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# Reproducing Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Turkey: Urban Governance and State Restructuring in the Shadow of Executive Centralization

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FORTHCOMING IN « GLOBALIZATIONS »

- The implosion of popular struggles against the erosion of economic and democratic rights in the Middle East has thrown into sharp relief the co-constitutive character of neoliberal reforms and authoritarian state practices. This article zooms in on this relationship, and traces the consolidation of a core component of authoritarian statisms by examining how the ruling AKP government in Turkey has facilitated executive centralization. This process refers to a form of state restructuring whereby key decision-making powers are increasingly concentrated in the hands of the central government while democratic avenues to contest government policies are curtailed through legal and administrative reforms, and the marginalization of dissident social forces. I unpack the mechanisms of executive centralization in Turkey by exploring the transformation of urban governance under AKP rule, which has promoted a spectacular degree of state-led commodification of land and housing while simultaneously recentralizing key decision-making powers. The investigation demonstrates that executive centralization in urban governance has paved the way for the swift implementation of contested urban transformation projects marked by a non-participatory approach to urban ‘renewal’, the reconfiguration of the state’s redistributive function vis-à-vis low-income households, and a tendency to exacerbate existing patterns of inequalities via the housing market.

AKP ■ executive centralization ■ housing policy ■ neoliberalism ■ urban governance ■ Turkey

## Introduction

Summer 2013 in Turkey was marked by an eruption of mass uprisings following an initial occupation aimed at the protection of green space in downtown Istanbul. The Gezi Park protests quickly spread throughout the whole country and mobilized an estimated 2.5 million participants in 79 provinces out of a total 81 (Amnesty International, 2013, p. 56). The rapidly developing wave of mobilization succeeded in bringing together a distinct coalition of social forces, which expanded the parameters of the protests to incorporate a set of broader issues related to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's dubitable approach to democratic rights and accountability, economic development and public participation. This sustained and widespread mobilization, combined with the government's heavy-handed response to the protests, received considerable international attention and helped highlight what some considered the AKP's 'authoritarian turn' (Benhabib, 2013). While the AKP government's harsh response was, indeed, emblematic of a single-party rule that tolerated little opposition both in and outside the parliament, the violent spectacle of the state repression displayed at Gezi captures only a single facet of a broader governing logic of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' that had long defined the AKP era (Tansel, 2018a). As such, it is necessary to contextualize Turkey's 'authoritarian turn' against the background of the systematic, yet perhaps less perceptible, transformations wrought in the fabric of the country's legal, administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms.

In order to contribute to recent discussions on the linkages between neoliberalism and authoritarian state practices across various socio-spatial contexts, here I argue that the AKP has relied on a high degree of political re-centralization, which operates in conjunction with—not in spite of—its wholehearted adoption of a neoliberal macroeconomic programme (see also Cozzolino in this special issue). This centralization not only privileged the executive as the sole arbiter of social and economic policy at various levels of governance, but also facilitated the party's increasingly recognized authoritarian drive by systematically blocking democratic and popular avenues for contesting its policies. I substantiate this argument by exploring the sweeping reorganization of the policy frameworks and institutions of urban governance with particular focus on the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (hereafter will be referred to as TOKİ, and the Administration). Analyzing the Administration's trajectory under the aegis of AKP rule provides us a productive avenue with which to disentangle the broader processes of executive centralization, whereby AKP-authored reform strategies have resulted in the domination of central-decision making bodies over residents, regulatory bodies and other stakeholders.

This argument is fleshed out through an analysis of the legislation produced or revised by AKP governments, which is then contrasted with a set of ethnographic insights on urban transformation projects compiled from the existing critical literature on urban governance. As the paper's primary aim is unpacking the legal and administrative facets of executive centralization, ethnographic material from urban transformation projects is harnessed as an auxiliary resource and the findings utilized from the literature are cross-referenced with multiple sources. Methodologically, while the paper is deeply rooted in the extant discussions on Turkish neoliberalism, it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism in other contexts (see also numerous papers in this special issue, especially those by Jenss and Kreitmeyr). The paper also

highlights that a greater emphasis on unpacking this particular relationship is necessary to study similar cases of democratic debilitation that are commonly discussed under the aegis of democratic backsliding (see Tansel, 2018).

In the first section below, I provide an overview of the AKP-led neoliberalization and a preliminary conceptual map to highlight the linkages between executive centralization and neoliberalism, with particular reference to the transformation of urban governance. This is followed by an analysis of the sweeping legal and administrative reforms enacted by AKP governments in urban policy, which have greatly increased the competencies of TOKİ and restructured the Administration as the executive's arm in facilitating urban transformation projects. The final section offers a panoramic look at the ways in which the legal and administrative reforms have shaped urban transformation projects in the AKP era, and how these contested projects ended up commodifying land and housing while reproducing the extant lines of inequalities faced by the urban poor and low-income households that they were ostensibly designed to assist.

### **Executive centralization and neoliberalism in the urban frontier**

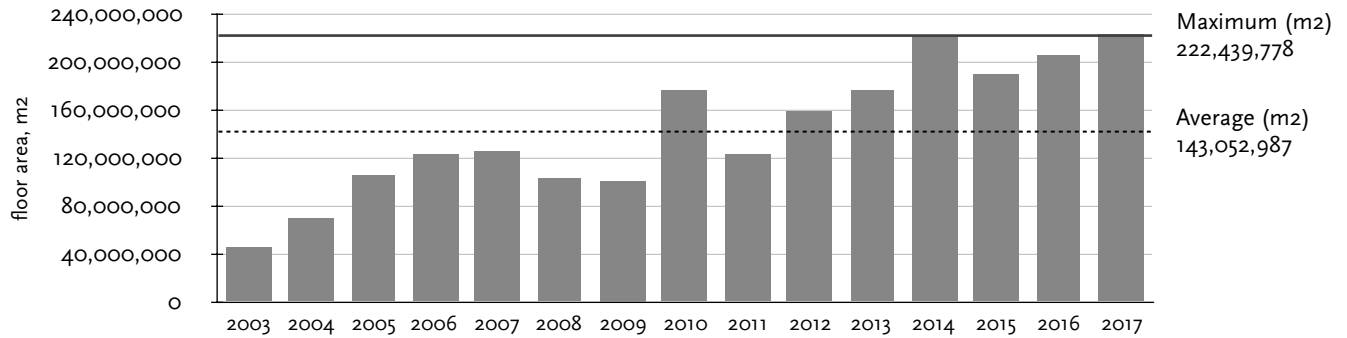
Before detailing the transformation of urban governance in Turkey, it is important to briefly recount the parameters of the AKP-led neoliberalization, as it was against this background that the party instrumentalized urban transformation as an engine of economic growth and stability, and relied on a renewed TOKİ-driven agenda of public-private partnerships to commodify housing and land across the country.

The AKP assumed office in 2002 following the inability of a centrist coalition to resolve the twin crises of neoliberalization which fully broke out in the economic and political realms in 2000-2001. Instead of mounting a challenge to the principles of liberalization that underpinned the preceding decade of economic instability, the first AKP administration largely adopted a set of prescriptions provided by the IMF, and the successive governments have prioritized inflation targeting, fiscal austerity and a considerably broadened privatization programme (Yeldan & Ünüvar, 2015, pp. 15-16). These policy priorities have resulted in a macroeconomic balance sheet that boasts inflation reduction, high FDI inflows generated by speculative capital movements, an initial period of high GDP growth rates, and improvements in GDP per capita. The final two benchmarks mirror the coeval performance of many other 'emerging countries' rather than signal an exceptional feat (see Tansel, 2017a). Yet, despite the oft-overstated assessments of this performance, the AKP programme has failed to tackle unemployment and chart a route out of the country's trajectory of 'jobless growth' (Yeldan & Ercan, 2011). The aggressive labour market restructuring pursued by AKP governments has placed considerable constraints on the prospects of wage increases for most workers, while simultaneously buttressing the employers' ability to shrink employment rights (Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018). Coupled with the rapid expansion of the scope and availability of financial products, wage stagnation has precipitated a record level of household indebtedness whereby 'household debt reached 41% of disposable personal income in 2010, implying a 6-fold increase since the end of 2003' (Karaçimen, 2015, p. 752).

As many observers have noted, cities have not only played an instrumental role in the AKP's ability to undertake key pillars of its economic programme, but they have also become the concrete

Figure 1. Total area of construction permits issued, 2003-2017

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute.

Available at: [http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PrelstatistikTablo.do?istab\\_id=609](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PrelstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=609)

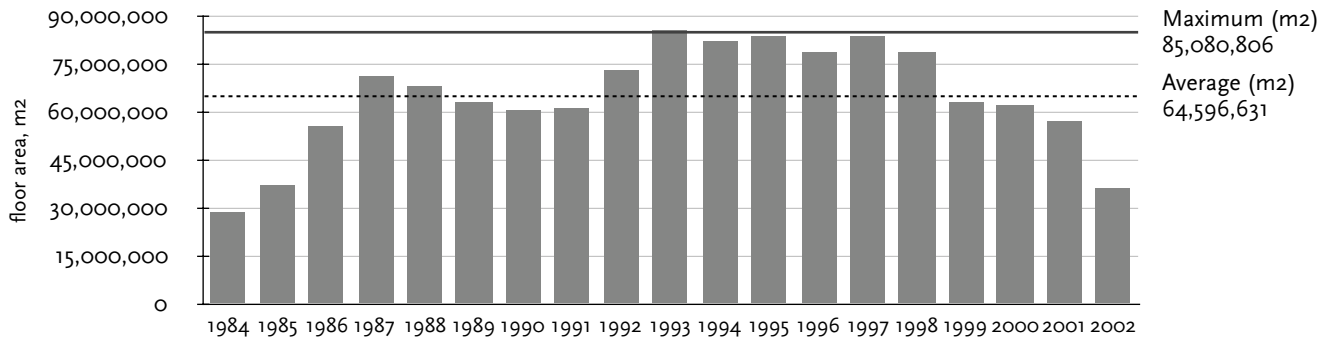
arenas for the party to demonstrate the apparent ‘success’ of its policy initiatives and its ability to ‘serve’ the people (Balaban, 2011). The urgently-needed capital inflows required by the rapid growth model propelled a search for new spaces to valorize and direct investment into, while the construction sector experienced a drastic expansion, thanks in no small part to the urban renewal and transformation projects devised and distributed by an increasingly ambitious TOKİ. TOKİ-initiated public-private partnerships effectively refashioned the Administration’s operation as a ‘catalyst for the private sector’ (Atasoy, 2016, p. 671), a role explicitly championed by the Administration itself (TOKİ, 2011, p. 7).

TOKİ projects are responsible for 9.2% of Turkey’s annual housing production. Between 2003 and September 2017, building permits for more than 2 billion m<sup>2</sup> were issued to facilitate the construction of approximately 1.7 million new buildings (TÜİK, n.d. A; Figure 1). Between 2003 and 2016, the Administration itself initiated the construction of 737,136 housing units with a stated aim to complete a total of 1.2 million units by 2013 (TOKİ, 2016, p. 10). This spectacular investment in built environment and state-supervised housing initiatives have propelled the construction industry to constitute an important share of the country’s overall GDP—8.9% in 2016—and to grow by an average of 5.9% annually between 2003 and 2014 (*Daily Sabah*, 2017; Erol & Unal, 2015, p. 9). It is within this context that the role of the construction sector and the urbanization of capital have gained prominence as *explanans* of the AKP’s hegemony, leading some scholars to establish a positive causal relationship between the AKP’s housing policy and the party’s electoral performance (see Marschall et al., 2016). AKP cadres have also utilized the demonstrable transformation of cities with new spaces of consumption, housing and ‘megaprojects’ as direct evidence of the government’s ability to modernize and transform the country, a strategy that aimed to appeal both to the Turkish electorate and the international capital that the government was keen to attract.

While the AKP’s agency in prioritizing this programme of economic development through urban transformation is undeniable, the socio-economic processes that facilitated this model should be linked both to earlier trends in urbanization in Turkey as well as to the systemic pressures generated by the country’s uneven liberalization. Rapid commodification of public land and the expansion of the real estate market under AKP rule were made possible by a proactive government policy that heavily relied on the state’s expropriation and planning powers, and also by the antecedent, intensified urbanization of capital in the 1980s and 1990s. As Louis Moreno (2014, p. 259) elucidates:

Figure 2. Total area of construction permits issued, 1984-2002

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute.

Available at: [http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PrelstatistikTablo.do?istab\\_id=2010](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PrelstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=2010)

urbanisation represented endless scope for capital to open up new channels of exploitation outside the closed field of the workplace. The city, comprising a fabric of social assets saturated with value, provided a space in which capitalism could re-fortify itself, through restructuring the ownership of the relations of production, consumption and collective consumption.

In Turkey, this process corresponded to a larger shift in economic management from import-substitution industrialization to neoliberalism, whereby the state's half-hearted attempts to regulate urbanization and the irregular housing stock began to clash with 'the emergence of entrepreneurial local government acting as a market facilitator, and the privatization of various municipal services such as transportation, housing, and provision of natural gas' (Bartu-Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008, p. 12). Throughout the 1990s, the planned spaces of production and consumption increasingly infringed on public land in desired residential and commercial locations as well as on *gecekondu* neighbourhoods,<sup>1</sup> while the perceived *function* of urban land—from the perspective of both capital and the state—changed from being an 'an instrument to accommodate the growing labouring classes' to 'a new area of economic investment open to both national and international capital' (Saraçoğlu & Demirtaş-Milz, 2014, p. 192).

Yet the trend towards a greater concentration of capital in cities and a more permissive policy environment did not trigger the type of large-scale transformation and housing projects that now marks the AKP era. For example, between 1984 (the year the Mass Housing Fund was established) and 2002, the total area for which construction permits were granted was approximately 1.2 billion m<sup>2</sup>—roughly the same area for the construction permits issued *only* in Istanbul between 2003 and 2014 (Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014, p. 142). Between 1984 and 2002, the average floor area for granted construction permits per annum roughly amounted to 64.6 million m<sup>2</sup>, whereas the same figure more than doubled to approximately 143 m<sup>2</sup> during the AKP's fourteen-year rule (2003-2017) (TÜİK, n.d. B; Figure 1 & 2).

This picture compels us to zoom in on the methods and mechanisms particular to the AKP-led state apparatuses and on the initiatives undertaken by the government since 2002. In addition to the availability of cheap credit, the AKP's key 'success' was its ability to deploy state apparatuses to facilitate and shelter capital flows. In effect, the policies have shepherded domestic and foreign capital flows into what David Harvey (1985, pp. 6-7) termed 'the secondary circuit of capital', which consists of 'long-term assets, particularly those constituting the built environment'. Harvey suggested that the movement of capital from the 'first circuit' (comprising activities that produce surplus

value) into the 'second' functions as a temporary displacement of the crisis tendencies of overaccumulation. Yet, this 'switching' between the circuits poses significant problems for individual capitalists, and Harvey indicated that it would be a feasible option only if a 'functioning capital market' and 'a state willing to finance and guarantee long-term, large-scale projects with respect to the creation of the built environment' existed (ibid., p. 7). My contention here is that AKP governments have effectively fulfilled this role by manoeuvring the Turkish state to become a facilitator of large-scale urban transformation and housing projects that both absorbed surplus capital—as Harvey's theory presumes it would—and heightened the scope and pace of the commodification of land through land and property transfer (see also Bruff & Starnes in this special issue on the importance of remaking households to neoliberalism).

It is crucial to underscore that this process was made possible by a significant transformation of the state's administrative and legal branches in managing urban governance, as well as the deployment of its coercive apparatuses to secure the continuation of contested projects. The main mechanism I highlight here is executive centralization, which, in this particular context, refers to the degree to which the key decision-making powers in urban governance have been transferred to the central government through the empowerment of TOKİ—which operates under the Prime Ministry—and the legislative changes that have granted extraordinary expropriation powers to the state and invalidated the influence of relevant auditing and regulatory authorities, residents and civil society groups.

This trend towards 'centralization', rather than constituting an exception to an assumed neoliberal logic of 'marketization' or the privileging of private actors, *enables* further commodification while also signalling the importance of certain mechanisms that distinguish the Turkish case from some well-established examples of neoliberal urbanization. For example, Swyngedouw et al.'s (2002, p. 561) influential work on neoliberal urban policy in the European Union (EU) asserts that neoliberal urbanization is defined by a degree of institutional fragmentation whereby the 'formal government structures' are 'subordinated to new institutions and agencies, often paralleled by a significant redistribution of policymaking powers, competencies, and responsibilities.' The case studies they cite suggest that neoliberal urbanization shifts the onus from public input to experts and a 'fusion of technical, economic, and political elites', and it reduces the 'role of the public in general and of traditional organized groups in particular, with a consequent loss of democratic accountability' (p. 579).

While the Turkish case mirrors many of these processes, it is important to highlight the following two qualifiers. First, the restructuring of urban governance during the AKP-led neoliberalization have not only excluded public participation in the design and implementation of large-scale projects, but it has also minimized the role of critical expertise. Centralization has consolidated and expanded the arms of the executive in shaping key decision-making processes, and has built a legal and administrative firewall around the urban transformation projects that many independent experts and professional associations have attempted to contest—all of which represent instances of 'preemptive discipline' (Tansel, 2017b, pp. 3-5; Bruff, 2014, p. 123). This does not contradict the overall thesis of Swyngedouw et al., as they also underline that the fragmented governance forged by neoliberal urbanization leads to 'the adoption of discretionary forms of management', and it helps create 'the conditions for the establishment of centralized and more autocratic' forms of deci-

sion-making (2002, p. 570). Nevertheless, the specificities of the Turkish case require some adjustment to the original argument.

Second, ‘centralization’ in the Turkish case does not necessarily refer to a complete reversal of the devolution of decision-making powers to local government. Many instances of administrative reform enacted by the AKP—particularly those that were propelled by EU accession negotiations in the first decade of AKP rule—explicitly aimed at furnishing greater powers to local authorities. Metropolitan Municipality Law No. 5216 and Municipality Law No. 5393 are clear examples of this orientation, as they both removed a number of central government controls over municipalities and encouraged the participation of civil society groups in local government initiatives (Bartucandan & Kolluoğlu, 2008, p. 13; Lelandais, 2014, pp. 1792-1793; Doğan & Stupar, 2017, p. 283). Yet the AKP’s administrative restructuring has failed to produce a tangible decentralized structure of power at local and regional levels; or in other words, the reforms that were supposed to facilitate a transfer of authority, power and control to local governments rarely amounted to a genuine *institutional* restructuring. Despite broad-ranging changes in municipal laws, the central government and its affiliated bodies (e.g. TOKİ) have not relinquished their intervention powers; on the contrary, in most cases, they ended up extending their control over local authorities. Correspondingly, various local administration reforms have increasingly amounted to ‘step towards strengthening the power of TOKİ while weakening that of local governments’ (Kayasü & Yetişkul, 2014, p. 217; Bayrabağ, 2013).

Executive centralization has also reinforced the state’s tendency to deploy coercion, and has resulted in the marginalization of public and non-governmental scrutiny of urban governance. As Annalena Di Giovanni (2017, p. 111) notes, coercion within the context of rapid urban transformation denotes a palpable increase in the scope and deployment of the state’s repressive apparatuses, and ‘a preemptive governance capable of legally restricting decision-making and auditing mechanisms. As politics must sustain the market of development investments and economic growth, policies are bound to restrict participation and accountability’. The expansion of the state’s expropriation powers and TOKİ’s exclusion from regulatory oversight have largely shielded urban transformation projects from legal contestation, while the heavy presence of the state’s coercive apparatuses have aimed to minimize social mobilization against the projects.

### **Establishing the mechanisms of preemptive discipline in urban governance**

This section examines how the AKP’s legal and administrative reforms have repurposed TOKİ to function as an agent of land and property transfer, and how these changes have been instrumental in reinforcing the overall trend of executive centralization in public policy under AKP rule. TOKİ was established in 1984 with the stated aim of facilitating state-backed financing to housing projects. The Mass Housing Law of 1984,<sup>2</sup> which defined the parameters of the Administration’s responsibilities, was envisioned as a potential panacea for the state’s inability to expand housing provision for low-income families. Previous state-led efforts were largely defined by policies that prioritized offering subsidized credit, which often received criticism due to their tendency to contribute ‘more to the development of middle-class and even luxurious residential construction than to the realization of social housing projects’ (Buğra, 1998, p. 308).



TOKİ's second incarnation under AKP rule was facilitated by a series of sweeping legal and administrative changes that radically enhanced the Administration's planning and financial powers while also bringing its operation under the full control of the executive. These reforms have given TOKİ the ability to expand considerably the scope of its projects, while also situating the Administration in the housing market as a 'private enterprise' as well as the regulator and facilitator of public-private partnerships in large-scale urban transformation and housing projects (Kayasü & Yetişkul, 2014, p. 216; Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010, p. 1485). Correspondingly, TOKİ's share of the housing market rose from 1.1% in 2003 to 18.6% within four years (Karaman, 2013, p. 3418), while the value of its housing investments at the municipal level reached \$11 billion by 2014 (Marschall et al., 2016, p. 202).

The AKP's ambitious efforts to place urban transformation at the heart of its socio-economic programme began as early as 2003, with the passing of key legislation that considerably expanded TOKİ's competencies and attached the Administration more closely to the government. Law No. 4966 amended the Mass Housing Law of 1984 (Law No. 2985) and extended the responsibilities of the Administration to include the 'provision of individual and collective credit for housing...financing projects that aim to regenerate *gecekondu* areas, [and] to protect and restore historical and local architecture'.<sup>3</sup> TOKİ was also granted the option to request the ownership of treasury land designated to be used in its own projects without any compensation, subject to the approval of the Prime Minister. With Law No. 5018 on the management of public finances, TOKİ's accounts were reallocated to a 'special budget', thus removed from the Turkish Court of Accounts' auditing remit.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after this, the Administration itself was removed from the control of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, and attached directly to the Prime Minister's office.<sup>5</sup>

2004-2008 represents a key juncture in urban governance in Turkey, as a series of laws passed in this period continued to expand TOKİ's powers. Law No. 5162 empowered the Administration to design and develop urban transformation projects, but also the authority to claim eminent domain, and thus the ability to expropriate any land or property owned by real or legal entities.<sup>6</sup> TOKİ gained the license to prepare and finance urban transformation projects in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods with a view to 'evacuating or reclaiming them through rejuvenation'. With Law No. 5162, the Administration was also authorized to establish partnerships with private companies, which would underpin its revenue-sharing partnership programme in the years to come.

Law No. 5273 strengthened the Administration's grip on public land by abolishing the Urban Land Office, 'which was formerly responsible for the development and allocation of urban land according to the needs of different institutions and local governments' (Türkün, 2011, p. 70), and transferring 64.5 million m<sup>2</sup> of public land to the TOKİ's own portfolio.<sup>7</sup> An amendment made to Law No. 775 in 2007 enabled TOKİ to take ownership of treasury lands without compensation.<sup>8</sup> Law No. 5366, ostensibly designed to protect and restore dilapidated buildings of historic importance, incorporated major conservation sites into the purview of urban transformation projects.<sup>9</sup> Directly empowering municipalities in implementing urban transformation projects in such areas, the law dismantled the regulations on 'historical and protection zones', and exposed these sites to the prospect of expropriation (Kuyucu, 2014, p. 616n.7; Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014, p. 143; Kayasü & Yetişkul, 2016, p. 217).

The contingent empowerment of local authorities—in conjunction with the ongoing expansion of TOKİ—continued with Municipal Law of 2005 (No. 5393). Municipalities' competencies vis-à-

vis urban transformation projects had already been enhanced with Law No. 5216 in 2004; but the 2005 law introduced a key new criterion for expanding the scope of urban transformation by entitling the municipalities with the authority to implement urban transformation projects to 'rebuild and restore decaying parts of the city'.<sup>10</sup> As Kuyucu (2014, p. 615) notes, the law 'specifies no concrete definitions or objective criteria of obsolescence, decay or dilapidation that should serve as the basis for designating areas as "transformation zones"', and this deliberate ambiguity 'opens up a dangerous degree of arbitrariness in decision making for municipal authorities' (see also Tepe, 2016, p. 77). These measures were designed to be implemented in partnership with TOKİ and did not amount to any systematic realignment towards institutional decentralization. Further pieces of legislation passed in this same four-year period demonstrate clearly that the AKP's approach to decentralization was highly contingent and did not aim to disassemble the central government's control over key decision-making mechanisms. For example, Law No. 5793, passed in July 2008, readjusted the scope of local government regulation in urban transformation projects and stipulated that TOKİ can authorize its own projects even if they are not approved by local authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Space does not permit a full exploration of all attempts to expand the scope of TOKİ's expropriatory powers and the public land available for urban transformation projects. However, two further key reforms should be briefly highlighted before unpacking how urban transformation projects are developed in practice. The first concerns the AKP's successful bid in 2012 to redefine the legal status of forests. Effectively revoking the pre-existing constitutional guarantees that protected forested areas from commercial use, Law No. 6292 legalized the sale of 'lands that have lost their "forest" status (due to burning and cutting of trees)' (Atasoy, 2016, p. 662).<sup>12</sup> By 2014, the state had completed cadastral work on the majority of lands that fell under this category and sold 1.573 million m<sup>2</sup> lands out of a total 3.45 million m<sup>2</sup> (Atasoy, 2016, p. 662). Commodification of forest lands was accompanied by a twin act which was promulgated in the same year. Law No. 6306 was presented by the government as a state-led effort to increase cities' resilience to disasters and to strengthen building codes and regulations, yet it neatly fit into the existing trend towards executive centralization by empowering the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization and TOKİ in designating 'risk areas', which would then be earmarked for urban transformation projects under the guidance of the Administration.<sup>13</sup> The law enforced a highly ambiguous definition of 'risk areas', which includes specific buildings and zones under immediate 'disaster risk' and those in the proximity of such areas as well, thus allowing the Ministry and TOKİ to subject 'hypothetically all existing building stock' to the jurisdiction of the law (Eliçin, 2014, p. 151).

Broader reforms enacted by AKP governments have also had a significant impact on urban governance, as they have transformed the state's approach to informal housing. The new Criminal Code, passed in 2004, criminalized the construction of *gecekondu* housing for the first time and made it punishable by a five-year prison sentence.<sup>14</sup> Given the historical role *gecekondus* played in facilitating access to housing for the urban poor and the state's permissive approach to informal housing, criminalization was a major step in redefining the state's redistributive function vis-à-vis low-income households as well as its commitment to codifying, and further commodifying, land and housing (see also Jenss in this special issue). The law has resulted in the escalation of disciplinary measures directed at *gecekondu* areas, which took the form of widespread demolitions of whole neighbourhoods and increased surveillance and policing (Lelandais, 2014, pp. 1793-1794).<sup>15</sup> The law also made the *gecekondu* neighbourhoods prime targets for TOKİ projects: the Adminis-

tration was empowered to impose large-scale urban transformation projects in such areas and sought to transform them due to their high 'rent gap', i.e. 'the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use' (Smith, 1996, p. 65; Karaman, 2014, p. 294; Saraçoğlu & Demirtaş-Milz, 2014, p. 179).

## **Reproducing authoritarian neoliberalism through urban governance**

The above-discussed legal and administrative reforms in urban governance reveal the gradual assembly of an infrastructure that reinforced executive centralization under AKP rule, yet examining *how* these changes were reflected in urban transformation projects exposes an even more drastic realignment of the state's productive and regulatory role in cities, and its relationship with the urban poor and various fractions of capital. This section will unpack the ways in which the AKP's authoritarian neoliberal rule has manifested in urban governance by reviewing a series of snapshots taken from TOKİ's major urban transformation projects. The aim of this exercise is to establish how urban transformation projects have (I) limited popular participation by adopting a top-down approach; (II) intensified existing inequalities in the housing market; (III) displaced residents from their long-established spaces of social reproduction; (IV) exploited class and ethnicity-based divisions and deepened 'territorial stigmatization'; and (V) constituted a form of preemptive discipline by preventing (and, if necessary, violating) legal and social challenges mounted against the projects.

One of the most immediate effects of the way in which executive centralization has taken hold of urban governance is the degree to which key decision-making processes have been transferred to TOKİ and the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization at the expense of local authorities, residents, and civil society groups. As highlighted above, this trend emerged against the background of ostensible empowerment of municipalities to develop and implement urban transformation projects while their competencies were, in practice, regularly subjugated to the demands of TOKİ. Instead of producing an institutional structure capable of reflecting the needs of local authorities and populations, the reforms have placed the 'implementation of urban regeneration projects in the hands of central government from the beginning (land development and planning) to the end (property development and redistribution of property rights)' (Eraydın & Taşan-Kok, 2014, p. 119).

The ramifications of the AKP's top-down approach to urban governance can be traced in the way in which major transformation projects were conducted by the relevant local authorities and TOKİ, which are 'typically announced without any prior consultation with the locals and have resulted in the involuntary displacement of residents who have no right or means to participate in renewal schemes' (Erensü & Karaman, 2017, p. 26). The urban transformation project that aimed to 'regenerate' the neighbourhood of Sulukule in Istanbul embodies the contradictions of the AKP's contingent decentralization. Developed by TOKİ, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and the local Fatih Municipality, the project began with an 'urgent expropriation decree' issued by the central government (Karaman, 2014, p. 296). While on paper the project aimed at the 'conservation of Sulukule'—a historic neighbourhood with a well-established majority Roma community—it was implemented without any substantial engagement with the residents, and widely criticized for the absence of participatory mechanisms that could integrate the needs and demands of the local population (Uysal, 2012, p. 16). A similar approach shaped the urban transformation project of the

Fikirtepe neighbourhood in Istanbul, whose residents resisted the resettlement plans proposed by the TOKİ's private contractors. The project could only proceed after the central government invoked Law No. 6306 to declare Fikirtepe a 'risk area', thereby preempting and undermining the residents' efforts to mount legal and social challenges (Tepe, 2016, p. 88).

While TOKİ repeatedly underscores that the 'social housing projects' constitute the majority of its housing production (85.2%),<sup>16</sup> the development and implementation of these urban transformation projects serve to reproduce extant inequalities in access to housing. The projects' inability to offer substantial solutions to the existing lines of stratification in housing stems from both the highly financialized and non-participatory nature of the projects, and the specific history of the development of informal housing in Turkey. The *gecekondu* neighbourhoods that have been targeted by the TOKİ's 'renewal' projects proliferated within a context of uneven urbanization and migration to the metropolitan areas in the second half of the twentieth century. Flows of migrant workers to the cities sustained the state's and the developing industries' labour needs, and successive governments' permissive approach to informal housing on public land—which gave birth to the *gecekondu* neighbourhoods—effectively helped them keep labour costs down (Lelandais, 2014, p. 1792; Karaman, 2014, p. 296). With the passing of amnesty laws in 1984 and 1985, the occupiers of *gecekondu* properties started claiming legal ownership and use rights through the state's land titling initiatives. These legal reforms spawned what Tahire Erman (2001, p. 987) has called the 'apartmentalisation of *gecekondus*', whereby 'the once-owner-occupied/owner-built *gecekondus* were [replaced] by high-rise apartment buildings in which the owner of the *gecekondu* land owned several apartments'. Those *gecekondu* residents who were able to access title deeds and legalize their ownership status thus profited from either selling their piece of once-public land or further developing their properties into larger units—a process which 'created a lucrative and hierarchical market structure that disproportionately benefits the more economically resourceful and better politically connected inhabitants' (Kuyucu, 2014, pp. 618-619; Enlil, 2011, p. 20).

TOKİ's urban transformation projects exploited these legal ambiguities of informal housing tenure, and exacerbated the already stratified relationship between *gecekondu* tenants who lacked legal claims and protections, and those who owned titles or use rights. In most transformation projects, 'legal' residents of the targeted neighbourhoods, i.e. those who can prove their ownership or use rights, retain the option to stay in the same area and move into a new-build TOKİ unit. The residents who opt for this scenario are required to pay a sum which is calculated as the difference between the value of their existing property and the value of the new TOKİ unit they would own. This arrangement thus offers 'the promise of acquiring a house with a significantly higher market value, and in the case of *gecekondu* settlers, the transition to formal ownership status' (Karaman, 2014, p. 297).

The translation of this arrangement into practice means that *gecekondu* tenants who lack established legal rights are not eligible for compensation, and often 'face direct eviction' (Karaman, 2014, p. 297). In the case of the Sulukule project, many tenants who could not afford the payment plan imposed by the project ended up abrogating their resettlement rights and selling their 'entitlement' to the new TOKİ properties to third parties (Uysal, 2012, p. 17; Karaman, 2014, p. 299). Meanwhile, residents who already possessed ownership rights had the opportunity to sell their properties at high profit margins (Uysal, 2012, p. 17). As such, the projects' promise of home-ownership often applies to those who already enjoyed secure tenures via the possession of deeds or use rights, while

tenants who lacked such legal claims are further pushed to a perpetual state of ‘rental housing insecurity’ (cf. Soederberg, 2018).

The exclusion of residents from participation in the planning and implementation of these projects, as well as the differential rights of resettlement possessed by owners and tenants, further serve to reproduce inequalities by displacing residents from their long-established communities and workplaces. The exclusionary effects often manifest in economic terms, as many resettled residents—particularly those who were tenants prior to resettlement—struggle to keep up with the mortgage payments and end up selling or leasing their new flats. Beyond this secondary cycle of displacement necessitated by economic hardship, the former residents of transformed neighbourhoods also face exclusion from their established spaces of reproduction. For example, Sulukule tenants were given the option to resettle in Taşoluk, a neighbourhood ‘40 km outside the city center’ (Karaman, 2014, p. 299), an unpopular alternative that was accepted by few residents. As Karaman (2014, p. 299) notes, ‘almost all of the tenants had moved to smaller substandard houses in the immediate vicinity of Sulukule or were pushed further away from the city center’. Likewise, the resettlement plan implemented in Kadifekale envisioned that the residents would be moved to a peripheral suburb ‘isolated from the economic and social opportunities on offer in the city’ (Saraçoğlu & Demirtaş-Milz, 2014, pp. 181-182).

In addition to the difficulty of maintaining access to their workplaces after resettlement, residents have faced the prospect of being physically cut off from their established ‘mutual assistance networks’, which have been crucial in reinforcing the urban poor’s ability to reproduce themselves outside the ‘formal’ framework of social reproduction via market mechanisms (Lelandais, 2014, p. 1798). As noted by ethnographic evidence, resettled residents have often lost access to informal practices that hitherto had increased their ability to purchase basic necessities (e.g. such as *veresiye*, a type of deferred payments commonly practiced in neighbourhood shops), and the stringently ordered TOKİ units built without the residents’ input—and often administered by private companies—have resulted in the destruction of communal spaces where residents used to grow their own produce (Bartu-Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008, p. 23). Simultaneously, there is growing evidence that resettled residents are attempting to ‘reappropriate’ these highly regulated and managed spaces to re-establish their everyday practices (Erman, 2016).

This consistent attempt to order informal spaces and submit them to the state’s logic of formalizing property relations has also been reinforced by an explicit securitarian discourse which has exploited class and ethnicity based differences to legitimize urban transformation (see also Jenss in this special issue). Public relations campaigns surrounding the urban transformation projects associated the targeted areas as zones of criminality and a general sense of urban decay, thus reinforcing an existing trend of ‘territorial stigmatization’ whereby ‘discourses of vilification proliferate[d]’ about neighbourhoods that had already been marked by a ‘pervasive stigmata of poverty’ (Wacquant, 1996, p. 125). This discourse manifested repeatedly in the statements and speeches of figures and authorities that played a key role in the projects. For example, in 2006, the then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described *gecekondu* neighbourhoods as a ‘tumor that has surrounded our cities’ and highlighted that ‘removing this tumor’ was the government’s main priority (quoted in Kuyucu, 2014, pp. 613-614). The transformation of neighbourhoods with large Kurdish and Roma communities, such as Ayazma and Sulukule, has been justified by paternalistic narratives that emphasized the implicit otherness of such communities and an aggressive rhetoric that ‘played upon

the racist prejudice according to which Kurdishness is equated with political disloyalty, quasi-feudal primitivism, general anti-social attitudes and criminality' (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011, p. 84; Uysal, 2012, p. 15; Karaman, 2014, p. 293).

Finally, it is important to highlight that despite the preemptive disciplining of dissent against urban transformation projects, residents and civil society organizations succeeded in mounting important challenges. These mobilizations took the form of legal efforts aimed at chipping away at the judicial armour of the projects as well as grassroots movements that brought together residents and regional/national civil society organizations to contest the terms of the proposed transformation. Some of the legal challenges brought about by residents and NGOs have been successful in courts, resulting in temporary interruptions to constructions and the partial revision of transformation plans in neighbourhoods such as Başbüyük and Tarlabası (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011, p. 91; Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010, pp. 1488, 1495). The effectiveness of this strategy has been limited due to the previously-discussed legal reforms which have drastically increased the scope of TOKİ's competencies, and to the fact that many of those rulings in favour of the projects' cancellation were later annulled by appeal courts. Nevertheless, the legal firewall built around the AKP's urban transformation strategy as well as the state's deployment of its coercive arm to preserve the projects has created a mutually reinforcing cycle of grassroots activism. As Tepe (2016, p. 95) notes:

The administratively nonnegotiable nature of URPs [urban renewal projects] introduces judicial venues as one of the most effective ways to contest them... Yet the local governments consistently disregard court decisions and reinforce the key role of central and local governments without judicial accountability. Paradoxically, the ineffectiveness of court decisions both increases political apathy and mistrust among residents as well as makes political activism the only viable option to challenge the URPs.

Therefore, while the extended judicial protection of the urban transformation projects, as well as TOKİ's ability to ignore contravening court decisions, constitute an important barrier to challenging these developments on legal grounds, the mechanisms of preemptive disciplining also heighten the possibility of coordinated grassroots action between residents, NGOs and other political actors by, in effect, channelling their opposition to the streets.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed the constitution of authoritarian neoliberalism through urban governance in Turkey, but the reader should not assume that the processes and practices that underpin the developments I have discussed are applicable only to questions of urban policy. It is vital to stress that the rapid centralization of decision-making processes and the accompanying legal and administrative measures taken in this specific policy area directly echo similar developments that AKP governments have put in motion in other key fields; hence the importance of recognizing them as individual nodes of a wider model of governance that I identify as authoritarian neoliberalism. The trajectory of administrative reform during the AKP era has followed the same pattern of recentralization in the guise of contingent decentralization. For example, the approach to privatization—the pace and value of which have increased dramatically since 2003—reveals an identical tendency for 'streamlining' procedures with a view to removing institutional and regulatory barriers against privatization (Angın & Bedirhanoglu, 2013; Tansel, 2017a). As Buğra & Savaşkan (2004, p. 82) have

noted, since 2003 AKP governments have amended existing laws and passed new pieces of legislation which have ‘simplified bureaucratic procedures, expanded and consolidated prime ministerial control over the Privatization Agency and eliminated the rules concerning partial public ownership of privatized enterprises’. This wave of regulatory liberalization vis-à-vis privatization initiatives went hand in hand with repeated efforts to utilize public procurement procedures to generate and further expand circuits of capital accumulation, particularly with a view to reinforcing the status and power of pro-government businesses. Loss of discretion and regulatory oversight in public procurement has resulted in ever-increasing market shares of pro-government conglomerates—many of them now possess monopolistic powers in key industries, such as in construction and media (Yeşil 2016, p. 105). TOKİ itself has played a crucial role in this process, as its investment arm has distributed 60% of its procurements to the members of the pro-government Independent Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association (MÜSİAD) (Çeviker Gürakar, 2016, p. 147).

While the specificities of the Turkish case—the ways in which executive centralization has transformed the state’s administrative, legal and coercive apparatuses—require a particular focus on the ‘authoritarian’ character of the AKP-led neoliberalization, it is important to note that ‘centralization’, in and of itself, has never been antithetical to the operation of actually existing neoliberalisms across the globe (see also Cozzolino in this special issue; Clua-Losada & Ribera-Almandoz, 2017). A brief look at cases ranging from the restructuring of the British state’s welfare provision during the New Labour years to the implementation of privatization programmes and bureaucratic reform in Mexico in the 1980s reveals that the adoption of neoliberal policies—often accompanied by an explicit discourse on the need to ‘decentralize’ decision-making—has repeatedly resulted in the ‘re-centralisation and formalisation of central state power’ (May et al., 2005, p. 704; Aitken, 1996, p. 25).

The exclusionary and anti-democratic tendencies of these processes have been noted by many scholars, though in some cases, such propensities were attributed directly to local particularities. Noel Castree (2010, p. 199), for example, has suggested that in neoliberal Britain, ‘executive decisionmaking has become increasingly immune to public scrutiny or pressure’ due to ‘some peculiarities of British politics and society’. What the Turkish experience under AKP rule—and, indeed, many other cases explored in this special issue—attests is that we now have enough evidence of such executive centralizations to link them more systematically to a broader ‘evacuation of capitalist democracy’, namely, the increasing failure of the established political forms of capitalism to manage the ‘tensions’ between the necessity to safeguard capital accumulation while maintaining a healthy level of public legitimacy (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015, pp. 605-606). While the implementations of neoliberalism in different national contexts have had success in offering, albeit temporarily, a panacea for the crisis of profitability, the accompanying process of the transformation of governance has proven itself ill-equipped to resolve the inherent political contradictions of capitalism. The AKP-led attempts to expand the scope of commodification in the Turkish case underlines the magnitude of the structural power the state possesses to facilitate these projects, but also the vibrant potential of urban processes in broadening the space for collective action and in building concrete forms of solidarity from the bottom up to mount an effective resistance against neoliberalization.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Gecekondu*, the literal translation of which is 'built overnight', denotes irregular and illegal housing built without legal authorization, often on public land.
- <sup>2</sup> Law No. 2985, *Official Gazette*, 17 March 1984.
- <sup>3</sup> Law No. 4966, *Official Gazette*, 7 August 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> Law No. 5018, *Official Gazette*, 24 December 2003. See also Marschall et al. (2016, p. 205).
- <sup>5</sup> *Official Gazette*, 16 January 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Law No. 5162, *Official Gazette*, 12 May 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Law No. 5273, *Official Gazette*, 15 December 2004. The amount of public land controlled by TOKİ would increase to 110 million m<sup>2</sup> by 2011 (Atasoy, 2016, p. 671).
- <sup>8</sup> Law No. 5609, *Official Gazette*, 28 March 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> Law No. 5366, *Official Gazette*, 5 July 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> Law No. 5216, *Official Gazette*, 23 July 2004; Law No. 5393, *Official Gazette*, 13 July 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> Law No. 5793, *Official Gazette*, 6 August 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Law No. 6292, *Official Gazette*, 26 April 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> Law No. 6306, *Official Gazette*, 31 May 2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Law No. 5237, *Official Gazette*, 12 October 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Between 2004 and 2008, 11,543 [*gecekondu*] units in Istanbul were demolished, a record high for any period' (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010, p. 1484).
- <sup>16</sup> The figure includes housing projects constructed for the urban poor, low- and middle-income groups, disaster housing as well as urban renewal projects (i.e. *gecekondu* transformation projects) and agricultural villages (TOKİ, 2016, p. 16).



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