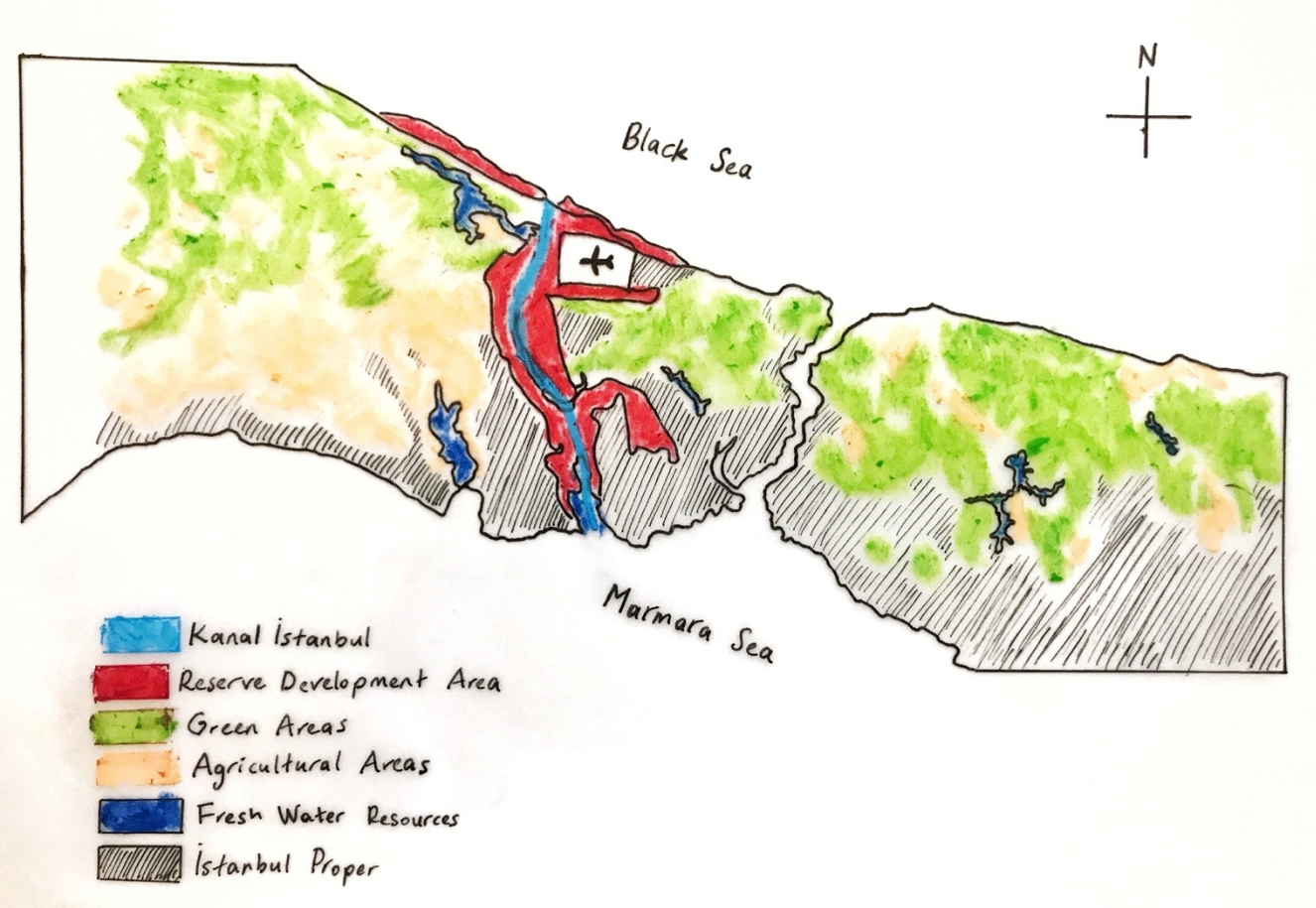
However, the legal framework for implementing mega infrastructure and transformation projects contained several legal and institutional ambiguities, leading the Erdoğan-led AKP to spectacularly deepen the centralization of urban governance they were already experimenting with the TOKİ. The very first victim of the rampant executive centralization was Mr. A's Planning Unit and İstanbul's environmental plan. "The abolishment of İstanbul's master plan for megaprojects was just a teaser of centralization," recalled Mr. A. Indeed, a much more ambitious attempt came immediately after Erdoğan announced *Kanal İstanbul* to the public. With an executive order in 2011, a new ministry was created to scale up the TOKİ model: The Ministry of Environment and Urbanization (the Ministry hereafter). Gathering all urban policy-making powers under its roof, the Ministry became the sole authority in regards to all zoning and and development decisions—authorities that were previously shared with municipal governments. Unsurprisingly, the head of the TOKİ became the first minister of the newly established Ministry.

Image 5. The Mass Housing Authority's ventures on a bluff overlooking the Sazlıdere Stream, the future *Kanal İstanbul*. Photo taken by author.

The Ministry gained its full potential following a disastrous earthquake the same year it was created in the city of Van—an eastern province of 1 million people. Using the fear of an imminent earthquake as an infrastructure, the Erdoğan-led AKP expanded the scope and pace of the already ongoing urban transformation programme by empowering the Ministry through a new legislation: the "Urban Transformation Act No. 6306 for the Areas under Disaster Risk," commonly referred to as Urban Transformation Law (the 2012 Law hereafter). With the pretext of increasing the built environment's resilience to natural disasters, the 2012 Law annulled all pre-existing legislations pertaining to urban planning to roar its supremacy. Thus, future ventures nationwide and across İstanbul were preserved by a legal firewall.

Behind the scenes, one of the Erdoğan-led AKP's ulterior motives with the 2012 Law was to create the legal framework of the most aggressive infrastructure and housing programme in the history of modern Turkey: *Kanal İstanbul* and its twin project "New İstanbul". Here, Mr. A's insights were invaluable. He recalled a conference for *Kanal İstanbul* held a few weeks after the Urban Transformation Law was promulgated. Organized by the pro-government Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD, in its Turkish acronym), the panel speaker of the event admitted that the Urban Transformation Law was to act as a common infrastructure for both urban transformation and megaprojects. (Kalsın in Sevinç Tüfekçi 2012). "This shared policy framework was what they [the AKP government] have been looking for the whole time," said Mr. A. "This legal framework is crucial to sustain İstanbul as a growth machine," Mr. A added.

But how exactly does the 2012 Law work as a legal framework for *Kanal İstanbul*? Here a new zoning concept introduced by the Urban Transformation Law comes in handy: "Reserve Development Area". These zones are designated by the Ministry, *sua sponte*, and the ownership of land is then transferred to the TOKİ—the central bank equivalent to land and housing markets. This special zoning status is defined by the 2012 Law as areas "reserved for new settlements to relocate residents of a risky area after derelict, obsolescent and risky buildings are cleared out."[6] However, according to the second article of the same law, "reserve development areas could also be used for urban development and infrastructure projects for the sole purpose of making financial gains."[7] "This is what makes the Urban Transformation Law the legal infrastructure of *Kanal İstanbul*," Mr. A said. Indeed, the reserve development area in İstanbul's European side is officially named "European Side Construction Reserve Area pertaining to *Kanal İstanbul*."



Map 4 – *Kanal İstanbul* and its reserve development area in Istanbul Metropolitan District. Drawn by author.

On a map prepared by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, which I tried to replicate (see map 4), Mr. A explained the imminent land use change with *Kanal İstanbul* and its twin project "New İstanbul". "Kanal İstanbul may be a waterway of 400 meters in width, spanning 45 kilometers from south to north. But the reserve development area surrounding *Kanal İstanbul* covers an area of 45,000 hectares. This corresponds to 6,5 percent of İstanbul's total surface area," Mr. A said with an exaggerating tone of voice to highlight the scope of the megaproject. Back in February 2022, only 4 percent of this enormous area

[6] Law No. 6306, *Official Gazett*e, 31 May 2012.

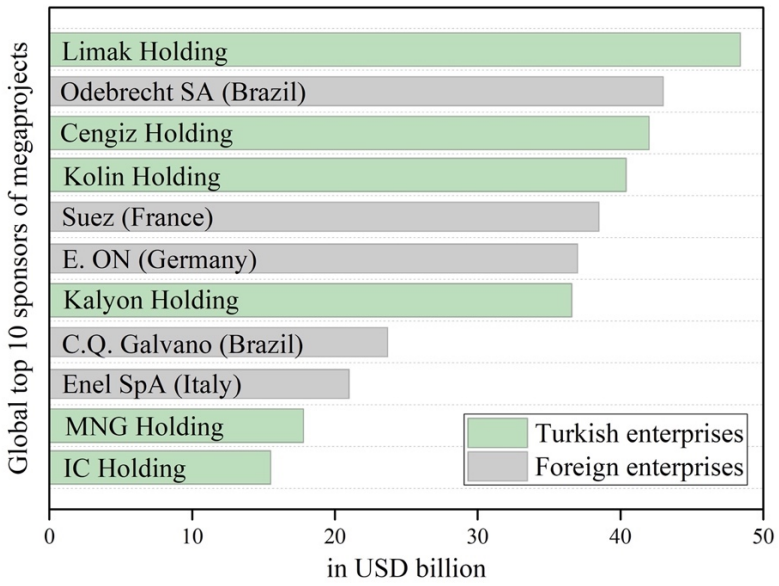
[7] Law No. 6306, *Official Gazett*e, 31 May 2012.

was residential according to Mr. A. According to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 70 percent of the area is still being actively used in agriculture, while 20 percent includes meadows, forestry, lake areas and water basins (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020). "These areas with natural resources have all been zoned within the scope of the Urban Transformation Law. To build *Kanal İstanbul*, around 200,000 trees will be uprooted; an excavation of 1.3 billion cubic meters will be dumped on Black Sea shores to construct marina ports, logistical centers, recreational areas and so on," Mr. A further added. Pointing his finger to me, "you will lose one glass of every three glasses of water you drink," Mr. A said. "At a time when the world was caught unprepared for the perils of the climate crisis, treasuring the clean water resources and looking for alternative ways of providing healthy and cheap food for everyone, we are discussing one-man's crazy project which will cause irreversible damage. And for what? Only to please a handful of elites. This is not a crazy project, this is the project of a crazy man." (Mr. A, interviewed in February 2022.)

What about the property rights in the reserve development area? How will actual development unfold and by whom? "The area includes six districts and nineteen neighborhoods where more than 300,000 residents live. But other than that, the properties previously held in common were officially enclosed and the property rights were granted to the TOKİ," Mr. A explained. It turns out that the Ministry and TOKİ follow two distinct yet interconnected models within the reserve development area of *Kanal İstanbul*. The first model pertains to the TOKİ's so-called "Revenue Sharing Model", where the TOKİ sells a portion of its lands in the reserve development area to its biggest subsidiary: Emlak REIT (Aşçı 2020). Mr. A told me that following a sealed tender in 2018, TOKİ did sell its significant chunk of land in the reserved development to Emlak REIT "almost at no cost". I asked if Mr. A had any figures for the purchases. "It is impossible to trace the figures since the tenders are shielded away from public oversight," Mr. A responded. "All I know is that they are well below the current market prices," he added. A recent PhD study (Aşçı 2020) has revealed that Emlak REIT has acquired 4,6 million square of land in the reserve development area of *Kanal İstanbul*. When it comes to the second model, which pertains to the TOKİ's public procurement schemes, "things become even more corrupt," said Mr. A. As mentioned earlier, the Authority's tenders are shielded from public scrutiny owing to a 2003 legislation on the management of public finances. "That opens the door for feeding construction tycoons," said Mr. A. "There are only a few companies in the world gaining as much public tenders as Erdoğan's cronies," he added. Indeed, a recent World Bank report has revealed that five pro-AKP private construction companies made the world's top-ten for gaining the highest amount of public infrastructure tenders (see graph 3). It is by no means surprising that the constructors of already existing megaprojects—the Bridge and the Airport—have all been undertaken by these companies (Aşçı 2020).

Image 6. Emlak REIT's ventures near *Kanal İstanbul*. Photo taken by author.

The main governance modality that has made all these possible was executive centralization in urban policy-making—the dual empowerment of the Mass Housing Authority and the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization at the expense of municipal governments, residents and civil society groups, independent experts, auditing and regulatory authorities. While it was by revitalizing the Authority in the early-2000s that the Erdoğan-led AKP appropriated and redistributed the urban land rent extracted from the EU-incentivized urban transformation projects to get construction sector going full speed ahead; it was the creation of the Ministry and the Law of 2012 that provided megaprojects with a a legal and administrative firewall—assuring their swift and uncontested implementation. And this is the frame where *Kanal İstanbul* needs to be situated—an infrastructure whose legal administrative history brings forth how neoliberal reforms have prepared the ground for the AKP's repressive and coercive urban governance by turning construction sector and İstanbul's urbanization into the very engine of the country's economy. Here, the executive centralization corroborates with what Bruff (2014) categorizes as the primary trait of authoritarian neoliberalism, "preemptive discipline": a technique of coercion that operates not only through naked display of force but more so through legally sequestering citizen involvement in decision-making processes and restricting auditing mechanisms in the name of "economic necessity".



Graph 3. World Bank report has revealed that five pro-AKP private construction companies made the world's top-ten for gaining the highest amount of public infrastructure tenders. Source: The World Bank 2020.

But there is so much more to tease out from *Kanal İstanbul* and İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization under the AKP rule if one pays more attention to how the AKP deployed state apparatuses—various urban transformation laws, the TOKİ, the Ministry, megaprojects—to facilitate, shelter and orchestrate foreign and domestic capital flows into the built environment. Harvey (1985) suggested that the movement of capital from the activities producing surplus value into immovable assets would function as a spatio-temporal fix, which consists in displacing the crisis of overaccumulation. Here, the AKP governments do not only "finance and guarantee long-term, large-scale projects with respect to the creation of the built environment" (Harvey 1985, 7 quoted in Tansel 2018, 5) at the service of private capital. The Erdoğan-led AKP does, in fact, facilitate, build, orchestrate, choreograph, participate in and mediate large-scale infrastructure and housing projects—dubbed megaprojects—that both absorbed surplus capital, in line with Harvey's argument, and heightened the scope and pace of the commodification of land through land and property transfer. Rather than being an exception to the supposed neoliberal logic of "free-market", it is the capacious role of the AKP government that permeated İstanbul to become the very engine of the AKP's neoliberal capitalism. The accumulation model that was manifested by İstanbul's neoliberal transformation was termed "accumulation by dispossession" by Harvey (2005). However, through a series of snapshots taken from northern İstanbul—the epicenter of megaproject frenzy—the next section will unpack an accumulation dynamic that goes beyond Harvey's famous framework.

III.b. Beyond Accumulation by Dispossession: Accumulation by Incapacitation?

After my interview with Mr A., I took the shuttle to İstanbul's new gargantuan airport. The airport was not located on my walking route. But, the shuttle was the easiest access to the villages, scattered around *Kanal İstanbul*'s reserve development area. My destination, or rather my starting point, was the public beach at Yeniköy village—the exact point where *Kanal İstanbul* will meet the Black Sea. In summer, domestic tourists flock to the village of 1500 people. Only then, a service economy flourishes in this tiny village, blasting away with a selection of upbeat Turkish pop music. On a February afternoon, however, the beach is uneventful and silent; except for the regular appearance of planes, disappearing behind two-storey country houses as they descend to the airport runway a few kilometers away. These houses were once home to small-scale market-oriented agriculture. Now, they are neighbors with the largest

infrastructure project Turkey has ever undertaken. They are not wanted here, however. One by one, they shall wither away. The Ministry had already started the expropriation process. This village will soon become a colossal logistical center.

After taking many pictures that look exactly the same, I started walking west to a fishermen's village located in the northwestern part of the crazy project—Karaburun village. Well-known for its seafood, the village is a popular overnight destination among white-collar İstanbulites, looking for a calm weekend away from the hustle and bustle of the city. According to the plans, a 40-kilometer-long fill area will reclaim the tiny harbor in Karaburun to turn the village into a "recreational zone". Sunk into concrete, life and marine ecology in the village shall too drastically change. How creepy the experience was walking in and to this asymmetry? Baffled by what the village today was and what it was to become, I took a turn left to start walking towards İstanbul proper; some 40 kilometers south.

Image 7. A man looking at the Black Sea on the public beach at Yeniköy, as a plane is prepared for landing. Photo taken by author.

My route will take me to the village behind the bluff, overlooking Karaburun harbor. Located next to the Terkos Lake—lifeblood of the 16 million İstanbulites and storks migrating between Africa and Europe—the village of 1900 people is called Durusu; literally meaning freshwater. The village's history is as old as the journey of bringing freshwater to İstanbul, dating back to the 12th century. Here, I will meet Akgün İlhan—a scholar of water management in Boğaziçi University and a member of a group of ecologists, protecting northern İstanbul from predatory accumulation. As I was taking the hill, I came across a 70-year-old man, carrying a hefty straw bag, full of jars. Struggling to walk, I offered him some hand. "Until the next bus stop would suffice," the man said.

Image 8-9. The beekeeper by the Terkos Lake, the lifeblood of the 16 million İstanbulites and storks migrating between Africa and Europe. The Terkos Lake is under risk of salinization should *Kanal İstanbul* be completed. Photo taken by author.

The man was a beekeeper, traveling to the city once or twice every week to sell a bag-full of honey. Utilizing the waiting time for the bus, I asked the man what he made of *Kanal İstanbul.* "I don't care," he responded. "My bees have already died because of the dirt discharged from planes flying above. I cannot keep doing what my ancestors have been doing for so long whether *Kanal İstanbul* is built or not." I wondered what his plans were once the construction for the megaproject began. "What options do you think we have?" he asked back. "The other day, bureaucrats from the Ministry's land office visited me and my neighbors. They told us that we can either sell our plots or we could take the land the Ministry will offer us in another village. But what do we need the village for if we cannot do what we do? I do not have any option but to sell my land and move into the city. I will look after my granddaughters."

Similar words were spelled by a middle-aged farmer and stockbreeder near Durusu village. The landscape here is dotted with pasturelands and agricultural fields, intersected by small streams where the farmer's cows wallow. As I was taking pictures of his herd, the farmer approached me, asking if I was a journalist. "No," I responded. "Good thing you are not," he said. "Hipsters like you visit here every week. We are sick of their stupid questions." Timidly, I asked the farmer how he thinks his life will change with *Kanal İstanbul*—probably a foolish question to the farmer's book. "I have wheat fields over there but the dust from the Airport has screwed my yields last year," he said, pointing his finger somewhere in the distance. "After *Kanal İstanbul* is built and all these areas become crowded with residences, I can perhaps become a night watchman. Look at me, I am huge. Don't I look intimidating?" He did, indeed.

Image 10. Buffoloes entering a construction site. Photo taken by author.

Locals I spoke to in the villages I was walking by were usually upset with *Kanal İstanbul* and the imminent expropriation of their lands. However, what frustrated them more was a broader dynamic, one which includes other megaprojects in the region—the Third Bridge with its connection routes, and the

İstanbul Airport—and the new ecology these megaprojects have produced. It appears that Erdoğan's already constructed megaprojects in northern İstanbul have engendered an intertwined process of environmental destruction and/or degradation that started dismantling the very spatio-ecological conditions that sustain rural livelihoods in the region. *Kanal İstanbul* was perceived to be the last straw of this material process. What is curious in northern İstanbul, based on locals' insights, is that the separation of rural communities from their means of (re)production was not triggered by the process of expropriation as Harvey's famous concept of "accumulation by dispossession" (2005) suggested. Drawing on Marx's (1867) original formulation of primitive accumulation, Harvey's notion paid attention to the processes of encasement and transfer of existing rights to land and resources through privatization or statization. Although it requires much thorough research and elaboration, the processes of displacement and alienation seems to be triggered by more material dynamics in northern İstanbul; e.g. particles of dirt in the air that disrupt agriculture or beekeeping; or filling in small ponds with excavation which disrupts livestock breeding due to the reduced availability of water for animals.

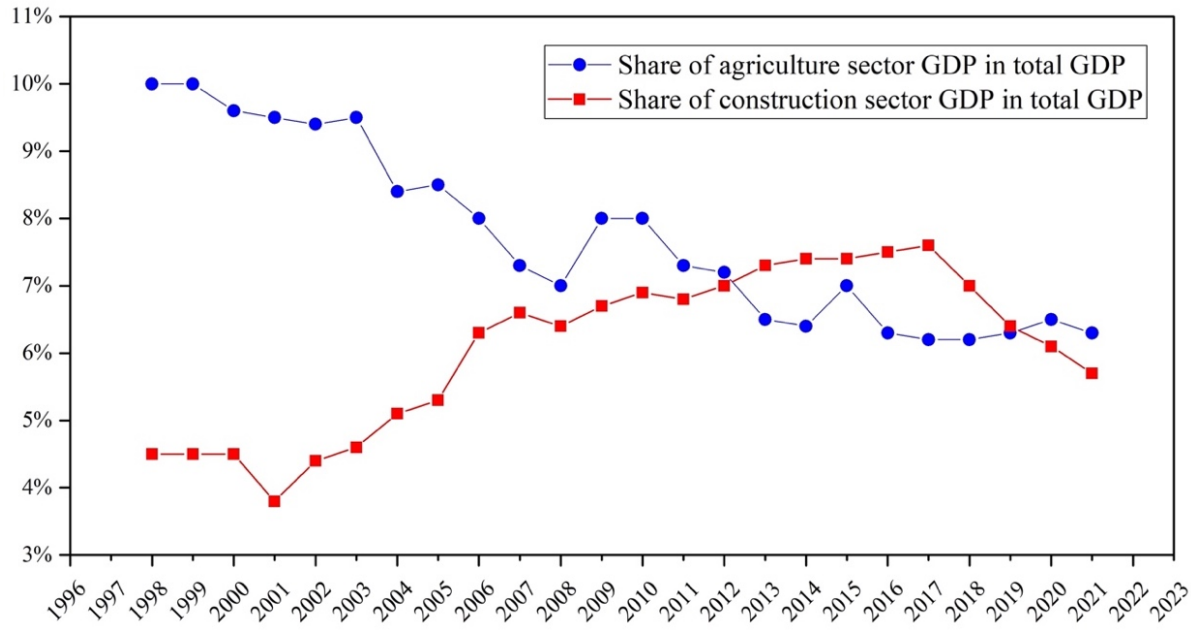
A 60-year-old woman, who owns a coffee shop in Durusu village, provided more insights on this process. The mistress pointed out that the reduced availability of water and polluted water resources due to the construction of the İstanbul Airport had significant adverse impacts on livestock breeding. "Water was everything for breeders," the mistress said. "These areas used to be covered with marshes, small ponds and lakes. When they built this [pointing to the hill where the Airport is located], these [water resources] were filled in with excavation.". Pointing at a middle-aged man having his lunch in the coffee shop, "that man sold his buffalos after they destroyed the lake a few hundred meters from here," she said. "Everyone will do the same when they start building *Kanal İstanbul*," she added. "Don't expect anyone to fight for their land. Those who can sell their space will sell it and leave for the city, simple as that. When livestock ends, I'm asking you, what am I going to serve here? I will also have to leave for the city. But son, I'm 60 years old. My ancestors have been living here for about 250 years. If you send me to the city and put me in an apartment unit, I will drop dead in a year. Look how beautiful it is just to sit here".

Image 11-12. New İstanbul Airport and cattles in Baklalı village. Photo taken by author.

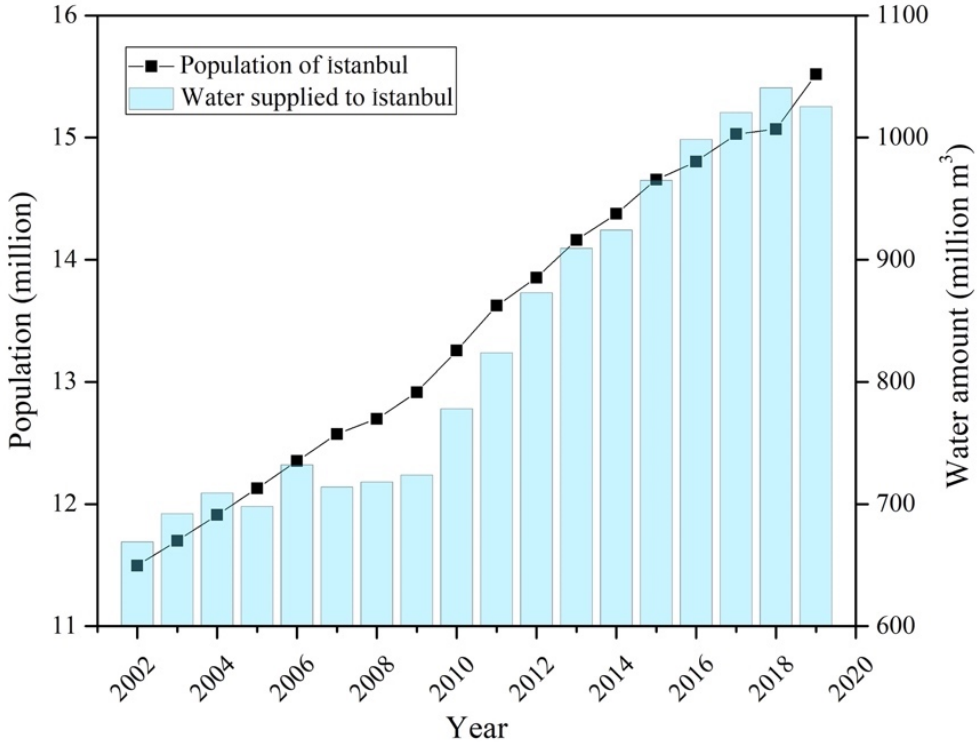
While these surveys are insufficient, the above vignettes reveal that, well before the expropriation process takes place, it is actually spatio-ecological destruction/degradation caused by Erdoğan's megaprojects that triggers the process of separating rural producers from their means of (re)production. To underscore this materiality, I propose to use the term "incapacitation": the process of dismantling, and/or making it nonviable to sustain, rural livelihoods by altering the very spatial ecological conditions that have long sustained these practices. Since the process of incapacitation makes it unsustainable for rural producers to maintain their subsistence-oriented livelihood activities, local producers seem to be more inclined to selling their lands and switching to wage labor, mostly situated within the construction sector. "Being more inclined to selling their lands" corroborates strongly with Bruff's notion of "preemptive discipline" (Bruff 2014). While Bruff pointed out to the legal and administrative mechanisms through which neoliberal policies are insulated from popular demands and struggles, what I call "incapacitation" points out how possible avenues for contesting Erdoğan's megaprojects are closed off by damaging the very spatial ecological conditions that sustain local communities in northern İstanbul. As the aforementioned beekeeper said, "what do we need the village for if we cannot do what we do?" In other words, Erdoğan's megaprojects in northern İstanbul engender a spatio-ecological degradation that incapacitates a particular livelihood, and subsequently discipline rural producers by alienating them from their means of (re)production. Incapacitation is then followed by remobilizing the alienated workforce to the construction sector, while also sustaining İstanbul as a growth machine by pulling non-commodified lands in northern İstanbul into the construction sector. For the purpose of this thesis, it is extremely important to underscore that the process of incapacitating subsitance-oriented livelihood activities at the benefit of the construction sector is not new. The graph 4 clearly shows that the seeds of this particular accumulation regime were actually planted by Erdoğan's neoliberalizing reforms in the early-2000s under the supervision of the IMF and the EU. Since the beginning of their tenure, the AKP governments have been systematically incapacitating agricultural activities' role in Turkey's financial output while

simultaneously propelling the construction sector to make up a significant portion of the country's GDP (see graph 4).

However, *Kanal İstanbul* and Erdoğan's other megaprojects in northern İstanbul—the Bridge and the Airport—(will) significantly heighten the scope of the incapacitation of rural livelihoods and their subsequent remobilization to the construction sector. One can materially support this assessment by tracing the amount of freshwater supplied to İstanbul from outside the city's boundaries. The graph 5 shows the correlation between İstanbul's surging population and the amount of freshwater pumped to the city. While the amount of water pumped to İstanbul did not increase significantly despite a surging population up until 2010, the era of megaprojects (from 2011 onwards) marks a drastic increase in the amount of water pumped to the metropolis. This indicates that it is not so much about population increase but more about the destruction/degradation of İstanbul's existing freshwater resources by Erdoğan's megaproject spree that accounts for the increase in pumped freshwater to the city from exterior resources (see graph 5). *Kanal İstanbul* will further annihilate İstanbul's existing freshwater resources, as the man-made waterway will completely deactivate Sazlıdere Stream, while claiming one fourth of the Terkos Lake—together accounting for İstanbulites' monthly water consumption according to my interviewee. "Inevitably," she said, "additional dams will have to be constructed to meet the increasing water demand. These dams will be located further and further away from İstanbul and will expand the city's ecological footprint to a wider area." But beyond expanding İstanbul's ecological footprint, what is at stake here is ripping off other communities of their resources of (re)production—water, in this particular case—to sustain İstanbul's neoliberal urbanization through megaprojects and therefore incapacitating these communities' livelihood and remobilizing their workforce towards the construction sector.



Graph 4. Neoliberalizing reforms in the early-2000s (i) attacked on the agriculture sector and (ii) simultaneously propelled the construction sector's share in the GDP through TOKİ and urban transformation programme (see graph 1 and 2). Source: Turkey Data Monitor. Prepared by author.



Graph 5. The amount of water pumped to İstanbul from resources outside the city boundaries did not increase significantly despite a surging population until the era of megaprojects started in 2011. Megaprojects marks a drastic increase in the amount of water pumped to the metropolis. This indicates that the destruction of İstanbul's existing freshwater resources expands the city's socio-ecological footprint to further geographies. Sources: The Turkish Statistical Institution and İSKİ 2020. Prepared by author.

All in all, what we have is this: Erdoğan's megaproject spree in northern İstanbul has been orchestrating spatio-ecological destruction/degradation and therefore incapacitating prevalent forms of livelihood in the region. It has been through incapacitation—which occurs well before expropriation—that Erdoğan's AKP has been choreographing the remobilization of rural producers from northern İstanbul towards wage labor opportunities, mostly found within the construction sector. The scope of this process of incapacitation could be traced through the availability of freshwater resources in northern İstanbul. The degradation of the latter has engendered the process of ripping off other communities of their resources and livelihoods and remobilizing both water and workforce towards İstanbul and the construction sector to sustain İstanbul as a growth machine. Since this accumulation model has not been triggered by the expropriation of space but by its ecological alteration, this section proposed using the term "incapacitation" to make visible these imbricated dynamics.

This section has demonstrated that Erdoğan's megaproject frenzy has been alienating villagers' of northern İstanbul by disabling them to produce themselves as work of their own (Sevilla-Buitrago 2015, 1003), while simultaneously mobilizing them to a subsequent regime of accumulation that has paved the way for the dispossession in the first place. What makes Turkey's neoliberal authoritarianism even more interesting is that this accumulation model has also been fastened to the idea of developmentalism—the strongest ideal that marks state-society relationships since the foundation of the Republic (Arsel 2005). It is precisely the allure of developmentalism and material benefits—e.g. employment opportunities—that has been instrumental in legitimizing Erdoğan's megaproject spree. Constructed as the collective interest of the people, such neoliberal endeavors are being cast as key contributors towards a more prosperous, developed and sovereign Turkey.

III.c. Neoliberal Developmentalism

"Hey you," shouted a youngish realtor as he stormed out of his office, named Kanal İstanbul. The real estate agency is located on top of a steep hill, in the village of Şamlar. If I ignored mushrooming real-estate agencies all over, there was little evidence of the village being one of the epicenters of the largest ever infrastructure project. Among them was the angry realtor's office—a popular destination for international news outlets and speculators from around the world. The display window of the agency was covered in maps and renders illustrating what northern İstanbul will soon look like—hospitals, parks, marinas and upscale apartment blocks all lined up along both sides of the Sazlıdere Stream, soon to be enveloped by *Kanal İstanbul*. For now, the area is still blanketed with meadows. "You working for the municipality?" the realtor asked with a threatening, mannish voice. "No. I am on my own. Just taking pictures," I replied. "Delete all of them," the realtor yelled. "I know your type. You're a Gezi-ist [a pejorative reference to those attending the Gezi Park Uprisings]. I don't understand why you are annoyed by Turkey's development. If it was up to you, we shouldn't have the Third Bridge, the Airport, not even the Marmaray. We should have kept nature untouched and be backward forever, right? God willing, son of this nation [a reference to Erdoğan] didn't give in to you traitors. Delete these pictures and buzz off before I mess you up.". Frightened, I deleted all but one.

Image 13. The only photo left of the Kanal İstanbul Real Estate Agency. Photo taken by author.

Much friendlier voices echoed similar words at the terrace of a traditional coffee shop on the central square of Sazlıbosna village. Located a few kilometers down the hill from the angry realtors office, right next to the Sazlıdere Stream, Sazlıbosna has been turned upside down with the AKP's decision to declare the village "reserve development area" within the scope of the Urban Transformation Law. To construct

the Bridge and the Airport, a vast area has already been expropriated in the wider district of Arnavutköy, where the village of Sazlıbosna belongs to. The scope and pace of the ongoing dispossession is scheduled to intensify with *Kanal İstanbul*. Veterans of this café are (eye)witnesses of the AKP's unprecedented drive for commodifying land through dispossession and ecological destruction. Playing cards and smoking their cigarettes right beside a log stove, they have long been watching meadows and forests surrounding their hamlets getting replaced by mass housing initiatives, high-rise condos, and colossal motorways. But their electoral support for Erdoğan remained unwavered. Why do those who shoulder the grievances inflicted by the megaproject frenzy continue to give their blessings to Erdoğan? Blowing the smoke of his cigarette right into my face, a self-proclaimed Erdoğan supporter provided valuable insights. Until 2017, he was a farmer, with very limited market-orientation, since his produce was already enough for taking care of his family. With a governmental decree, the self-proclaimed Erdoğan supporter's farmland was urgently expropriated for the Airport. The man and his family sold their land and cattles. "I lost a lot," he admitted. "But after all, *Reis* [leader in Turkish, another reference to Erdoğan] built the largest airport in the world, didn't he? Brother, when it comes to national development the question is simple: do you love your country or not?" The man's playmate, a 45-year-old grocer-turned-realtor, intervened to voice a similar opinion. Using his hands passionately, "imagine," he said. "Our beloved village will look like New York, or Dubai [with *Kanal İstanbul*]," he added and continued: "People like you mumble about birds and trees. I really like genuine environmentalists but some of you guys are nothing but paid agents. If our country aims to reach its potential, we need megaprojects, not lakes and birds.". Outtalking some contesting voices, the man suggested "let's grow first." "If you are poor, you cannot care about nature. First, we have to grow. Just like a kid, you know?"

Image 14. The grocer-turned-realtor at the traditional café in Sazlıbosna village. Photo taken by author.

Snapshots from the terrace of a traditional village café hint that the AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism does not only operate through coercive mechanisms. The commentaries of the veterans and their continued electoral support for Erdoğan and his megaprojects point to an additional element in the AKP's statecraft: constructing megaprojects as guarantors of economic development. The latter, according to this narrative, serves the general interest of the society. And if people want to become prosperous, then socio-ecological-economic costs of megaprojects have to be shouldered. This means that, despite far-reaching negative externalities, it is not in spite of but rather thanks to its spatial politics that the AKP is able to establish and sustain its neoliberal authoritarianism. That goes to show that the Erdoğan-led AKP achieved to solve the neoliberal problematique: enforcing market discipline on the poorest segments of the society and weathering the electoral backlash (Biebricher 2020). Absorbing the poor's potential challenge within the AKP's brand of neoliberalism was perhaps best articulated by the 70-year-old owner of the traditional café in Sazlıbosna. Bringing another round of tea for everyone, the man complained about his unemployed grandson—a recent university graduate. "My grandson needs a job. A lot more people need employment," he said. "Erdoğan is doing very well with these megaprojects. Do you know how many people are working at the Airport?" he added. The 70-year-old man did not mind that his café will be no more when *Kanal İstanbul* is constructed. "There will be new housing developments, hospitals, shopping malls like in the city. This means more employment, isn't it? Do you know what this means for unemployed people? I am sure I can find better paying jobs if I want to," the man said.

Image 15. Veterans of the café, sitting next to a stove log. Photo taken by author.

The appeal of megaprojects extends beyond the employment opportunities and other financial benefits provided by such endeavors. Dubbed monumental achievements of a government working hard for its people, megaprojects are presented and received as epicentral components of a historical contract between the Turkish state and its citizens: the promise of raising the state to the level of developed countries. Rethinking this social contract through the Gramscian concept of hegemony (1971) is mind-opening to understand the ways in which state-society relationship has been constructed. If one takes hegemony as a political, ideological, moral, and material practices that produce consent by tapping into the idea of a shared national project as once argued by Jessop (1990), we can argue that the AKP's neoliberal hegemony is much determined by developmentalism (Arsel 2005; Adaman and Akbulut 2020; Çavuşoğlu and Strutz 2014). Here, the state appears as the bearer and deliverer of a shared societal interest. Precisely this social contract of achieving the collectively shared goal is what legitimizes the state's very existence.

It is important to underscore that developmentalism was not invented by Erdoğan. The idea of becoming a "developed nation" is older than the Republic and it is intimately connected to the birth of Turkish liberalism, dating back to the 19th century—a time when the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty was collapsing (Kılınçoğlu 2015). In reaction, a picnic took place at the wooded hills of northern İstanbul (Mardin 2000)—the area that shall be uprooted by Erdoğan's *Kanal İstanbul*. Attending it were young Muslim bureaucrats, banded together to formulate a political economic programme that shall raise the state to its deserved place in the new global order. Becoming a developed nation would require a proper capitalist economic system and a parliamentary democracy, they argued—like the ones in the Western counterparts. The founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal, came from this intellectual reservoir. For him, the Republic of Turkey was "an undivided, homogenous and harmonious totality" (Çelik 1999, 196), came together around a grandiose project: elevating the Turkish state and people to the economic level of the West. This was what developmentalism stood for—a *contrat social* that permeated Turkish parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the idea of development has been the single most shared ideology regardless of political spectrum. Not being a developmentalist has never been an option.

The AKP has never strayed off the developmentalist promise, even though Erdoğan positioned his "New Turkey" in direct opposition to what he called "Old Turkey", associated with Mustafa Kemal's secularist, bureaucratic and tutelary regime. What is distinct in Erdoğan's operationalization of developmentalism is how he employed the neoliberal logic to recode the ethos of "raising the nation". Cast as tantamount to Turkey's path to becoming a developed country, neoliberal ventures like *Kanal İstanbul* marry the promise of development with the profane and globalized construction sector's interests. This allows the Erdoğan-led AKP to convince the people to the idea that social-ecological-economic degradations are inevitable for becoming a prosperous nation. The discourse of inevitability receives acceptance precisely because this rhetoric recasts financial growth as the collective interest of "the nation".

The above snapshots from a terrace of a traditional café in the village of Sazlıbosna do not perhaps constitute evidence. But they at least shed a dim light on how Erdoğan's megaprojects complicate the link between reform and repression, consent and coercion. The main technique of consent-production I aimed at highlighting here is that of neoliberal developmentalism: the idea of elevating the Turkish state to its deserved place in the global political economic order and shouldering the burden of neoliberal endeavors to share the benefits collectively as a unified nation. Saturated by a developmentalist discourse, *Kanal İstanbul* and other megaprojects are cast as the primary duty of the Turkish state towards its citizens: making İstanbul a global city means making Turkey a global power, which in turn supposedly improves the living conditions of the citizens. The latter are expected to be thrifty enough to rip the financial opportunities produced by megaprojects, while being obedient and grateful to the government for its accomplishments. However, this social contract is ridden with contradictions, conflicts and cracks

as this contract and mega infrastructure developments are exclusionary and accelerate already existing social, spatial, ecological and economic degradation and inequalities. It is these cracks that make possible planting seeds of alternative horizons and counter-hegemonic challenges—the topic of the final section.

III.d. Will Anything and Everything Ever Be Fine?

At midnight on 27 May 2013, I received a bulk email from an environmental activist platform I was part of—the Black Sea Uprising Platform [Karadeniz İsyandadır Platformu]. The platform was originally created by a group of villagers from the Eastern Black Sea Region—where my family also originates from—to collectively struggle against an abnormal amount of hydroelectric power investments, turning villages into construction sites (Erensü and Karaman 2017, 10). Owing to the high rates of urban migration of the Black Sea villagers to İstanbul, the platform had deep roots in the city, where the activists were participating in other ecologist groups' struggles mainly against Erdoğan's trio of megaprojects: the Bridge, Airport and *Kanal İstanbul*. Having been beaten up by the police the previous day during the demonstrations against the Bridge and the uprooting of millions of trees for the megaproject, the group called its email subscribers to join a modest resistance encampment on May 29—the day the ground was to be broken for the Bridge. That was the content of the message I received. The encampment was to take place in a tiny urban park in downtown İstanbul: Gezi Park, the epicenter of the largest urban rebellion in Turkish history and one of the most substantial revolts of the global 2011-2013 movements of square (Tuğal 2022).

Although Erdoğan has come to promote his megaprojects as important ingredients of Turkey's national interests, these iconic infrastructures also produce major political rifts and bring counter-hegemonic projects into being. Gezi Park Uprisings (Gezi, hereafter) was certainly the most influential case. Having emerged against the AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism and its footprints on a variety of geographies from gentrified city-centres with urban transformation projects to the rifted hinterlands with megaprojects, Gezi quickly turned into a countrywide resistance movement, bringing together 4 million people from various backgrounds under the slogan of "Gezi is everywhere". Against a well-defined "enemy" in Erdoğan and his megaproject-fuelled political economy, Gezi has revitalized a moribund Left, catalyzing a rainbow coalition among those who were "othered" by Erdoğan's government for one or another reason—be it ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, religion or ideology (Mert 2016). Here was a formidable section of society, some of which wouldn't see eye to eye previously, denouncing the neoliberal consensus the AKP had established in the early-2000s. The spiral of police violence against protestors soured Erdoğan's relations with the international technocracy, globalist financial sector, national capitalists and middle-classes. Erdoğan and his AKP found themselves profoundly upset—no longer capable of explaining their brand of neoliberalism as reality (Gerbaudo 2021). Observers anticipated Erdoğan to respond to these challenges by integrating some of the counter-hegemonic demands to the AKP's own paradigm. Erdoğan, however, chose to further polarize the society by embracing a right-wing populist discourse. Using chauvinistic arguments, Erdoğan scratched existing cultural (secular vs. conservative) and ethnic (e.g. Turkish nationalism vs. Kurdish nationalism) cleavages to discredit protestors—labelling them as looters, terrorists and puppets of "foreign dark forces", seeking to topple the man of the people and to weaken the Turkish nation (Gürhanlı 2020). From hereon, the megaprojects began to be cast as guarantors of the "perpetuity of the nation"; linking a national security discourse with the interests of the globalized construction sector. The implicit message was that those standing against megaprojects were "enemies of the nation" who did not want Turkey to grow, be prosperous, or sovereign (Gürhanlı 2020).

Gezi marked the beginning of Turkey's "populist moment": a moment where neoliberalism has been in the process of crumbling and yet a new political programme is yet to emerge (Hochuli et al. 2020). Even worse, the post-Gezi era has been nothing but an unceasing state of turmoil. The first general elections after Gezi saw an originally Kurdish-affiliated leftist political party—the People's Democratic Party (HDP)—rebranding itself as the expression of the Gezi spirit and achieving a spectacular result which robbed Erdoğan from forming a majority government (Tuğal 2021). Erdoğan, however, refused to form a coalition with the HDP and launched a military campaign in the Kurdish region to reignite the national security discourse in the build up to the rerun elections which he won by a landslide. In the summer of 2016, Erdoğan's erstwhile allies in the military launched a coup attempt which failed miserably. After the initial shock, Erdoğan went live and declared a state of emergency that lasted for two years. Later, he callously admitted that the coup attempt was "a gift from God" (Akçay 2018, 22). Indeed, the coup attempt prepared the ground for a regime change from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency. The 2018 presidential election marked *Kanal* İstanbul's great recoil to electoral politics. Hailed with the motto of the "New Turkey's Magnificent Project," Erdoğan made his crazy project once again the main promise of his campaign, pledging that the project would spur economic growth and employment amidst the hardship the citizens were dealing with.

Then came March 31, 2019—a moment in contemporary Turkish history when ten million İstanbulites went to the polls for the seventh time since Gezi to hand Erdoğan the most momentous electoral defeat since his rise to power in 2002 (Esen and Gümüşçü 2019). Local elections saw İstanbulites not voting in favor of Erdoğan's appointee but for the main opposition party's Ekrem İmamoğlu—previously a local mayor in one of İstanbul's many districts. Confronted with a government wheeling their election campaign on *Kanal İstanbul* as tantamount to national development (Hoyng and Es 2020), İmamoğlu pitched a left-populist discourse by focusing on İstanbulites' bread-and-butter issues: rising urban poverty, unemployment and social assistance, as well as insufficient transportation network and non transparent, exclusionary governance. Calling Erdoğan's regime "the order of waste," and his *Kanal İstanbul* a "textbook real estate project," the opposition candidate reframed the antagonism between different factions of the society. The real divide in Turkey was neither between secularists and conservatives, nor was it between Kurds and Turks, or even between the nation and the culturally detached elites. The real divide was between a handful of government cronies and the 99 percent of the excluded people from decision-making. "My esteemed citizens, İstanbul is bigger than one [percent]," roared İmamoğlu to the jubilant crowd in one of his many campaign speeches. "İstanbul does not need another real-estate project [*Kanal İstanbul*] that seeks nothing but opening our sacred city to development and extracting land rent out of it," he added. "Note my words: together we shall end this 'order of waste'." (İmamoğlu 2019 quoted in Şimşek 2019). Speaking on behalf of the people from a leftist standpoint corroborated a whole host of Southern European political parties, which emerged in the last decade against the rising right-wing populism. Movements such as Spain's Podemos, Italy's Five Star, France Insoumise, and others have been striving for luring extremely heterogeneous segments of their respective populations by not focussing on the traditional workers vs. capital owners cleavage, but by drawing attention to an increasingly tiny group ripping the benefits of skyrocketing socio-economic-ecological injustices (Mouffe 2018). Building on these progressive movements, scholars such as Blakeley (2019), Frazer (2019) and Mouffe (2018) have been encouraging the Left to come up with a populist narrative of its own, one which is capable of displaying how neoliberal capitalist model concentrates the wealth and power in the hands of a tiny elite by ripping off working people. Instead of taking populism as "a threat to democracy," it was deemed urgent to embrace left-populism as an opportunity to reopen democratic avenues and present a new political horizon beyond neoliberalism (Mouffe 2018, 35). Rhetorically constructing *Kanal İstanbul* as the interface of what he called "the order of waste," where bir avuç seçkinler [a handful of elites] rip off the people, İmamoğlu followed the maxims of a left-populist strategy. With his motto of "everything will be fine," the prospective mayor merged his left-populist

discourse with the promise of an inclusive and transparent governance against Erdoğan-led AKP's executive centralization—injecting a much-needed dose of hope for those fallen into despair after Gezi. Thus, the opposition's candidate achieved to formulate the so-called "İstanbul Coalition" among socialists, environmentalists, LQBTQI+ activists, urban poor, Kurdish people, young professionals and secular middle classes and beat Erdoğan by gaining the largest mandate ever obtained by an İstanbul mayor.

After being elected, the new mayor followed up his oppositional stance against *Kanal İstanbul*. İmamoğlu went live the day after the government approved the megaproject's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in December 2019 and launched his counter-campaign against *Kanal İstanbul*: "Either the Canal or İstanbul"."To protect the interests of a handful of elites, this project of murder [of İstanbul's environment] is being dictated to the esteemed people of this city," İmamoğlu said. "My fellow İstanbulites, should this crazy project be constructed, it will be the end of İstanbul. That's why there is no other option: It is 'Either the Canal or İstanbul'," the mayor chanted (İmamoğlu quoted in Cumhuriyet 2019). A month later, in January 2020, the slogan "Either the Canal or İstanbul" became the name of a symposium organized by the Municipality with the objective of thoroughly informing the public about *Kanal İstanbul*'s negative socio-economic-ecological impacts (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020). Hundreds of scientists from a variety of disciplines joined the symposium and discussed the megaproject in terms of economy, urban planning, law, environment, seismicity, hydrology and other topics. According to the Municipality, "these democratic debates" were guided by "factual data and scientific mindset". Because to the new mayor, in science his people should trust, not to the politicians. "Our opposition to *Kanal İstanbul* has nothing to do with politics," İmamoğlu said in his opening speech for the symposium. "Our position is based on science and reason," he added. "My esteemed citizens, don't trust me or any politician for that matter. Trust science and our respectable scientists." (İmamoğlu in Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020, 10).

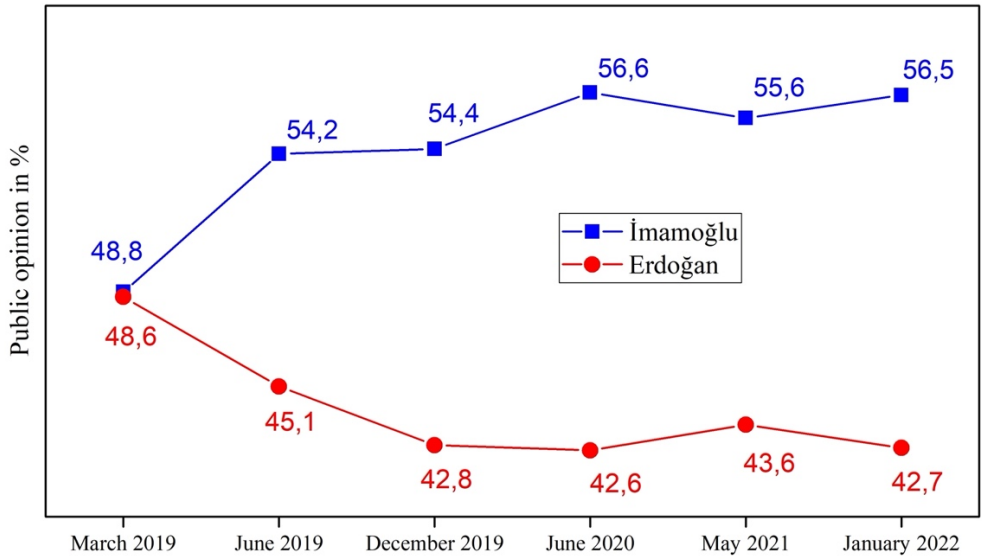
What kind of oppositional avenues did Either the Canal or İstanbul Symposium (the Symposium hereafter) offer to the Municipality? To have a deeper understanding on the strategies against *Kanal İstanbul*, I paid a last visit to Mr. A. This time, we met each other not in the municipality building, but at the office of the newly founded Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA and the Agency hereafter). The Agency is located a few kilometers away from the Marmara shores of *Kanal İstanbul*, nested in an 80-acre green area. Surrounded by running tracks, tennis courts and a swimming pool, the space was, until recently, exclusively used by public officials. "Since Mr. İmamoğlu opened the space to our people, the place quickly became a hub for the academia and other stakeholders," Mr. A told me. The institution was launched by the mayor İmamoğlu a few days after the Symposium with the aim of preparing İstanbul's Vision 2050: "fair, green, creative and happy city (...) guided by scientific data" (Istanbul Planning Agency 2020). "There is a direct correlation between what we wanted to achieve with the symposium and our objective with the IPA," Mr. A said. "With the symposium, we wanted to inform our citizens and compile all the scientific information regarding *Kanal İstanbul's* negative impacts into a booklet," he added. The 160-page long booklet provided the Municipality with an alternative EIA report, one which voiced all the ecological risks İstanbul might face—an issue the government's EIA on *Kanal İstanbul* was largely silent. "We submitted the booklet to the court and legally contested *Kanal İstanbul*," said Mr. A. Galvanized by İmamoğlu's support, numerous NGOs and neighborhood associations have also banded together to submit a petition to the hastily approved *Kanal* İstanbul plans. In the space of ten days, more than 100,000 people flocked to the Ministry's offices in İstanbul to challenge Erdoğan's megaproject (Sözcü 2020). For Erdoğan, the most concerning of all the manoeuvres permeated by the Symposium has been İmamoğlu's bargaining power with the megaproject's potential investors. "The Either the Canal or İstanbul Symposium presented legitimate environmental concerns," Mr. A told me. These concerns have been used as bargaining chips against (inter)national banks and finance institutions

not to fund *Kanal İstanbul*. As it turned out, a vast majority of Turkish banks are financially supported by European finance institutions and credit syndicate companies, all of which are counterparts of the United Nation's Principles for Responsible Banking Framework (Sezer and Tuncay 2021). This makes potential investors reserved to fund the megaproject—doing so might clog up the flow of credits in the future. Worse, potential investors might never get a return for their investments based on the Municipality's legitimate claims over environmental degradation. Indeed, Mr. A reminded me of a recent tweet series posted by the mayor. Addressing the investors in four languages, İmamoğlu advised not to get involved with *Kanal İstanbul*. "Starting from 2023, Turkey will be governed by our coalition. When we come to power we will annul *Kanal* İstanbul and will not pay up to investors of this project of murder," İmamoğlu tweeted.

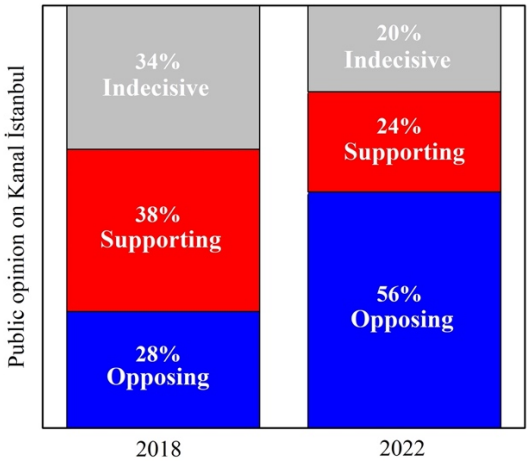
However, the mayor's efforts to undo *Kanal İstanbul* is yet to yield any concrete results. Quite the contrary, the louder the mayor's voice grows, the more determined Erdoğan is to proceed with the megaproject. But according to pundits, that is not necessarily a bad thing, as "Either the Canal or İstanbul" counter-programme helps İmamoğlu raise his profile—turning the project into a battlefield over Turkey's leadership as the 2023 presidential election is looming on the horizon. Berk Esen, a Turkish political scientist from İstanbul's Sabancı University, argues that the battle in and around *Kanal İstanbul* could play out in favor of İmamoğlu not only because of his left-populist "the order of waste" discourse, but more importantly because of the transparent, competent and inclusive model of urban governance he is promoting against *Kanal İstanbul* (Busch 2020). Mr. A agrees, for whom launching the Istanbul Planning Unit was the most significant policy alternative to Erdoğan's megaprojects. "We are not only proposing alternative projects to *Kanal İstanbul*," said Mr. A. "Rather, we are implementing an alternative decision making mechanism and proposing a new urban governance model.". When explaining this new model, Mr. A frequently referred to scientific research for determining real problems of İstanbulites and rational and permanent solutions to those problems. This explanation sounds anything but new. In fact, this was the exact same definition of the obsolete Istanbul Metropolitan Planning Unit, created by the AKP in the early-2000s to prepare İstanbul's comprehensive Environmental Plan (2009) within the scope of EU alignment policies. The Planning Unit and the environmental plan were nullified by Erdoğan's plans for the trio of megaprojects. Once being an expert at the Unit, Mr. A acknowledged that the newly founded IPA was the obsolete Planning Unit's reincarnation—albeit by "revamping some of its aspects". "True, the inspiration for the Planning Agency came from previous experiences," Mr. A told me (Interview conducted in February 2022). What distinguishes the IPA from the obsolete Planning Unit is the former's participatory decision making mechanism. "Problems and several solutions are identified by our competent experts," said Mr. A. Then, it was a matter of "deciding collectively which problems should be solved with the city's budgets after a participatory decision making process," he added. One of the most stand out projects of this model was the "Participatory Budget Mechanism". With the slogan of "Budget Is Yours," the project called for active online citizen involvement in the process of deciding to which solutions and projects the city's budget should be allocated in 2022. As a result of the IPA's research, 191 projects were proposed by the Municipality and 27 projects were selected by 150,000 İstanbulite voters. "This was a milestone in urban policy-making," said Mr. A. "The objective of this is to ameliorate the solidarity, cooperation and consensus culture in local governance and therefore ameliorate social and environmental justice in the long run," he added. "The IPA is a human-centered institution that prioritizes 16 million citizens' needs, instead of the government's crazy project which seeks to enrich a few cronies who rip off the people from their future."

It appears that the new Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality heard the growing dissident voices since Gezi against coercive and exclusionary decision-making processes associated with the megaprojects. This science-driven, commonsensical and rational urban governance is deemed much-needed under the conditions of democratic crisis. By rhetorically reconstructing *Kanal İstanbul* through the left-populist

"order of waste" discourse and merging it with rational urban governance model through the Istanbul Planning Agency, the "Either the Canal or İstanbul" movement has been effective in challenging not only *Kanal İstanbul* but also Erdoğan-led AKP's authoritarian statism. Voters seem to respond well. Two recent surveys in İstanbul, conducted by two highly credible pollsters (Toplumsal Etki Araştırma Merkezi and Metropoll), indicate that those backing İmamoğlu have increased in numbers exponentially since he publicly announced his opposition to *Kanal İstanbul* in December 2019. His constituency has surged from 48,8 percent in June 2019 to 54 percent in January 2020 after the Symposium and to 56,5 percent in January 2022. The polls indicate that İmamoğlu now outpolls Erdoğan in İstanbul by more than 10 points—indicating a drastic decline in Erdoğan's constituency (see graph 6). The same public opinion polls reveal that İmamoğlu and his municipality's counter campaign against *Kanal İstanbul* is working out nicely as well. Showing patterns similar to İmamoğlu's rising constituency, those who are against *Kanal İstanbul* have surged from 28 percent before the 2018 presidential election to 56 percent in January 2022 (see graph 7). 51 percent of the respondents mentioned that they did not buy the government's official rhetoric that *Kanal İstanbul* would mitigate environmental risks at Bosphorus and that it would generate growth. Instead, they expressed that the megaproject is a scheme to extract urban land rent from the city (TEAM 2022).



Graph 6 shows the shift in İmamoğlu and Erdoğan's constituency since 2019 local elections. Prepared by author. Source: TEAM 2022.



Graph 7 shows the shift in public opinion regarding *Kanal İstanbul* since 2018 presidential elections. Prepared by author. Sources: Optimar 2018 and TEAM 2022.

These achievements are significant. The once fractured and desperate dissidents seem to be more united than ever. As the 2023 presidential election is approaching thick and fast, "people are hopeful," as Mr. A put it. "Erdoğan and his 'order of waste' can be dismantled." But at the same time, it would be a stretch to argue that this challenge points to a new horizon beyond neoliberalism. Rather, it appears that the new Istanbul Municipality's challenges operate within the conceptual framework of neoliberalism. Litigation, for instance, could be an effective opposition strategy. But do they pose a radical challenge to the existing political economic order? Worse, in a country like Turkey, where the judiciary branch is under the incumbent's control, seeking rights in the courts rarely yields positive results. "We know how expert reports have been altered by the prosecutors and judges. That's the problem with the current regime," said Mr. A—confirming the limitations of this strategy. When it comes to bargaining with private and national banks and international financial institutions, it wouldn't be harsh to claim that this strategy fully operates through neoliberal ideology's cost-benefit calculations. But more importantly, and perhaps even worryingly, the new urban governance model—embodied in the IPA, according to Mr. A—is the reignition of some of the elements associated with the AKP's supposed belle époque. Because, it seems that the new municipality and its governance model employs a technocratic conception of politics, presenting elements that shun ideological confrontation. In their seminal article on techno-populism, Bickerton and Invernizzi-Acetti (2018) defines technocratic conception of politics as a system of thought that reduces politics to an epistemic endeavour, in which there are only rational and irrational, or competent and incompetent solutions to specific policy problems. According to this conception, incorrect solutions or projects—e.g. *Kanal İstanbul*—can only be the result of partisan attachments or private interests. An epitome of this conceptualization is İmamoğlu's definition of his opposition to *Kanal İstanbul* not being "political, but scientific in its nature" (İmamoğlu in Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020). This rhetoric locates the mayor's opposition to *Kanal İstanbul* beyond the space of ideological struggle and within the domain of technical and scientific assumptions that should muffle up discretionary decisions. But the problem is that if there is room for discretionary decision-making within a political system, even a government of experts could not guarantee that the insights of science will be followed in urban policy-making. There cannot be a better epitome of this conceptual conundrum than the AKP of the early-2000s. However, it is also important to underscore that what distinguishes İstanbul's new urban governance from the previous experience is the citizen empowerment to decide on which resolutions to go forward with.

As our short meeting came to an end with Mr. A, I asked him if we can dream and hope for a new horizon beyond neoliberalism. He responded with two words and one sentence that spoke millions: "Like what?" The incapacity of envisioning a horizon beyond neoliberal political economy was also echoed by the mayor himself. At a recent conference titled "Big Leap in Rail Systems", İmamoğlu boasted about how his municipality made İstanbul the city with the highest number of ongoing subway projects. When asked where the funding for railway infrastructures was coming from, İmamoğlu admitted that the policies fully operate within neoliberal political economy: "All over the world, these large-scale investments are carried out with private sector or international finance institutions. We made transparency, competency and accountability the backbone of our new municipal governance. Our municipality is a safe harbour for investors." (İmamoğlu in T24 2021). It seems that while the mayor's opposition against *Kanal İstanbul* poses a significant threat to Erdoğan's regime, the mayor's left-populism does not point to a new horizon beyond neoliberalism. It can be, however, a valuable starting point. "The key for us is to be a model for our country. At the municipal level, we will restore participation, transparency and accountability. These practices will be scaled up to the national level when the opposition takes power. If we can re-establish the rule of law and a rule-based governance that is based on rationality and science, we will see that grievances will be minimized," Mr. A said. "Of course, we can always dream of a future beyond neoliberalism," Mr. A added, reminding me half-jokingly of İmamoğlu's slogan "Everything will be fine". "To dream for any future, we should first make

sure that we have a future, don't you think?" he asked. "That's why we are so staunchly opposed to *Kanal İstanbul* which will kill the life in this city. We have to stop this project and to do that, we have to beat Erdoğan—plain and simple."

CONCLUSION

The rise of authoritarian populism, growing disregard for the rule of law and basic human rights, and increasing entanglement of state power with capital had some scholars and pundits argue that Erdoğan's Turkey was no longer neoliberal. Scholars argued that the AKP's "golden era" of neoliberalizing reforms were decidedly disrupted by Erdoğan's responses to the 2008 financial crisis and Gezi Park Uprisings in 2013. From being a paragon of neoliberalism (Tuğal 2022), Turkey has recently been dubbed an authoritarian state (Bermeo 2016; Çağaptay 2017; Çalışkan 2018; Esen and Gümüşçü 2020; Levitsky and Way 2010; Müller 2016; Özbudun 2015). The Work of a Rift: *Kanal İstanbul* and Turkey's Authoritarian Neoliberalism criticized and challenged this burgeoning literature by tracing Turkey's experience with neoliberalism under Erdoğan and his AKP. It did so by focusing on a to-be-built urban megaproject, *Kanal İstanbul*.

Drawing on the concept of "authoritarian neoliberalism" and through a walking experience along the path of *Kanal İstanbul*, the thesis laid bare that Erdoğan's megaprojects seek to propel the globalist construction sector and perpetuate İstanbul as a growth-generating machine as a signature node in the global web of flooding money and commodities. This political economy was operating under an executive centralization, the seeds of which were planted with neoliberalizing reforms in the early-2000s, to secure the implementation of megaprojects (Tansel 2018). This revealed that reform and repression were mutually constitutive modalites of Erdoğan's brand of neoliberalism and contributed the thesis' criticism towards "authoritarian turn" narratives.

Walking *Kanal İstanbul* did reflect on how everyday life echoed contemporary coercive and authoritarian modalities of the Erdoğan-led AKP in the contested territories of megaprojects in the form of censorship, surveillance, and verbal aggression. However, thanks to the locals' inputs, the walking experience did also open up that the AKP did not completely exclude consent production despite rampant coercion. In fact, Erdoğan's megaproject spree in northern İstanbul was fastened to the ethos of national development (Arsel 2005; Adaman and Akbulut 2020; Çavuşoğlu and Strutz 2014). Dubbed monumental achievements of a government working hard for its people, *Kanal İstanbul* and other megaprojects were presented and received as epicentral components of a historical social contract between the Turkish state and its citizens: the promise of raising the state to the level of developed countries. It turned out that coercion and consent were also complementary modalities of the authoritarian neoliberalism.

And yet, the promise of making Turkey and İstanbul a global power through megaprojects was an exclusionary social contract, planting the seeds of counter-hegemonic struggles. The İstanbul mayor İmamoğlu's opposition against *Kanal İstanbul* was a product of this. While the mayor's left-populist discourse (Blakeley 2019; Frazier 2019; Mouffe 2018) have been challenging *Kanal İstanbul* and Erdoğan's brand of neoliberalism through a moral conception of the economy—e.g. handful of elites ripping of the people—his alternative governance model is premised on a technocratic conception of politics (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Acetti 2018), shunning ideological confrontation, even though it opens up avenues for popular participation. While challenging Erdoğan's authoritarianism and *Kanal İstanbul* was important, the thesis did acknowledge that an alternative horizon to neoliberalism was yet to emerge.

Walking experience in and around *Kanal İstanbul* most importantly pointed out a nuanced accumulation regime engendered by Erdoğan-led AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism: accumulation by incapacitation. Thanks to the locals' invaluable contributions, the thesis teased out that it was spatial ecological degradation that triggered the process of displacement in northern İstanbul, well before the expropriation took place. By incapacitating the material conditions that sustain rural producers' livelihoods, Erdoğan's

megaprojects were choreographing the remobilization of labor and resources to the benefit of the construction sector to sustain İstanbul as a growth machine.

But was this accumulation process in northern İstanbul a new phenomenon for the region? Could this accumulation dynamic be limited to Erdoğan and his AKP's neoliberal political economy? What would be revealed if one traced simultaneously the material history of northern İstanbul and the city's history of urbanization? What kind of tensions could such an intertwined history reveal regarding Turkey's history with capitalism, democracy, liberalism and urbanization? These sets of questions point one possible avenue to expand on this research. Because, by walking *Kanal İstanbul*, I understood that northern İstanbul was not only one of the last remaining rural areas of the city; nor was it solely the epicenter of Erdoğan's megaprojects. Northern İstanbul was İstanbul's history of urbanization; a topography of juxtapositions: past and future, infrastructure and superstructure, wealth and poverty, urban and rural. Teasing out these intermingling histories will be my next task.

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