



**A STRUGGLE TO KEEP ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS  
ABOVE PARTY POLITICS: THE CERATTEPE CASE**

**ÇEVRE PROTESTOLARINI PARTİ SİYASETİNİN  
ÜSTÜNDE TUTMA MÜCADELESİ: CERATTEPE ÖRNEĞİ<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Cerattepe mining project for the extraction of gold and copper in the city of Artvin has been controversial since the mid-1980s. Local resistance against the project peaked in 2015-2016 in the form of blockages, sit-ins, social media protests, litigations, and signed petitions. This paper analyzes protests against the Cerattepe mining project in terms of their motivations, strategies, limitations, and political perceptions. Through an original survey analysis (N=253) and interview data, we find that the locals frame their activism as above party politics to keep a legitimate position in resisting the mining project. This strategy has remained intact for several years despite the politicization attempts of resistance from national-level political parties. We explain this strategy with the national consensus on prioritizing economic growth over environmental issues, neoliberal developmentalism with strong state support for private companies, and high levels of political polarization in society. Overall, the study offers an

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<sup>1</sup> University of Delaware IRB determined this project is exempt from IRB review according to the federal regulations with the decision number 1398504-1 on March 4, 2019.

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\* Makale Geliş Tarihi / Article Received: 10.01.2023  
Makale Kabul Tarihi / Article Accepted: 12.05.2023

understanding of the challenges in front of environmental issue-based activism in Turkey and reveals the strategies of locals in resisting an environmentally destructive mining project.

**Keywords:** Cerattepe Mining Project, Environmental Movements, Issue-based Activism, Local Protests, Gold and Copper Extraction.

## ÖZ

Artvin ilinde altın ve bakır çıkarılmasına yönelik Cerattepe maden projesi 1980'lerin ortalarından beri ihtilafli olmuştur. Blokajlar, oturma eylemleri, sosyal medya protestoları, davalar ve imzalı dilekçeler şeklinde gösterilen yerel direniş, 2015-2016 yıllarında zirve yaptı. Bu makale, Cerattepe maden projesine karşı yapılan protestoları motivasyonları, stratejileri, sınırları ve siyaset algıları açısından analiz etmektedir. Orijinal bir anket analizi (N=253) ve röportaj yaparak, yerel halkın maden projesine karşı çıkma konusunda meşru konumunu korumak için aktivizmlerini parti politikalarının üzerinde bir çerçeveye oturttuğunu bulduk. Ulusal düzeydeki siyasi partilerin protestoları siyasallaştırma girişimlerine rağmen bu strateji yıllarca bozulmadan kalmıştır. Bu stratejiyi, ekonomik büyümeyi çevresel meselelerden önceleyen ulusal mutabakat, özel şirketlere güçlü devlet desteği ile neoliberal kalkınmacılık ve toplumdaki yüksek düzeyde siyasi kutuplaşma ile açıklıyoruz. Bu çalışma genel olarak, Türkiye'de çevre sorunları odaklı aktivizmin önündeki zorluklara dair bir kavrayış sunmakta ve yerel halkın çevreye zarar veren bir maden projesine direniş stratejilerini incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cerattepe Maden Projesi, Çevre Hareketleri, Konu Odaklı Aktivizm, Yerel Protestolar, Altın ve Bakır Çıkartma.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of extractive projects has led to a rise in grievance-driven local environmental activism in the last several decades in Turkey (Adaman and Arsel, 2005; Adem, 2005; Doğu, 2017; Knudsen, 2016; Özkaynak et al.,

2015). Despite their growth in numbers, the grassroots resistance to environmentally destructive development projects faces several significant challenges. First, the historical consensus on prioritizing economic growth over the environment has remained salient in Turkey since its early years. Thus, environmental issues take a very small space in public opinion surveys and in the discourse of opposition parties (Çarkoğlu, 2017). Second, due to the paternalistic state-led developmentalist background and top-down modernization, the civil society organization numbers and their effectiveness remains very limited (Özler and Obach, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s, neoliberalization promoted a retreat in state involvement in the economy. However, this only turned into neoliberal developmentalism, in which state-corporatist polity utilizes state apparatuses to ensure the economic interests of private firms (Özen and Özen, 2009). Third, the recent consolidation of authoritarianism not only intensified the repression and punishment for environmental activism but also led to a highly polarized society. In extreme polarization, local activism can get easily politicized and delegitimized by external attempts to intertwining them with party politics or ethnic identities (Knudsen, 2016). With these prominent challenges, this paper poses a significant question: what kinds of strategies do locals adopt in resisting environmentally destructive projects in the current Turkish context? More specifically, this paper explores how local environmental mobilizations navigate the challenges of (1) a national consensus on prioritizing economic growth over environmental issues, (2) neoliberal developmentalism with a top-down developmentalist approach, and (3) a highly polarized society under a consolidated authoritarian regime.

To investigate this question, we focus on the Cerattepe case in the city of Artvin, where the extraction of gold and copper in a unique area in terms of its biodiversity has started after decades of local resistance. By doing so, we aim to demonstrate the strategies of the local protestors of the Cerattepe mining project. Through an original survey analysis (N=253) and interview data, we find that the locals adopt the strategy of framing their activism as above party politics to keep a legitimate position in resisting the mining project. This strategy has remained intact for several years despite the top-down politicization attempts of resistance from both the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the opposition party of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Overwhelming majority of our respondents consider the Cerattepe protests as above party politics. Similarly, the most expressed goal out of the protests was to end the mining project while none of the respondents expressed an aim for creating a broader opposition to national government. However, this 'above party politics' strategy of the locals does not

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<sup>2</sup> There are only two organizations in Turkey that are accredited by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion (TEMA) and the Syrian Engineers for Construction and Development (SECD) based in Turkey. For comparison, Germany has 23 of them (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2023).

mean a neglect for the systemic role of national political economy in the construction of top-down developmentalist projects like the Cerattepe mining project. Instead, it is a nuanced strategy that strives to be effective within the specific political economic context of Turkey, with deep polarization, paternalistic state tradition, and the prioritization of a narrowly defined economic growth over all other issues.

This paper begins with a historical background on environmental policymaking and state-environment relations in Turkey. Then, we focus on the history of environmental activism in Turkey and local resistance cases to development projects. After that, we specify our methods of survey analysis (N=253) and justify the case selection of the Cerattepe Mining Project in Artvin. In the findings and discussion section, we present major survey and interview results in addition to elaborating on the capabilities and limits of the nonpartisan environmental local resistance. The conclusion discusses the research limitations and proposes future study ideas.

## **1. TURKISH STATE AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Turkey has been suffering from a plethora of environmental problems, including increased greenhouse gas emission rates; deforestation; desertification; biodiversity loss; air, water, and soil pollution; reduced groundwater reservoir levels; and soil erosion. According to the 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), Turkey is the 172nd out of 180 countries, which shows alarming neglect for the environment and a major deterioration in recent years, as its ranking in 2018 was 108th out of 180 countries (Wolf et al., 2022; Adaman et al., 2022). Many of these problems originate from the “overuse of natural resources, disposal of waste more than the ecosystem can absorb, unregulated industrialization, and unplanned urbanization” (Adaman and Arsel, 2005: 3).

Turkey’s poor environmental performance is not due to a lack of environmental legislation or bureaucratic capacity. On the contrary, Turkey has a substantive history of adopting and developing environmental regulations that aim at conserving biodiversity, forests, and coastal waters (Adaman et al., 2022). In the last several decades, successive Turkish governments have adopted these regulations and developed environmental policies due to regional and international demands. For instance, with the Stockholm Conference of 1972, organized by the United Nations (UN), Turkey included an environmental protection section into its 5-year development plan for the first time. Similarly, the Ministry of Environment was established right before another UN initiative, the Rio Summit of 1992. At the regional level, the European Union has played a major role in shaping the environmental legislative capacity. For instance, in cooperation

with the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) in 1984 and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in 1994, Turkey agreed to protect its endangered plants and animals. In 2004, within the context of accession policies with the EU, Turkey merged the Ministry of Environment with the Ministry of Forestry to respond to demands for better coordination from the EU (İzci, 2005). In 2011, when the demands from the EU lost its power on Turkish policymaking, the Ministry of Environment was connected to the Ministry of Development and Housing, which had existed since 1958, in the new office of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization (Paker et al., 2013).

While satisfying international expectations for certain environmental standards was an incentive, economic development has always been overweighed as the primary goal of the Turkish government (Özen and Özen, 2009: 554). From the early years of the establishment of the Turkish Republic to the 1980s, state-led developmentalism has been the primary ideology in the country. The negative impact of development projects on the lives of local people was “a sacrifice for the development of the country, (which) was seen as the duty of all citizens.” (Kadirbeyoglu, 2010: 225). The consensus on prioritizing economic growth was so strong that even the opposition parties didn’t criticize environmentally destructive development projects until the late 1990s (Tezcür et al., 2021). Thus, developmentalism at the cost of nature has negated any political will to effectively implement environmental policies or incorporate even the “rather mild calls to conserve nature” (Paker et al., 2013: 763).

With global neoliberalization starting in the 1980s, the role of the state as the initiator of development has started to deteriorate. Initially, some scholars hoped that neoliberalism would decrease the involvement of the state in the economy. However, it turned out to be an evolution of “statist polity ... towards ‘state-corporatist polity’ (Jepperson, 2000) or ‘business-corporatist’ polity (Whitley, 2005) since the beginning of liberalization experience in the early 1980s.” (Özen and Özen, 2009: 552). Neoliberalization has encouraged both domestic and international companies to invest and lead development projects in many sectors, most notably energy generation, extraction of natural resources, and mega construction projects (Adaman et al., 2020; Paker, 2017). Importantly, the role of the state has not diminished in the facilitation of these projects. Far from it, the neoliberal state is even more aggressively involved in top-down developmentalist projects (Arsel et al., 2015: 375; Tezcur et al., 2021). Similarly, the national consensus on the superiority of developmentalist projects over environmental concerns is sustained in public opinion and political party discourses (Carkoglu, 2017).

Since 2002, the state's unyielding support for top-down developmentalist projects has intensified under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. The institutional changes over the last decade have led to a super-presidential regime with excessive concentration of power (Sasmaz et al., 2022). The political centralization is accompanied by "authoritarian consolidation with increasingly frequent use of presidential decrees, government appropriation of key media groups, and repression of critical voices." (Soylemez-Karakoc and Angin, 2023: 13). Furthermore, through changing the legal framework, using the police and gendarmerie forces, and cooptation of court judges the resistances against developmentalist projects are uncompromisingly repressed (Kaçar and Güngör, 2016).

The AKP has also incorporated a discourse on achieving energy independence, which is directed towards the high-carbon energy generation sector, despite the promising potential of renewable energy sources in Turkey. The high-carbon energy generation has increased greenhouse gas emissions and exacerbated the impacts of climate change (Özkaynak et al., 2022). Furthermore, the essential role of extractivist energy generation within the neoliberal developmentalist and authoritarian framework has led to major tragedies, most notably the Some Mining Disaster of 2014 (Adaman et al., 2021). Moreover, some of the recently constructed hydroelectric dam projects have led to the major displacement of local people. For instance, with the construction of Ilisu Dam, more than 80.000 people had to move from their homes and workplaces in early 2020 (Tezcür et al., 2021). Similarly, the residents of Yusufeli were forced to leave their homes due to the Yusufeli Dam project completed in 2022 (Durur, 2023). Overall, the neglect of both environmental harm and the impact on local's lives has been exacerbated in correlation with the tenure and authoritarianization of the AKP government.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN TURKEY

Environmental activism, for the purpose of this article, refers to, on the one hand, establishing and utilizing environmental civil society organizations, including associations, Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS), and national environmental platforms; on the other hand, social movements that aim to preserve or improve the quality of the environment and raise public awareness of environmental issues (Adem, 2005; SGuin et al., 1998). These social movements can take many mobilization forms that "... include protesting, rallying, petitioning, educating the public, lobbying government and corporations, participating in direct actions such as blockades or participating in voluntary conservation..." (Fielding et al., 2008: 319; Kadirbeyoglu et al., 2017).

While the establishment of Turkish environmental civil society organizations dates back to the 1950s, they gained prominence only after the 1980s with the retreat of paternalistic and state-led developmentalism. However, in contrast to the neoliberal faith in strong and effective civil society and NGOs didn't materialize in the Turkish context (Aydın, 2005: 53–54). First, the post-coup transformation was enacted by the military regime in the first years of the 1980s, which repressed the vibrant civil society and criminalized any kind of political activism. Second, the continuation of top-down modernization and prioritization of economic development led to the utilization of the state's capacity to empower capital and disempower the NGOs that express critical opinions. Thus, despite the process of Europeanization, through which civil society organizations accessed resources, policy rights, legitimization, and networks, the effectiveness of the organizations has remained limited (Boşnak, 2016). Therefore, “most non-governmental organizations took the form of service, educational, social or cultural groups that were not oriented towards policy or advocacy work” (Ozler and Obach, 2018: 313). Perhaps, due to the policy and advocacy-oriented nature of ENGOS, their distribution among all registered associations is as low as 2.74% (See Table 1).

**Table.1: Distribution of Associations According to Their Activities (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2023)**

Subject	Percentage	Number
Professional Solidarity	37.67%	38378
Religious Services	17.62%	17954
Sports	7.08%	7212
Education	6.11%	6227
Humanitarian Aid	5.95%	6061
Art, Culture, and Tourism	5.84%	5949
Societal Values and Development	5.19%	5288
Environment and Animal Rights	2.74%	2791
Health	2.63%	2684
Miscellaneous	9.16%	9330

The ENGOS vary in terms of their activity, size, scope, ideology, degree of institutionalization, range of issues they address, and their external relations. While their common target of influence is the state, their “mode of interaction with the state can be collaborative, confrontational, or based on cooptation” based on the specific situation the organization faces (Kadirbeyoglu et al., 2017: 1725). The environmental organizations' effectiveness and interactions with the Turkish state depend on several factors. The degree of institutionalization matters; in order to participate in the national-level decision-making process, start-up

environmental CSOs need a higher level of institutionalization at the national level. If they remain as small-scale, grassroots, local mobilizations, they will have limited or no participation in decision-making. Predominantly, institutionalized environmental CSOs have also transformed into large-scale organizations growing away from grassroots efforts. Intuitively, the more these organizations expand, the more funding they need. Their funding sources vary, either from corporate donors or membership fees and individual donations. On the one hand, if they manage to obtain funding from corporate donors, they often engage less with politically contentious issues (e.g., World Wildlife Fund-Turkey). On the other hand, if they secure funding from membership fees and individual donations, they can tackle contentious problems (e.g., Greenpeace Mediterranean). In the end, the degree of politicization involved in environmental protests is likely to have an impact on both the choice of an issue(s) and funding decisions because certain issues cannot be effectively addressed without acknowledging the political environment and fundamental structures of the economy (Kadirbeyoglu et al., 2017).

In response to these various ENGOs, the Turkish state adopted a “critical engagement” approach, which means listening to them as long as it does not threaten the state's development strategy (Aydın, 2005: 60). To keep a legitimate position, the state builds a relationship with both ENGOs and even local protesters, but the attitude is often contradictory and inconsistent. It is in the best interest of the Turkish state to promote a democratic image and fulfill the criterion of working with civil society. However, the engagement with ENGOs does not lead to the incorporation of their scientific reports and policy proposals into actual decision-making, limiting the engagement to ‘participation on paper’ (Paker et al., 2013). According to an interview conducted by Paker et al., state inspections are utilized as a means of discouragement for environmental civil society organizations, including the Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion (TEMA), that express critical opinions (2013: 767). Furthermore, taking part in state projects can also lead ENGOs “to remain silent about state-endorsed activities that degraded the environment.” (Kadirbeyoglu et al., 2015: 1723).

The local mobilizations that resist an environmentally destructive development project are as important as the ENGOs and other more institutionalized forms. In contrast to ENGOs, these grievance-driven mobilizations have to engage with contentious issues, especially considering the state’s alignment with the projects. In many cases, the struggles are sustained for years and the issue is publicized at national and international levels. Some of them also resulted in effectively altering or stopping the progress of the projects, like in Gerze, while others were eventually dissolved or displaced, like in Hasankeyf. Nevertheless, local resistances bring together a diverse set of individuals and enable grassroots mobilizations. They also form alliances across Turkey with



towns from different regions and with different ethnic identities demonstrating solidarity (Hamsici, 2010).

Local environmental mobilizations also reflect broader state-society relations (Arsel et al., 2015). Because local mobilizations are over contentious issues and the structural political and economic imperatives are visibly top-down, the politicization of environmental protests with a more comprehensive agenda has always been a potential strategy (Çimrin and Candan, 2014). For instance, the Gezi Park protests of May-July 2013 began as a peaceful sit-in environmentalist protest to preserve a public park in Istanbul. It grew and evolved into a larger opposition movement against the government's increasingly authoritarian policies on basic rights to expression, freedom of speech, and other democratic rights. Furthermore, the protests united people from different economic, social, and political backgrounds, allowing them to get to know one another; and collectively raising a strong voice against a common source of grievances. The experience is invaluable as it was the first time in Turkey that environmental protests turned into a broader critical imagination with the participation of people from different walks of life (Özkaynak et al., 2015). However, from a purely pragmatic standpoint, the “tactical use of environmentalism as a disguise for anti-AKP political action can indeed form a barrier to the effectiveness of environmental social movements.” (Adaman et al., 2022: 216). The Gezi Park protests turned into a critical point in the authoritarianization process. In its aftermath, the AKP government repressed most expressions of environmental concern more harshly, used the delegitimizing discourse more frequently, and disempowered environmental social movements significantly as they proved their power to turn into a nationwide mobilization against the government (Adaman et al., 2022).

While the ENGOs and local resistance movements are conceptually distinct, they cooperate in many of the mobilizations against top-down developmentalist projects. While the ENGOs offer institutionalization, a long experience with sustaining social movements, and leadership, especially for legal activism, locals help the diffusion of the issue and increase participation in protests. Overall, both forms reveal similar dynamics of state-civil society relations and their deterioration in the last decade.

### **3. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS AND PARTISAN POLITICS**

Environmental activism faces significant challenges within the Turkish context, considering the strong consensus on developmentalism, the state-capital alignment backing the environmentally destructive projects, and historically diminished space for civil society organizations. These challenges, however, multiplied with the recent authoritarianization of the regime. Various state mechanisms are utilized for the repression of environmental movements, from

issuing decades-long prison sentences against peaceful protestors (e.g., Gerze) to the accusations “... of being separatists or betrayers of the fatherland.” (Knudsen, 2016: 305). While deep historical cleavages and the domination of identity politics have always created a challenge for forming broad alliances, the recent increase in polarization exacerbates the situation. Rising in relation to authoritarianization, the high polarization levels have paved the way for quick associations of environmental movements “as partisans simply doing the bidding of opposition forces” (Özler and Obach, 2018: 317). The list of accusations goes beyond the bidding of opposition forces and includes being politically directed (*siyasi tembihli*), terrorist, organized (*örgütlü*), anarchist, communist, and atheist (Knudsen, 2016: 308).

The consequences of top-down cooptation of environmental movements into divisive ethnic and party politics depend on the specific case. By looking at the dissolution of an anti-nuclear platform due to political, ethnic, and sectarian divisions in two towns of the Black Sea region, Knudsen concludes that “...environmental activism seldom remains purely ‘issue-based’...” and thus “...environmental conflicts in Turkey can only be understood within the context of national identity- and party-politics.” (Knudsen, 2016: 302). In these cases, the deliberate attempt of environmental organizations to avoid “over-politicization and polarization and instead adopt issue-based activism as *modus operandi*” has failed (Adem, 2005: 83). The Gerze case of anti-coal power plant mobilization illustrates a different strategy (Arsel et al., 2015). In this case, the local resistance that brought peasants, workers, and employers together cooperated with an ENGO that has left-wing political activism background (i.e., YEGEP). Therefore, the environmental protests involved a “combination of an anti-state, anti-capitalist stance for many activists” and “an opportunity for those with a history of left politics, violently repressed after 1980, to ‘get even’ with the state” (Arsel et al., 2015: 386, 375).

Importantly, framing environmental politics as above party politics should not be confused with the depoliticization of environmental civil society organizations. The latter refers to the “implicit or explicit acceptance of economic and political power structures that are shaped by market forces, private ownership, and capital accumulation, and for which no structural alternative is imagined.” (Kadirbeyoglu et. al., 2017). In contrast, the ‘above politics’ framing can be adopted as a strategy to protect the mobilization from dissolution in spite of awareness of the obvious role of the government and the current Turkish political economy in causing their struggle.

In light of this background, we analyze the local strategies involved in the Cerattepe protests of 2015-2016 against a mining project. The next section describes the original survey and interview data and the methods of analysis.

Then, we proceed to the case background with the discussion of the nature of Cerattepe/Artvin and the timetable of the Cerattepe mining project. In the findings and discussion section, we unpack and provide empirical evidence for the 'above politics' framing of protest participants. The conclusion lays out research limitations and identifies future research venues.

#### 4. DATA AND METHODS

The Cerattepe mining project refers to the extraction of gold and copper from a hill called Cerattepe in the city of Artvin in Turkey. The Cerattepe case is interesting and worthy of investigation for many reasons. First, Cerattepe is located next to the Hatila Valley national park. These parks are usually not subject to contestation and are conserved well in the global North. Second, it has a long and complex history of controversy, with periodic local mobilization extending over three decades. Third, in the Cerattepe case, the Green Artvin Association and locals adopt multiple tactics, such as organizing sit in and street protests, publicizing the issue in national and international media, participating in advisory committees, and filing lawsuits in their struggle against the environmental distractive mining project. Utilizing these multiple tactics by different actors illustrates the richness of local mobilization forms. Finally, while other local environmental resistance cases in Turkey had ethnic divisions and the prominence of ideological groups in facilitating the mobilizations, the Cerattepe case maintained an inclusionary framework for decades (Arsel et al., 2015; Tezcur et al., 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Because our study focuses on revealing patterns in strategies and framings of local protestors against the Cerattepe Mining Project, we rely on survey and interview data. We conducted an online survey with 253 residents of Artvin in January and February 2019. We distributed the survey link through the social media websites of the city and increased the sample size through snowball sampling. While the survey is helpful in exploring the local perceptions and framings of the protests, the non-randomized design of it prevents us from generalizing its findings to the entire population of protestors, as well as establishing significant relationships among our variables. Furthermore, our survey analysis remains limited in answering open-ended questions about how and why those patterns emerge. Thus, we complement the survey data with an elite interview, conducted with the head of the Green Artvin Association, Nur Neşe Karahan, in January 2023. The interview triangulates the survey findings as our interviewee is also a participant and even a leader of the protests. Conducting the interview much more recently than the survey helped us gain insights into the

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<sup>3</sup> Artvin is a diverse city in terms of ethnic groups including Turks, Georgians, Lazs, and Hemshins (Sunni Muslim Armenians). However, these ethnic groups did not turn into a separation against the Cerattepe project.

developments after the start of the project in 2017. Finally, we also use secondary interview data from the past scholarship.

In analyzing the survey data, we use descriptive statistics due to the explorative nature of the study. Table 2 presents a basic overview of the survey sample characteristics. The sample is fairly representative of the city population in terms of gender, income, and employment status but skewed towards younger (18-34 age group) and higher education levels (4-year college and Graduate level).

**Table.2: Characteristics of the Survey Respondents**

Characteristics	Group	Number	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	117	46.4
	Female	135	53.6
<b>Age</b>	<18	11	4.4
	18-34	144	56.9
	35-55	84	33.2
	>55	14	5.5
<b>Education</b>	Primary	2	0.8
	High School	56	22.1
	2-year College	47	18.6
	4-year College	121	47.8
	Graduate Level	27	10.7
<b>Income</b>	<2000	66	26.8
	2000-6000	145	59
	>6000	35	14.2
<b>Employment</b>	Working in the public sector	71	28.1
	Contracted workers in the public sector	20	7.9
	Working in the private sector	52	20.6
	Student	54	21.3
	Retired	13	5.1
	Self-employed	25	9.9
	Farmer	4	1.6
	Unemployed	14	5.5

The survey questions of this study have six different but interrelated themes. First, we started with demographic questions to identify the survey participants' gender, age, occupation, income, education level, and so on. Second, we measured the awareness of survey participants about the mining project and questioned if and how they took action to protest the project. By utilizing Yang and Ho's (2018) classification of grievance-driven environmental activism, we lay out different ways of environmental activism of survey respondents. Third, we posed questions related to the economic and environmental impacts of the mining project. Fourth, we asked about locals' expectations from their resistance to the mining project. Fifth, we also inquired about the political and ideological

perceptions of protests. Last, we measured the trust level of survey participants in the national government, local governments, and the operating company about the interests of the residents of Artvin.

## 5. THE CERATTEPE MINING PROJECT

The Cerattepe Mining Project has a contentious history that is marked by mobilizations, lawsuits, different licensed companies, contradictory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports, and conflicting court decisions. The mine site was constructed as early as the late 1980s, and the first drills of a Canadian company hit the mines in 1990. However, the mining project created a big public backlash, which extended the legal process of acquiring an operating license to extract gold and copper for decades. Thus, the case of Cerattepe displays a crucial example of extractive projects and counter-movements in Turkey, with a contested legal history and collective action responses. Table 3 demonstrates the complex and conflictual continuum of the Cerattepe project with many forms of environmental activism and legal inconsistency.

**Table.3: Chronology of Cerattepe Mining Project and the Protests**

Date	Event	Description
1988	Cominco's Operating License	Cominco, a Canadian company, was licensed for exploration in Cerattepe.
1990	Cominco's First Drill Hole	Cominco's drill hole hit the mine at the Cerattepe copper-gold deposit.
1994	Reported Death of Animals	Villagers around the drilling area started to report that some of their animals, such as cows and chickens, died. This is the first environmental consequence of the project.
1995	Green Artvin Association	The first ENGO was established against the Cerattepe mining project.
1997	1st Petition to the Ministry of Environment	8122 people, including Artvin representatives of all political parties, signed a petition against the mining project and handed it over to the Ministry of Environment.
1998	Suspension of the Project	Because of the public backlash, the Cerattepe mining project was suspended.
2002	Handover of the Operating License	Cominco transferred the operating license to another Canadian company, Inmet Mining.
2002	2nd Petition to the Ministry of Environment	Another petition was drafted to stop the project, and almost 10.000 people signed it. This petition was also handed over to the Ministry of Environment.
2005	1st Lawsuit against the Cerattepe Project	Green Artvin Association and Artvin Bar Association filed a lawsuit against the mining project. This is the first legal action against the mining project.

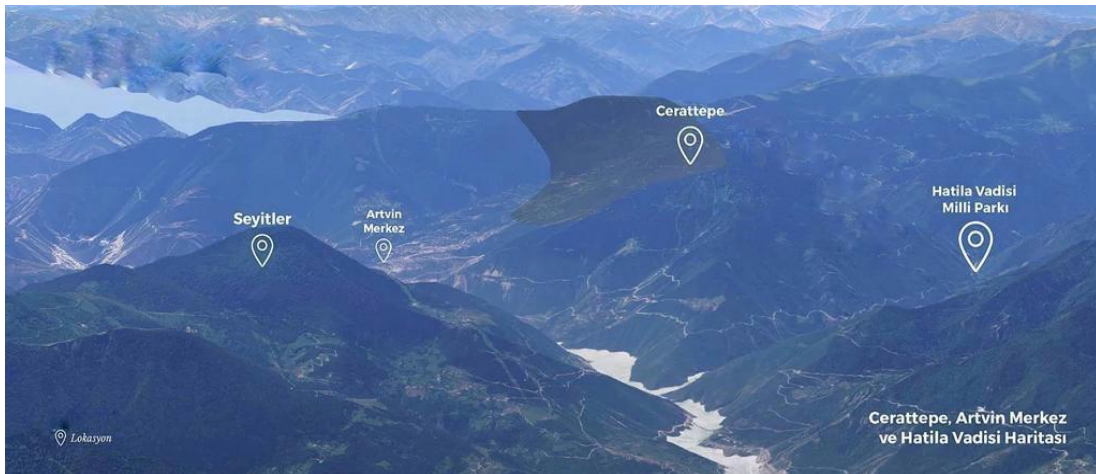
2005	The Court Decision	Erzurum Administrative Court suspended the execution of the operation of the project based on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report approved by the Ministry of Environment.
2008	Environment Committee of the Turkish Parliament	Turkish Parliament's environment committee conducted on-site research in Cerattepe and found the continuation of mining activities "worrisome."
2008	The Court Decision	Rize Administrative Court canceled the operating license of the Inmet mining company.
2011	Modification of the Mining Law	The Mining Law was modified, and the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources announced that contracting licenses for the Cerattepe gold and copper resources, along with 1,343 other mining sites, would be granted.
2012	Handover of the Operating License	The operating license was granted to the Ozaltın Construction company, but after a short time, the company transferred it to Etibakir Company, owned by Cengiz Holding.
2013	Protests of the Cerattepe Project	An estimated 10.000 people gathered in the city center to protest the new operating license.
2013	The EIA report was approved for the execution of the project	The Ministry of Environment approved the EIA report of Cengiz Holding on the Cerattepe mining project.
2013	2nd Lawsuit against the project	281 local people filed a lawsuit to cancel the favorable court decision on the EIA report of Cengiz Holding.
2014	Protests of the Cerattepe Project	The mining company tried to start cutting trees and transporting its equipment to the Cerattepe area, but the protesters blocked the roads that go to Cerattepe.
2015	The Court Decision	Rize Administrative Court annulled the Holding's EIA.
2015	Approval of the EIA report	The Holding submitted another EIA report with minor changes, and the report was approved in June 2015.
2015	Protests of the Cerattepe Project	To prevent Cengiz Holding's entrance into the area, locals stayed in a small wooden cottage to protect the area for 245 days until police intervened.
2015	3rd Lawsuit against the project	Artvin residents filed another lawsuit against the company. This is the biggest environmental legal case in Turkey, with 751 people and 61 attorneys.
2016	Use of Police Forces	Several thousand police officers were brought into the city center to allow Cengiz Holding to enter the mining area. Entry to and exit from the city center were banned from cutting support from nearby provinces.
2016	The PM met with Protesters	Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu hosted a delegation of protesters in Ankara and discussed the planned mine. He announced that mining activities would be suspended until the court decision.

2016	The President commented on the protests	President Recep Tayyip Erdogan slammed the protests as a "junior Gezi." He claimed that these kinds of protests had been planned from outside of Turkey.
2016	The Court Decision	Rize Administrative Court rejected the request for the cancellation of the project and allowed for mining activities in Cerattepe because the planned mining area is not located within Hatila Valley and any cultural preservation sites.
2017	Finalization of the Case and the beginning of extraction	The Council of State has upheld the decision of the Rize Administrative Court. Cengiz Holding has started to extract copper and gold from Cerattepe Hill with the protection of police and military forces.

**Source:** Authors summarized from the Green Artvin Association website.

The current project area is unique in terms of its exceptional biodiversity.<sup>4</sup> In Cerattepe Hill, there are 545 taxa and different kinds of plants, and 30 of them are endemic (Yang and Ho, 2018). Furthermore, Cerattepe Hill overlaps with a recreational and touristic place called "Artvin Kafkasör Area of Protecting and Developing Tourism" and locates next to the Hatila Valley National Park. The Hatila Valley was granted its national park status in 1992, as it has 57 endemic and 769 total taxa. This national park locates less than half a mile distance from Cerattepe Hill (Eminağaoğlu and Anşin, 2003, 2005).

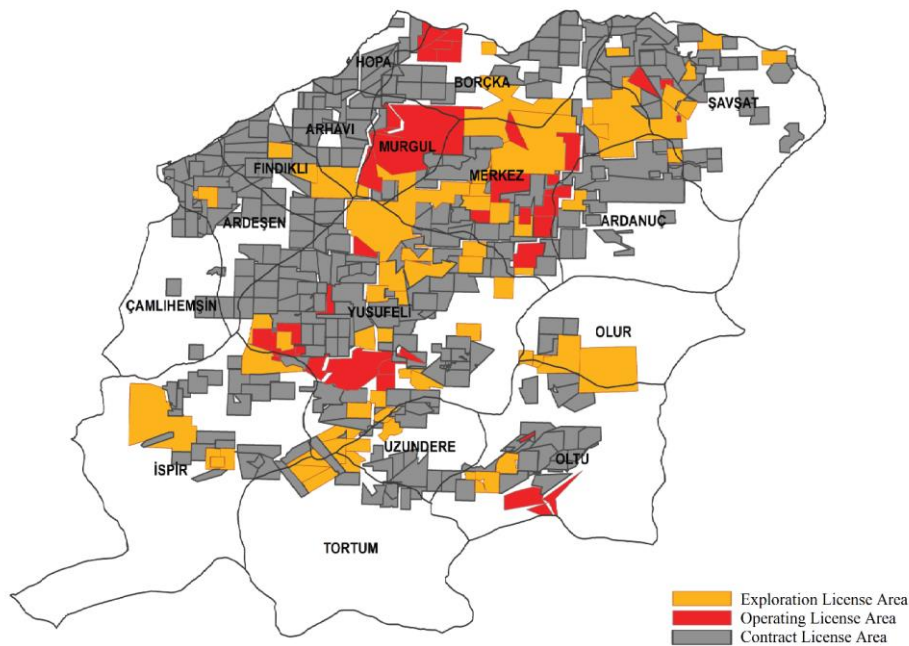
**Figure.1: Map of Cerattepe, Artvin City Center, and Hatila Valley (Akçagüner et al., 2015)**



<sup>4</sup> Cerattepe Hill locates in Artvin, a city in northeastern Turkey, called the Black Sea region, with a population of 34.537 (Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), 2022). Artvin is a unique area in terms of its fauna and flora diversity, as it is the only extension of the Caucasus ecosystem in Turkey. It hosts 2727 taxa, different kinds of plants, constituting 13% of Turkey's flora. Out of these taxa, 198 endemics, and 302 non-endemics are under the risk categories, according to the International Union for Conservation Nature (IUCN) (Eminağaoğlu, 2015: 82). The mining project is conducted within the central district of the city.

Furthermore, the mining project area locates between two water resources, Hatila Valley and the Genya water resources, that meet the water needs of the city center. In a report, the Chamber of Forest Engineers stated that the Genya water resource is vital for the city center, especially considering the water scarcity in the summer months (Gümüş et al., 2013). In addition, a court-demanded expert opinion report explains that it is absolutely certain that the underground and groundwater resources of the city will be polluted with heavy metals (Karadeniz et al., 2014). Therefore, Artvin residents are concerned about their health and safety being jeopardized by water pollution.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure.2: Distribution Map of Mining License Areas in Artvin and Its Surrounding (Tema Vakfi, 2021: 21)**



Despite these severe concerns, the majority of Artvin and its districts are approved for mining activities. The map above shows the distribution of mining license areas in Artvin and its surrounding (See Figure 2). In the map, the red stands for areas granted with operating licenses, which means the authorization certificate given to carry out mining operation activities in these certain areas. These red areas concentrate in the city center, Merkez, and the districts of Murgul and Yusufeli. Furthermore, the yellow areas which have the exploration license are authorized to carry out mining exploration activities. These yellow areas appear in almost all districts of Artvin. Finally, the gray points out the areas with

<sup>5</sup> Our interviewee, the head of the Green Artvin Association, explained that they tested the soil sample taken from Hatila National Park after the mining project started and they found high levels of arsenic, mercury and cyanide. However, the laboratory didn't sign the report after learning the soil sample is taken from the Cerattepe Hill.

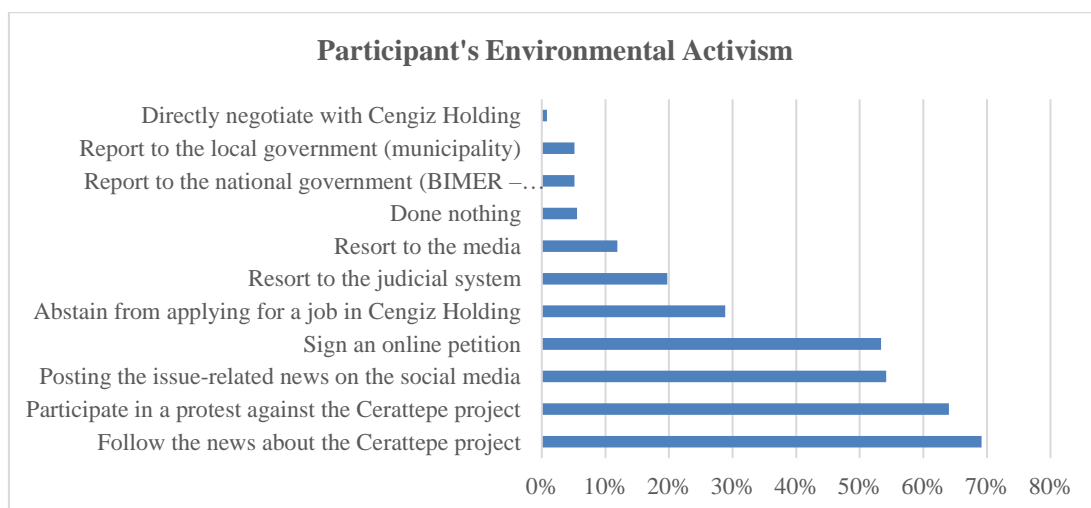


a contract license, which determines the coordinates of an area whose operation and exploration licenses are yet to be given to any company or organization. The prevalence of the gray areas indicates that the mining activities will continue to expand in Artvin city center and its districts. (Resmi Gazete, 2017; Tema Vakfi, 2020). When the areas with operation, exploration, and contract licenses are combined, 94% of the Artvin city center and 76% of the city with its districts are subjected to mining activities (Tema Vakfi, 2021).

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The survey results show that the overwhelming majority of residents have protested the Cerattepe Mining Project in more than one way. Figure 3 shows that 64% of the respondents actively participated in street protests, which is the most popular way of environmental activism in this sample. Furthermore, 53% of the respondents signed an online petition and 54% stated that they used social media to protest this mining project. Almost one-fifth of our survey respondents stated that they resort to the judicial system. This finding supports the timeline above that demonstrates several lawsuits about the Cerattepe Mining Project with locals' participation.

**Figure.3: Frequencies of Residents' Environmental Activism (n= 253)**



In contrast, reporting concerns to Cengiz Holding is negligible as the private companies usually do not negotiate their environmentally destructive projects with the locals. Similarly, only 5.14% of survey respondents expressed reporting their concerns to the local and national governments. The responses to trust-related questions might offer an explanation for the low percentage of engaging with the public or private authorities. For instance, when asked how much they trust Cengiz Holding's technical knowledge and capacity to minimize the environmental damage of the project, 90% of the participants responded "None at all." Similarly, when asked how much they trust the national and local

government's willingness and capacity to protect the environment and the interests of the residents, 80% and 73% of respondents said “none at all,” respectively. The skepticism of the respondents can be attributed to some of the long-lasting attitudes towards environmental movements mentioned above, including the state tradition of prioritizing economic growth at the expense of preserving nature and limiting the engagement with civil society organizations at the level of “participation on paper” (Paker et al., 2013). In our non-randomized sample, participation in the protests is at similar percentages across income levels, with 63% of low-income, 65% of the middle-income, and 60% of the high-income group participating in the protests. Therefore, among the participants in our research, there is a broad alliance of people with different income levels.

One of the most important findings of this analysis is that 82% of all respondents consider the Cerattepe mining protests as apolitical. Furthermore, 70% of them argued that there had been no ideological change in the protests, and they have always been apolitical. Considering that the protests are dispersed over a large period of time and the third quarter of all respondents expressed that they have known the issue of Cerattepe for more than three years, this consistent perception of protests as above party politics is particularly meaningful. This finding shows support for issue-based environmentalism, where the activism strictly focuses on the environmental consequences of a contested development project.

We also ask about the importance of attribution to various issues linked with the Cerattepe project. When we ask the participants to list the aspects of the project from the one that matters most to them to the one that matters the least, 36% of them put the “potential environmental impact” at the top of the list. 34% of the respondents think that the most important aspect of the issue is the lack of participation of the local residents in the process. These two issues are considered much more important than the intervention of the national government in the project (21%), the impacts of the project on the economy (6%), and Cengiz holding's actions (3%). These findings also support the idea that protestors are primarily concerned with the environmental implications and the exclusivity of the project conduct.

Finally, to understand the motivations of locals in participating in the 2015-2016 Cerattepe Protests, we asked the respondents to choose the most important goal that they wanted to achieve out of their mobilization. An overwhelming majority (68%) of the respondents chose ‘to end the mining project’ as the most important goal of their mobilization. One-fifth of the respondents chose ‘to minimize the environmental cost of the project’, whereas 12% aimed for a more participatory setting where the locals’ voices are heard. Most significantly, none of the respondents selected the option ‘to stand against the national government’

as the most important goal of their mobilization. This finding very clearly indicates that locals avoid turning their activism into broader opposition to the government.

Our interviewee, Nur Nese Karahan, the head of the Green Artvin Association, explained that keeping the protests above politics is a vital strategy to keep a broad alliance and continue the struggle as much as possible:

If any political party led these protests, there wouldn't be an Artvin left today. We have been calling the provincial chairman (*il baskani*) of all parties to invite them to our meetings for 28 years. We are not there to fight one another, we are there for the sake of Artvin. It is an issue for all of us. One time, we even thanked AKP provincial chairmanship (*il baskanligi*) for making a public statement on an issue related to Cerattepe in front of the governorship. ... In reality, keeping the Cerattepe protests above politics and as inclusive as possible is the most effective way. It might be the first and only one in Turkey where environmental protests achieve cross-party support.

Overall, both the survey and the interview data illustrate the deliberate avoidance of local protesters from creating a politicized movement-image. Engaging with partisan politics might fragmentize the broad alliance, undermine the legitimacy in public opinion, and most importantly, subject the ultimate issue of the environment to the shadows of party politics disputes. However, framing Cerattepe protests as above politics should not be confused with the depoliticization of environmental civil society organizations (Kadirbeyoglu et al., 2017). In contrast, our interviewee both explicitly acknowledges the systemic role of national political economy in the construction of top-down developmentalist projects, but still argue for framing their struggle as above-politics:

This is obviously a matter of politics. If there were a fair government and good policies, there would not be this much of a rentier economy that loots every environmental resource...

She also explains the implications of the recent transformation with excessive political centralization and concentration of power in local politics:

Until 2017, the local politicians of both AKP and MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) were participating in our activities and signing our petitions. Since then, there has been a shift in their behavior as they are much more concerned with the directives of the central government. We still tried to meet Erdogan when he visited for presidential campaigns to make a presentation with a map on the potential harms of the mining project. The mayor of the time, who was also from AKP, got scolded severely when he delivered our request to discuss Cerattepe. He ended up saying that he cannot do anything about Cerattepe anymore.

Contrary to the locals' perception of their activism, the government's portrayal of the protests is far from issue-based environmentalism. For instance, in February 2016, President Erdogan called the Cerattepe protests a "junior Gezi", and he claimed that the protests have an agenda beyond the environment:

They even themselves said that "Why don't you understand this? It is not about the trees!" They clearly expressed their intentions. With the support of our nation, our determined position prevented this provocation before it was too late. (CNN Türk, 2016; translated by the authors).

Therefore, we conceptualize the strategy of framing protests as above politics as a conscious resistance against external politicization, which can be defined as outside attempts to shape, provoke and manipulate local mobilization into positioning within national partisan politics (Knudsen, 2016). During our interview, Karahan emphasized that they achieved and maintained this inclusionary, non-polarized attitude for decades by establishing trust in the organization and the protestors: "We never exaggerated anything, never published a false, ungrounded report. Thus, we gained the trust of the people. Even workers of the mining project tell us that they know we only have good intentions."

Interestingly, the external politicization of the protests also happened through the opposition parties. For instance, a network analysis of social media use against the Cerattepe mining project finds that most tweets on the issue are from the accounts affiliated with the opposition party, CHP (Doğu, 2017). During our interview, Karahan explained that despite the prominent use of social media accounts to protest the project, some members of the Artvin CHP provincial office contracted business deals with Cengiz Holding after the project started. Therefore, the local resistance didn't seek the involvement of national political parties, as they did not consider alignment with partisan politics in their interest.

Overall, our findings suggest that in the case of Cerattepe, local protesters and the Green Artvin Association agree upon framing their resistance as 'above party politics' to both maintain broad support and their legitimacy. This strategy created a deliberate resistance against the external politicization by the incumbent government's manipulative and delegitimizing discourse and opposition parties' attempt to take the matter over for their political agenda. The emphasis on the 'above party politics' frame can be explained in the specific context of Turkish domestic politics, where the deep cleavages cause easy dissolution, direct confrontation with the state is consequential, and keeping a legitimate position often requires not engaging with partisan politics.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the local environmental resistance strategies against the Cerattepe mining project within a polarized society and an authoritarian setting. The survey data demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of the local protestors of 2015-2016 consider their resistance as issue-based environmental activism above party politics. Furthermore, we find a deliberate resistance against cooptation into partisan politics in the case of local protestors and the Green Artvin Association. We conceptualize this strategy as a measure against the external attempts to fragmentize and delegitimize local support. Thus, it is far from the concept of depoliticization, as our interview reveals an explicit acknowledgment of the government's role in the matter. We explain this nuanced approach with the specific political economic context of Turkey, including its strong, paternalistic state tradition, the superiority of a narrowly defined economic growth over all other issues, and a high level of polarization under an authoritarian regime. Within this framework, the Cerattepe case study reveals a unique juggling act in resisting an environmentally destructive mining project.

While this study points out the perceptions, motivations, strategies, and challenges of protesters against the Cerattepe mining project, it falls short of explaining the most recent factors of the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe inflation crisis of 2021-2022. Both of these factors undermined the mobilization, as the former was used as an excuse to ban the meetings of the Green Artvin Association, and the latter undermined the opposition to the project by forcing people to work for the mining company. Thus, future research can explore how an economic crisis and high unemployment rates impact local environmental activism and its strategies in Turkey.

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