



# Rescaling of spatial planning authorities in Türkiye: The case of Bağcılar square urban transformation project

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## Abstract

Neoliberal urban policies often tout decentralization, yet in Türkiye, they have paradoxically facilitated a renewed and intensified centralization of spatial planning under the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change (MEUCC). While Türkiye has a long-standing tradition of centralized planning, post-2011 reforms—particularly the establishment of the MEUCC—have significantly concentrated planning authority in the central government. Through a qualitative analysis of legal and institutional frameworks, judicial rulings, and the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project, this study reveals how ‘risk area’ designations are used to bypass participatory mechanisms and expedite the commodification of urban space. Extending Brenner’s state-rescaling framework, the article argues that Türkiye exemplifies a distinctive form of authoritarian neoliberal urbanization, in which regulatory instruments support capital accumulation while weakening democratic oversight. The findings underscore a global tension: while neoliberalism rhetorically promotes decentralization, neoliberal urbanization often relies on centralized state power to implement market-oriented urban transformation projects. The study concludes by interrogating the legitimacy of governance models that prioritize capital interests over equitable and inclusive urban development.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal urbanization, centralization, rescaling, spatial planning, urban governance, Bağcılar Square

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# Türkiye’de mekânsal planlama yetkilerinin yeniden ölçeklenmesi: Bağcılar meydanı kentsel dönüşüm projesi

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## Öz

Neoliberal kentsel politikalar genellikle adem-i merkeziyetçiliği öne çıkarırken, Türkiye’de paradoksal bir şekilde mekânsal planlama yetkilerinin Çevre, Şehircilik ve İklim Değişikliği Bakanlığı (ÇŞİDB) çatısı altında yeniden ve yoğun biçimde merkezileşmesine yol açmıştır. Türkiye, merkeziyetçi planlama geleneğine uzun süredir sahip olmakla birlikte, 2011 sonrası reformlar—özellikle ÇŞİDB’nin kurulması—planlama yetkisinin merkezi hükümette yoğunlaşmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, yasal ve kurumsal çerçevelerin, yargı kararlarının ve Bağcılar Meydanı Kentsel Dönüşüm Projesi’nin nitel analizi yoluyla, ‘riskli alan’ ilanlarının katılımcı mekanizmaları bertaraf etmek ve kentsel mekânın metalaşmasını hızlandırmak amacıyla nasıl kullanıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Brenner’in devletin yeniden ölçeklendirilmesi çerçevesini yeniden yorumlayan bu makale, Türkiye’nin, sermaye birikimini destekleyen ancak demokratik denetimi zayıflatan düzenleyici araçlarla işleyen otoriter neoliberal kentleşmenin özgün bir biçimini örneklediğini savunmaktadır. Bulgular küresel bir gerilimin altını çizmektedir: Neoliberalizm söylem düzeyinde yerelleşmeyi teşvik etse de, neoliberal kentleşme çoğu zaman piyasa odaklı kentsel dönüşüm projelerini hayata geçirmek için merkezi devlet gücüne dayanmaktadır. Çalışma, sermaye çıkarlarını önceleyen yönetim modellerinin, adil ve kapsayıcı kentleşme hedefleri karşısındaki meşruiyetini sorgulayarak sonlanmaktadır.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal kentleşme, merkezileşme, yeniden ölçeklenme, mekânsal planlama, Bağcılar Meydanı

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## Introduction

This article examines the recentralization of spatial planning authority in Türkiye's urban governance since the early 2010s. It addresses the question: How has the rescaling of spatial planning authorities influenced urban governance under neoliberal frameworks? The central argument is that Türkiye has undergone a renewed and intensified centralization of spatial planning powers, particularly following the establishment of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change (MEUCC) in 2011. This process prioritizes rapid urban commodification and capital accumulation, exemplified by the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative, interpretive case-study approach informed by critical urban theory and state-rescaling literature. The empirical focus of the study is the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project in Istanbul, selected as a paradigmatic example of centralized, authoritarian neoliberal urban policy in Türkiye. The case was chosen purposively due to its explicit demonstration of the interplay between institutional rescaling, exceptional legislation, and the commodification of urban space. Empirical material was collected through an extensive review of official urban planning documents, legal texts (including national laws, ministerial decrees, and judicial decisions), media archives, and relevant academic literature. The study does not seek to measure policy outcomes quantitatively; rather, it critically evaluates the mechanisms and political rationalities underlying authoritarian neoliberal governance. Thus, the methodological approach is aligned with the theoretical aim of exploring how state rescaling operates as a spatial-political strategy facilitating capital accumulation at the urban scale.

Building on Brenner's (2009, p. 127) argument that state rescaling serves as a political strategy to manage systemic crises in capitalist economies, this study discusses how decision-making powers across various levels of public institutions have become increasingly concentrated in the central government. This centralization enables the removal of barriers to investment in city-regions and metropolitan areas, aiming to address the persistent crises and failures of neoliberal policies in stabilizing markets. In Türkiye's urban context, this trend is evident in the expanded authority of the MEUCC, which has assumed a dominant

role in urban planning and development, exemplified by the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project.

The centralization of decision-making powers is closely tied to an economic growth strategy rooted in neoliberal policies that prioritize urban space as a tool for capital accumulation. Neoliberal pressures drive the commodification of urban space, pushing for its rapid marketization, monetization, and profitability. Mechanisms such as public oversight, bureaucratic and judicial processes, and stakeholder negotiation are often sidelined as obstacles to achieving these goals. To facilitate this process, significant legal and institutional changes have centralized planning authorities and land-use control within the central government, streamlining decision-making to meet neoliberal demands.

In this regard, the article initially explores what might seem to be a contradiction within neoliberal ideology—its inherent institutional, ideational and contextual flexibility and experimental nature. Specifically, it examines the tension between advocating for state withdrawal from the economic sphere and simultaneously relying on state intervention to enforce marketization processes. It then evaluates the MEUCC's expanding role in spatial planning, focusing on the transfer of planning powers from local governments to the central government, that is, the rescaling of spatial planning from local to national levels. The third section analyzes the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project as a case study of how the MEUCC has consolidated spatial planning authorities, particularly under Decree Law no. 644<sup>3</sup> and Law no. 6306<sup>4</sup>. The article concludes by discussing how the rescaling of spatial planning authorities reflects the centralized neoliberal urban policy regime, highlighting its broader implications for urban governance.

### **Neoliberal Urbanization and State Rescaling: A Theoretical Lens**

Since the late 1960s, capitalism has grappled with falling profit rates and the perceived inefficiencies of Keynesian welfare policies. Neoliberalism emerged as a political-economic response, first implemented under Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile and later adopted across the UK, US and

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<sup>3</sup> Decree Law on the Organization and Duties of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization.

<sup>4</sup> Law on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk.

other advanced economies (Bedirhanoğlu, 2009, p. 44; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009, p. 50). During the 1980s and 1990s, it spread globally through international financial institutions and reform packages imposed on the Global South and post-socialist regions (Golub, 2013; Jessop, 2002, p. 457).

Having become globally dominant since the early 1980s, neoliberal policies and programs were part of “a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey, 2005, p. 19). This project involved reducing state regulation in key industries, weakening labor unions, downsizing and/or privatizing public services, cutting welfare programs, boosting capital mobility, and heightening competition among localities, often marginalizing vulnerable urban populations (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 350). These policies and programs inevitably generate crises while limiting state intervention to enforce market expansion. To manage resulting conflicts, the state has been restructured into an elite-dominated, less democratic entity through legal and institutional changes (Bruff, 2014, p. 113; Harvey, 2005, p. 66).

As Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) emphasize, neoliberalization is not a singular or homogenous process. Rather, it is a variegated, path-dependent and context-specific transformation that assumes different institutional forms across time and space. These differences emerge from interactions between global neoliberal pressures and national/local political-institutional frameworks. Building on this, neoliberalization can also be seen as a project marked by historical contingency and ideological instrumentalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Rather than applying a fixed policy formula, it advances through flexible and adaptive practices that respond to crises, institutional legacies, and scalar struggles. This flexibility enables strong state interventions not as anomalies but as functional tools for restructuring governance in the service of market logics.

To better understand how these context-specific neoliberal trajectories unfold through distinct institutional mechanisms, Peck and Tickell’s (2002) concepts of roll-back and roll-out neoliberalization provide a useful analytical lens:

- The former involves a strategic withdrawal or reduction of the state’s role in social, economic, and regulatory functions. This process aims to dismantle existing institutional frameworks and weaken alternative power structures. It typically involves

removing bureaucratic controls, disciplining potential collective dissent, and restructuring power through deregulation, devolution, and privatization.

- The latter, on the other hand, marks an era characterized by active state-building, regulatory reforms, and the consolidation of neoliberal governance that blends neoliberal economic management with authoritarian state forms. This process encompasses public-private initiatives and socially interventionist policies, supporting state interference and public spending in response to the failures of earlier roll-back neoliberalization. These adaptations, driven both by internal contradictions and external pressures, reflect not a linear progression but a pattern of ongoing crises and pragmatic adjustments—what Peck (2010, p. 23) call a series of “forward failures”.

These processes have also been accompanied by the changes in neoliberalism’s scalar constitution through the enforcement of the rules of the neoliberal game by supranational institutions on the one hand and the devolution of responsibilities, resources, and risks to local governments (especially on a metropolitan scale) on the other (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 391). This led to the emergence of a post-national, multiscale regulatory framework characterized by the coexistence of various scales, including supranational, national and local levels. In urban contexts, this has led to the prioritization of metropolitan regions as key nodes for global capital flows, reinforcing interurban competition (Brenner, 2004; Savaşkan, 2015, p. 50).

Consequently, metropolitan administrative structures have been stripped of the central government’s mandate and endowed with powers and responsibilities, often without the necessary financial support, pushing cities into a competitive mode (Beauregard, 2006, pp. 416-417). This shift, termed “centralized decentralization” by Andersen (2008), is based on the assumption that empowering these authorities enhances the efficient allocation of public resources while strengthening the core tenets of democratic governance. Such a devolution refers to the rescaling of state at the subnational layers of government, as it involves a redistribution of authority to metropolitan and regional level (Bayırbağ, 2013, p. 1226). However, the scalar aspect of neoliberalism is far from uniform. In non-Western contexts, the rescaling of the state in accordance with neoliberal policies does not necessarily lead to the empowerment of local

governments; in fact, it may even result in the reinforcement of central government power (Savaşkan, 2021, p. 206).

In fact, central governments with their unique resources (such as robust budgets, extensive organization and personnel, exceptional powers, access to mass media, democratic legitimacy, and monopoly on force) remain a central site for political and social demands (Della Sala, 2001, p. 157; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000, p. 151). They play a pivotal role in suturing the multi-level governance network across sectors and scales (Hirst & Thompson, 1995, p. 423). In particular, the capacity of central governments, reinforced by a strong executive and administrative structure, to mobilize resources and coordinate actors from diverse sectors and scales allows them to significantly influence and become embedded in governance processes (Bayırbağ & Göksel, 2013, p. 168; Şahin, 2018, pp. 6-7).

This influence is especially apparent in the central governments' ability to establish supranational action and coordination and to drive subnational restructuring through the decisions they take, the laws they enact, and the hegemony they organize (Eroğlu & Tunç, 2018, p. 29). Owing to this, they become increasingly active within localized contexts and across multiple scales to foster economic growth, tailoring their strategies to the unique circumstances of each place and scale (Martin, 2006, p. 113). In line with the flexible and experimental nature of neoliberalism, these place- and scale-sensitive approaches may, over time, give way to more standardized or centralizing tendencies, particularly in pursuit of capital accumulation, often at the expense of disregarding the qualities of space (Şahin, 2018, p. 3).

This reflects a shift away from the Keynesian approach of addressing spatial socioeconomic challenges, which aimed to promote balanced regional development, toward a tolerance—or even encouragement—of uneven development between competitive and non-competitive city-regions. Thus, state rescaling, as Bayırbağ (2013, p. 1226) observes, is a contentious process, often generating more policy challenges, disrupting established interest groups and networks, and reembedding the power relations between and within classes into the spatial organization of the capitalist state.

In cities, the transition from Keynesian approach to a neoliberal one manifests through the commodification of urban space, privatization of public services, and the reorganization of governance structures (Harvey, 2003). The neoliberal critiques of the Keynesian welfare state's localized structures as overly bureaucratic and inefficient led to the adoption of new

municipal administration models focused on budgetary control, simplified administration, privatized service delivery, and new public management practices (Brenner, 2004, p. 200). These changes, driven by fiscal pressures, have intensified the privatization of urban services and the commodification of urban space.

Simultaneously, globalization has eroded national barriers to trade and investment, forcing cities to restructure themselves to enhance international competitiveness and attract foreign capital (Brenner, 2004, p. 217). Thus, the commodification of urban areas and their rapid integration into the market has been facilitated. However, mechanisms such as participatory decision-making, public accountability, and judicial review are often viewed as impediments to the swift marketization and interurban competition demanded by this new paradigm (Rosa, 2009, p. 102). To circumvent these perceived obstacles, legal and institutional reforms have been implemented, dismantling participatory processes and advancing centralized, often coercive governance practices (Bayırbağ & Penpecioglu, 2017).

Spatial planning has become a key tool for central governments to integrate urban areas into global markets and enhance the competitiveness of their key local economies. For example, central governments in Italy, France, and Britain, have implemented place- and scale-specific policy initiatives to enhance the global economic competitiveness of cities like Milan, Paris, and London (Brenner, 2004). This trend reflects a centralization of spatial planning authorities at higher levels of government. In this context, it is evident that state rescaling and the scaling of urban policies often operate in tension.

Urban policies serving as an instrument of central governments and aiming to facilitate rent distribution through simplified legal and institutional structure may lead to unintended outcomes. While legal and institutional regulations in spatial planning aim to prevent conflicts of authority and promote holism and integration, they may inadvertently encourage piecemeal and short-term interventions due to competing interests (Şahin, 2018, p. 9). These trends of centralizing spatial planning authorities and fostering piecemeal and short-term spatial interventions are also evident in Türkiye, where neoliberal urban transformation policies have reshaped the legal and institutional framework—a dynamic that will be explored in the next section.



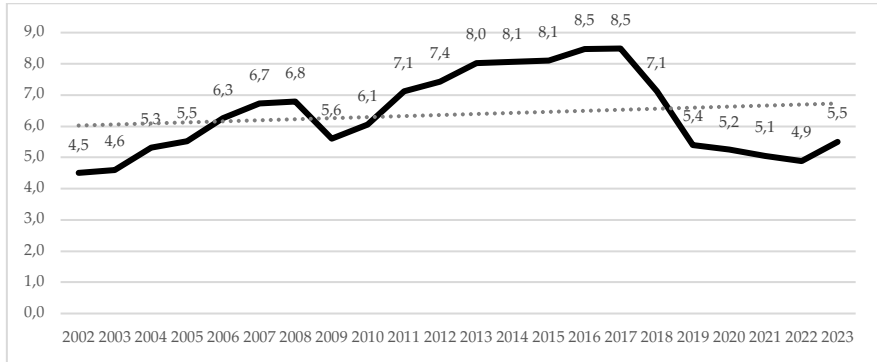
## **Regulatory and Institutional Machinery of Urban Transformation in Türkiye**

The regulatory and institutional machinery of urban transformation in Türkiye has been shaped by successive waves of neoliberalization—initiated by the liberalization reforms of the 1980s, intensified by the construction-led growth of the 2000s, and consolidated through the authoritarian restructuring of the 2010s. While all three waves constitute critical moments in Türkiye’s broader neoliberal trajectory, the following analysis focuses specifically on the second and third phases, which have had the most direct and transformative impact on the legal frameworks and institutional capacities underpinning contemporary urban transformation.

Urban transformation in Türkiye began as a government policy in 2004, following the establishment of a legal and institutional framework. Prior to this, economic crises, high budget deficits, and political instability in the 1990s hindered large-scale transformation projects. The Justice and Development Party (JDP), which came to power in 2002 after a major earthquake in 1999 and economic crash in 2001, prioritized economic recovery and growth. Between 2002 and 2012, Türkiye experienced rapid economic growth, with GDP increasing by an average of 6.5 percent annually, and per capita income tripling. This period saw significant financialization, increased foreign investment, and a boom in the construction and real estate sectors, driven by favorable global economic conditions and domestic reforms (Kuyucu, 2022, pp. 138-139).

The construction sector became a key driver of economic growth, with a surge in building permits, mortgages, and foreign investment in real estate (Kuyucu, 2022, pp. 139). Orhangazi and Yeldan (2021, pp. 476-477) identify three mechanisms that led to the rapid expansion of construction activities in Türkiye in the 2000s. First, urban migration driven by the decline of agriculture and the 1999 earthquake’s emphasis on unsafe housing increased demand for housing and infrastructure. Second, stable inflation and financial expansion enabled long-term housing loans, fueling speculative housing bubbles. Finally, state-led investment strategies, including large-scale public construction projects and the transformation of the Mass Housing Administration (MHA) into a key contracting agency, became the primary driver of construction-centered

growth. This was further reinforced by the growing influence of the MEUCC, which became particularly prominent after its establishment in 2011 and ultimately gained direct oversight of MHA in 2018.



**Figure 1:** The share of the construction sector in the GDP of Türkiye (%), 2002-2023 (Turkstat, 2024)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the share of the construction sector in Türkiye's GDP between 2002 and 2023 fluctuated significantly, reflecting economic cycles and corresponding shifts in governmental spatial planning strategies. After initially expanding substantially during the early period of AKP rule, the sector faced sharp declines due to the 2008 global financial crisis. The government responded by selectively recentralizing spatial planning authorities—especially via legislative interventions such as Law no. 6306 (2012) and Decree Law no. 644 (2011)—to stimulate construction-led economic recovery.

However, after 2012, the economy began to slow due to reduced foreign capital inflows, currency depreciation, and global economic challenges. To mitigate the economic, political and social fallout of the impending economic crisis, the JDP-led government initiated a series of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as new bridges, airports, and residential developments, bypassing local governments (Kuyucu, 2022, pp. 140-141). Despite the adverse impacts of internal and external shocks (e.g. the 2008 global financial crisis, geopolitical risks, 2016 coup attempt, etc.) on the construction sector, its share of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) almost doubled between 2002 and 2017 (see again Figure 1), owing to the government's response to economic downturns through the selective rescaling of the state – i.e.

decentralization and/or centralization of spatial planning authorities to attract capital investments to urban areas.

Over the past two decades, Türkiye's spatial planning system has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting a process of state rescaling characterized by the redistribution of authority and decision-making power between central and local governments. Since the early 2000s, the JDP government has spearheaded this transformation through a series of legal and institutional reforms designed to restructure urban governance and strengthen the state's capacity to manage urban development. These reforms have resulted in a multi-tiered local government structure, comprising district, provincial, and town municipalities (first-tier municipalities have been abolished) (Şahin, 2018, p. 11).

However, Law no. 5216 (2004) stands out as a key intervention, significantly expanding the spatial planning powers of metropolitan municipalities at the expense of other municipalities. This law broadened their planning jurisdictions and granted them planning authority for all types and scales of urban development. In other words, metropolitan municipalities have gained the ability to develop plans at both a comprehensive scale, where development rents can be organized, and a detailed scale, where rent maximization can be achieved (Şahin, 2018, pp. 11-12).

Additionally, the JDP-led government introduced numerous instruments to expedite the implementation of urban policies related to the privatization of urban space and the deregulation of spatial planning regulations (Kayasü & Yetişkul, 2014, p. 212). It established a comprehensive legal framework for urban transformation. Key legislation included a location-specific law (numbered 5104) passed in 2004 enabling a transformation project in Ankara, another law (numbered 5366) passed in the same year authorizing municipalities to implement transformation projects in areas under historical and cultural conservation", and the new Municipality Law (numbered 5393) passed in 2005 granting municipalities the authority to designate "transformation zones" (Kuyucu, 2022, pp. 142-143). The 2010 amendments to the Municipality Law (through Law no. 5998) transferred nearly all authority over transformation zones from district to metropolitan municipalities, thereby mitigating potential inter-municipal conflicts (Tarakçı & Türk, 2021, p. 421).

The roll-out neoliberalization combined with Türkiye's centralized administrative structure, has facilitated the reconfiguration of spatial planning authorities, characterized by the centralization of decision-making powers in the late 2000s. According to Şahin (2018, p. 14), one of the reasons for the centralization of spatial planning authorities is the competition and occasional tension between local actors and the central government. In particular, the influential role of mayors in making key decisions regarding urban development has been perceived as a threat by central government actors. Additionally, despite being granted extended authority over issues such as local service provision, housing production, and urban infrastructure, local governments have been criticized for failing to meet expectations.

The other reason is the concern to intervene in urban space more directly, through central government institutions such as the Privatization Administration and the Mass Housing Administration, rather than through piecemeal interventions by local governments. These institutions, which have access to the central government's resources, have gradually acquired spatial planning authority, thereby overcoming regulatory obstacles related to urban planning legislation that previously hindered the use of these resources at the local level. The central government's strategy here prioritizes attracting capital investment, stimulating built environment production, privatizing urban space, and improving urban services (Şahin, 2018, p. 14).

A key reform was the restructuring of the MHA, established in 1984 as a credit provider for housing production, into a powerful land broker and housing developer with significant financial resources and planning authority. The MHA was authorized to partner with private developers to fund social housing through for-profit projects. It became the primary actor in urban transformation, assuming planning and construction responsibilities in designated "transformation zones". It also became an exceptional public institution as its operations, including budgetary and decision-making processes, were removed from standard regulatory and political oversight (Kuyucu 2022, p. 141; Özdemir 2011, pp. 1106-1107).

Following the national elections in 2011, the JDP-led government received to pass decree laws and introduced significant changes to Türkiye's legal and institutional frameworks, particularly in the reorganization of spatial planning powers. These changes were implemented swiftly and with minimal public consultation, excluding key

stakeholders such as public institutions, civil society organizations, professional chambers, and opposition parties. This exclusion was further compounded by the use of decree laws, which circumvented parliamentary committee discussions and general assembly debates, raising significant concerns about the erosion of democratic oversight and accountability, as critical decision-making processes were removed from public scrutiny.

Through these legislative and institutional changes, the authority of central government institutions was significantly expanded to encompass urban planning, the development of conservation areas, and urban transformation of designated high-disaster-risk zones (Penpecioglu, 2013, p. 170). Decree Law no. 644 of 2011, which established the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization<sup>5</sup> as an authority-concentrating ministry with comprehensive jurisdiction over spatial planning at all scales nationwide, underscores this shift and reflects the broader process of state rescaling in Türkiye. Despite the broad urban planning powers already vested in the ministry by Law no. 3194 (on zoning), this decree further consolidated urban planning and transformation authority at the central level. As Ersoy (2011, p. 4) notes, this centralization of authority represents a historical peak in Türkiye's 160-year planning history, marking a significant departure from previous practices.

Following its establishment, the ministry adopted a top-down approach to declare urban transformation areas across the country, rapidly evolving into a centralized neoliberal mechanism for direct state intervention in urban spaces. This change was further highlighted during the JDP's 2011 national election campaign, where then Prime Minister Erdoğan pledged large-scale urban projects—famously termed 'crazy projects'—in nearly every city he visited. In İstanbul and other cities, these ambitious initiatives have frequently bypassed local governments, relegating them to executive roles and leading to centralized decision-making that sparked debates about political representation (Eroğlu & Tunç, 2018, p 32; Kuyucu, 2017, p. 62).

These projects also signaled a shift toward a construction-driven economic growth model, facilitated by exceptional public authorities like the MEUCC, which were granted extraordinary powers to integrate new conservative elites into urban development schemes (Şahin, 2019 pp. 607-

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<sup>5 5</sup> The Ministry was renamed the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change (MEUCC) in 2021.

608). Thus, state rescaling in Türkiye can also be interpreted as an administrative process rooted in class dynamics, where the centralization of power serves the interests of dominant economic and political elites, reinforcing their control over urban development and resource allocation (Bayırbağ, 2010).

On the other hand, Law no. 6306 (on the Renewal of Areas Under Disaster Risk), enacted in 2012, represents a significant shift in Türkiye's approach to urban renewal. Introduced in response to the slow progress of urban transformation projects and the 2011 earthquake in eastern Türkiye, the law aims to address disaster risks by enabling the rapid demolition and reconstruction of substandard buildings. However, it has been highly controversial due to its centralized, top-down approach and its implications for property rights, local governance, and urban planning.

The law designated the Council of Ministers (later the Presidency after the 2018 transition to the presidential system) as the sole authority to identify risk areas and transferred significant planning and implementation power from municipalities to the MEUCC, further centralizing decision-making and reducing local autonomy. The centralized control enabled the ministry to designate disaster risk areas, approve plans, and oversee projects, frequently bypassing local governments and upper-scale plans (Tarakçı & Türk, 2021, p. 422). In addition, the law introduced plot-based rebuilding, a shift in urban transformation policy from comprehensive block-based plans to individual plot redevelopment (Kuyucu, 2022, p. 143).

However, the law has faced criticism on several fronts. It grants the ministry broad discretion to designate reserve areas, often without clear scientific or technical criteria, leading to legal disputes and accusations of arbitrariness (Güzey, 2016, p. 44; Özden, 2016, p. 291). The provision allowing for forced sale of properties (with a two-thirds owner agreement) raises concerns about potential violations of constitutional property rights, especially for dissenting owners (Kahraman, 2021, p. 221). Moreover, the law's imposition of infrastructure and social facility costs on property owners disproportionately affects low-income residents, raising social justice concerns (Aldemir & Doğan, 2015, p. 507).

In 2018, Türkiye transitioned to presidential system, which further centralized authority over urbanization and spatial planning. A concern with aligning decisions with the Presidency is palpable in the actions of both ministries and municipalities affiliated with the ruling JDP. This influence is particularly evident in the formulation of policy frameworks

for issues such as urbanization (Şahin, 2018, p. 19). This shift was accompanied by the announcement of highly standardized, top-down urban projects ahead of the 2018 presidential elections. During the election campaign, for instance, President Erdoğan introduced the concept of 'Nation's Garden' (*Millet Bahçesi*) and 'Nation's Coffee House' (*Millet Kırathanesi*), standardized urban facilities intended to address the lack of green spaces and social amenities in Turkish cities. The other initiative was the urban development amnesty (*imar barışı*), which granted legal status to all unauthorized buildings across the country, effectively bypassing existing planning regulations. Therefore, this centralization tendency in urban development, indicative of ongoing state rescaling, diminishes local control over urban space and reinforces the central government's dominance over established planning processes (Şahin, 2019, p. 611).

Following the devastating February 2023 earthquakes in southern Türkiye, significant administrative and legislative changes were implemented in late 2023. Presidential Decree no. 153 established the Urban Transformation Presidency under the MEUCC. to carry out urban transformation practices in areas under disaster risk and in lands and plots with risky buildings outside these areas. This new body is responsible for urban transformation in both designated disaster-risk areas and on individual properties with risky buildings.

The establishment of this administratively and financially independent entity has drawn criticism. Concerns have been raised about reduced public oversight due to its special budget and the restriction of local government powers, contravening the principle of subsidiarity. Critics also point to the broad powers granted to the Presidency in transformation implementation and financial resource creation, arguing that it has been designed as a privileged administrative structure with excessive authority (Karakuş-Candan, 2023).

Moreover, Law no. 7471 introduced amendments to Law no. 6306. These changes further strengthened the ministry's powers under the latter. The amendments allow for the designation of virtually any area as a reserve, facilitating property expropriation. The reduction in required property owner consent to a simple majority further undermines property rights. Moreover, the expedited legal processes and shortened notification periods limit public participation, prioritizing administrative efficiency over citizen rights.

In conclusion, the MEUCC's ascendance as a dominant force in Türkiye's spatial planning is a clear manifestation of state rescaling, its power having grown substantially since 2011 through comprehensive legal regulations. This expansion, reallocating authority from local governments to central institutions like the MEUCC, is ostensibly driven by the need to streamline urban transformation and manage disaster risks. However, the actual outcomes include the erosion of local governance, diminished public participation, and the prioritization of rent generation over equitable urban development. The continuing nature of this centralization trend is evident in recent amendments to Law no. 6306 and the establishment of the Urban Transformation Presidency. In that regard, the next section's analysis of the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project will further illuminate the MEUCC's pervasive influence and its impact on urban development in İstanbul.

### **The Case of Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project**

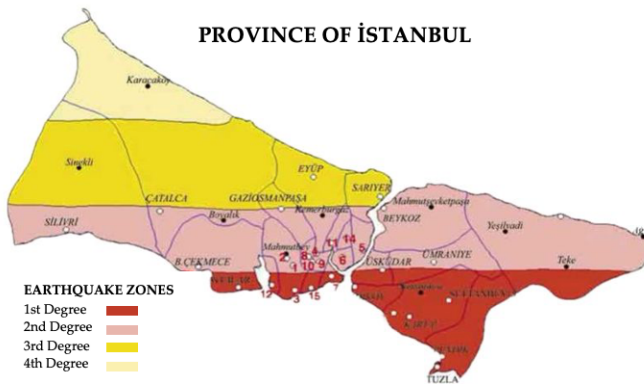
Bağcılar is a district located within the administrative borders of İstanbul Province. It is located in the central part of İstanbul's European side. It is bordered by Başakşehir to the north, Küçükçekmece to the west, Bahçelievler to the south, and Esenler and Güngören to the east (Figure 2). Historically a rural village known for its vineyards and gardens until the 1950s, Bağcılar underwent rapid urbanization in the 1960s with the emergence of squatter settlements (*gecekondu*). By the 1980s, aided by urban development amnesties, it transformed into a densely populated urban district dominated by 5-6 story apartment buildings (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, pp. 2-3). Additionally, Bağcılar has undergone significant urban transformation since the 2000s, with industrial sites being replaced by residential and commercial projects (Sarp, Temurçin, & Aldırmaz, 2019, p. 105).





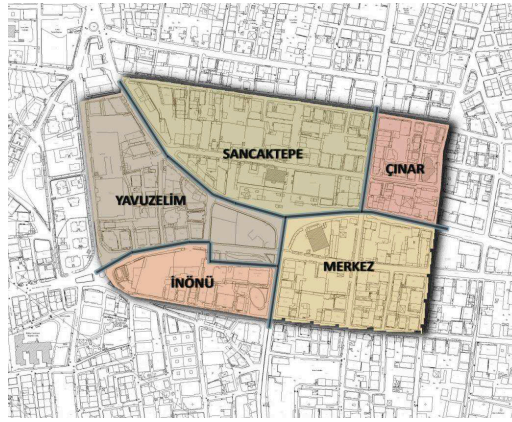
**Figure 2:** Location of Bağcılar in İstanbul (Bağcılar Municipality, 2016)

In June 2013, the Bağcılar Municipality officially announced the initiation of the project titled “Bağcılar Square: Transformation Project for Disaster Risk Areas in Bağcılar District – Bağcılar Center”. According to the municipality, the area in question, recognized as one of the oldest settlement areas within the district, exhibits irregular and substandard construction practices. The municipality has also pointed out that the residential areas of the district fall within 1<sup>st</sup> degree and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree earthquake zones (Figure 3), emphasizing that most of the buildings were constructed before the 1999 Marmara Earthquake and are therefore vulnerable to seismic risks. It also identified issues related to shared ownership that complicate the property landscape.



**Figure 3:** The earthquake zone map for İstanbul – The district of Bağcılar is indicated by the number 2 (Gencoğlu, Özmen, & Güler, 1996).

Additionally, the municipality's planning decision covering the area of Bağcılar Square was annulled by the İstanbul Administrative Court in 2011 (Case no. 2009/944), leaving the relevant area unplanned. The reason for this is the closure of the intersection arrangement in the area following the opening of the Bağcılar metro station, which transformed the area into a large square, thereby necessitating a complete redesign. Furthermore, the municipality emphasized the need for urban redesign due to the area's role as a critical junction for both pedestrian and vehicular access (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, p. 130).



**Figure 4:** Location of the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Area (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, p. 6).

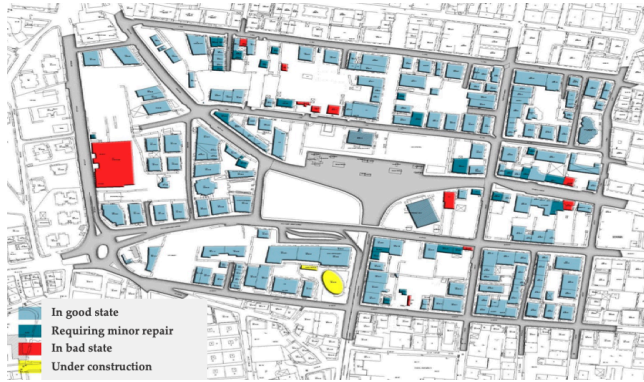
On these grounds, Bağcılar Municipality requested the MEUCC to designate a 22-hectare area within the borders of Çınar, İnönü, Sancaktepe, Yavuzselim and Merkez neighborhoods as a risk area (Figure 4). Consequently, after receiving consideration from the Disaster and Emergency Management Administration, the ministry submitted this request to the Council of Ministers. Based on this submission, the Council of Ministers officially declared the area as risky on August 1, 2013, under Law no. 6306. In response, Bağcılar Municipality has prepared amendments to the 1/5000 scale master development plan and 1/1000 scale implementation development plan for the Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project. The MEUCC approved these amendments based on the authority granted by Decree Law no. 644. Following the annulment of the plan amendment by the judiciary, the designation of Bağcılar Square as a risk area by the Council of Ministers and the transfer of

planning authority over the square to the MEUCC reflect the government's attempt to overcome judicial obstacles to urban transformation projects through state rescaling.

This shift from municipal to ministerial authority exemplifies Brenner's state rescaling in its distinctly Turkish form—not a redistribution of powers across new scales, but a deliberate concentration of planning authority within the central state. The MEUCC's direct intervention, enabled by its expanded mandate under Decree Law no. 644, demonstrates how spatial planning has been rescaled upward, hollowing out local decision-making capacity.

In 2015, property owners in the area, including those with houses and workplaces, filed a lawsuit with the Council of State, seeking a stay of execution and the annulment of the risk area declaration and the plan amendments. The plaintiffs argued that the designation of the area as risky lacked concrete evidence, that there was no assessment proving the buildings were unsafe for life and property, and that the actions taken were inconsistent with urban planning principles. They also raised that the designation of Bağcılar Square, an area of interest for construction companies, as a risk area will primarily serve to increase urban land value and generate high returns for business and commercial circles, rather than prioritizing public interest. Finally, they asserted that the proposed plans, which disregard the realities of the region and the needs of residents and business owners, result in a 60 percent loss of development rights, ultimately disadvantaging many in the community. In response, the defendant, the MEUCC, maintained that all actions related to the area were in compliance with the law, in addition to the above ground put forward by Bağcılar Municipality (Expert Report, 2017, pp. 32-34).

The expert report prepared by a geologist, a civil engineer, and an urban planner as part of the lawsuit concludes that the classification of the 22-hectare area as a "risk area" is not supported by sufficient evidence regarding ground structure, building conditions, or earthquake risk. While the redevelopment of Bağcılar Square, particularly for metro construction, is a valid objective, using the "risk area" designation as a tool for urban transformation is inappropriate. For instance, the area map included in the municipality's plan justification report indicates that 80% of the 178 buildings in the area are classified as "in good state", contradicting claims of structural risk (Figure 5).



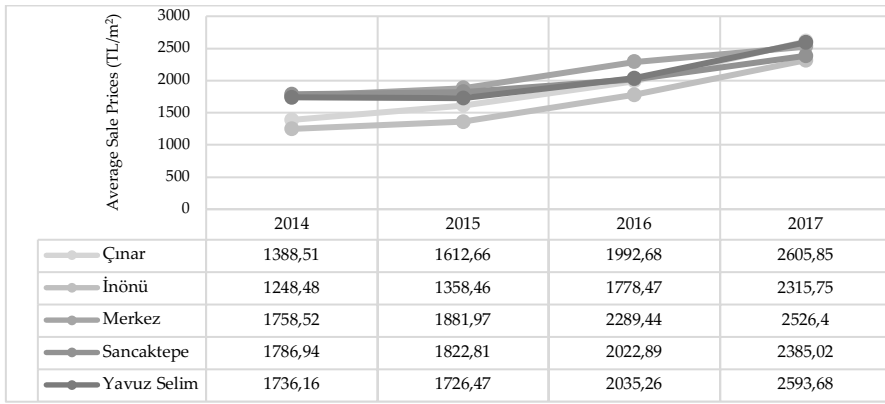
**Figure 5:** Building qualifications in the area (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, p. 87)

Considering that Bağcılar district is entirely located within the first and second-degree seismic zone, the technical and objective basis for declaring only 2 percent of the district as a “risk area” is unclear. The declaration of this area as risky appears to be a means to facilitate urban transformation rather than an evidence-based necessity. The proposed plan neglects necessary participatory processes (e.g., public opinion polls, meetings and workshops), fails to clarify the relocation of property owners, and creates ambiguity about compensating for lost development rights. This vagueness created legal and spatial uncertainty for property owners and effectively sidelined them from benefitting from the project. Many residents found their ability to claim or negotiate development rights severely diminished, rather than securing their rights or claiming a stake in the redevelopment process. Overall, the plan is deemed inconsistent with planning principles and urban planning standards (Expert Report, 2017, pp. 54-56).

The Council of State, in its decision, referred to the protection of property rights under both the Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. The ruling underscored that any restriction of property rights must be justified by the public interest. Moreover, the Council of State noted the absence of any technical or scientific report indicating that the area and the buildings within it were at risk. In light of this, the Supreme Court deemed the complainants’ objections as legitimate, citing the lack of concrete evidence, and issued a stay of execution for the risk area decision and development plans in February 2016 (Hürriyet, 2016).

The legitimacy of implementing this urban transformation project is questionable, as the designation of the risk area was not supported by

technical or scientific reports. Consequently, it cannot be asserted that the safety of life and property is at risk or that the project serves the public interest. Even if the project is deemed necessary for the reasons previously mentioned, public institutions are expected to adhere to established procedures when making spatial plans or plan amendments. Typically, such amendments should be made through local government decision-making bodies, like municipal councils. However, the MEUCC played a central role in the spatial planning process—from the announcement of the risk area to the approval of plan amendments—based on the authority granted by Law no. 6306 and Decree Law no. 644.



**Figure 6:** Average sale prices of real estates in Bağcılar's five neighborhoods (TL/m<sup>2</sup>), 2014-2017 (Zingat.com, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2018e)

Bağcılar Square and its surrounding area serve as a significant commercial hub due to its dynamic transportation links and strategic location (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, p. 95). The existing buildings in the area predominantly have commercial functions. In recent years, new metro and tramway lines and stations have been constructed. Nationally and internationally recognized companies in the food and clothing sectors have opened stores in buildings facing Bağcılar Square. Additionally, new buildings, some of them 9-10 stories high, have been developed around the square in recent years (Expert Report, 2017, p. 10). Given these factors, the area has become an attractive center, leading to a surge in real estate prices (Figure 6). This suggests that Bağcılar Square and its surroundings represent a high-rent urban area with significant investment returns, catering to the interests and expectations of the business and trade sectors.

Thus, given the lack of participation and the restriction of property rights, it is evident that the MEUCC's approval of plan amendment for Bağcılar Square – based on its designation as a risk area –primarily benefit contractors and the commercial elites in the region rather than local stakeholders. This aligns with the tendency of state rescaling to serve capital accumulation.

As a result, it can be argued that the reorganization of Bağcılar District's center is not primarily focused on mitigating natural disaster risks. Instead, the project aims to enhance the district's commercial centrality and economic competitiveness through urban transformation efforts that emphasize modernization, orderliness, hygiene, and improving the city's image. This approach is intended to attract investments from more nationally and internationally recognized companies. As noted earlier, the initial attempt to transform Bağcılar Square was initiated by the municipality but was annulled by the İstanbul Administrative Court in 2011. In 2013, the initiative was taken up by the MEUCC, leveraging its expanded authorities to bypass participatory decision-making, negotiation, and public consultation processes. However, the Council of State's judicial review ultimately blocked this effort in February 2016, citing the absence of concrete evidence regarding the risk that formed the basis of the urban transformation project.

Subsequently, the same area was once again designated as a “risk area” by the Council of Ministers in November 2016, effectively reactivating the project through the central government's exceptional planning powers. In 2021, the Bağcılar Municipality commissioned a private planning firm to prepare revised 1/5000 and 1/1000-scale development plans for the area. These plans—almost identical to the previously annulled ones—were officially and unilaterally approved by the MEUCC. The revised plans included minor amendments under the guise of facilitating implementation and addressing property owner concerns (Bağcılar Municipality, 2021, p. 280). In September 2022, the İstanbul 4th Administrative Court issued a stay of execution for these revised plans (E.2021/2118), once again halting the project and reinforcing the persistent legal and procedural fragility of centrally imposed urban transformation (Bağcılar Municipality, n.d.).

By that time, the physical transformation of Bağcılar Square had been largely completed and the urban landscape had already changed (Anadolu Agency, 2021). This disjunction between judicial rulings and on-

the-ground realities demonstrates that authoritarian neoliberalism not only bypasses legal and participatory safeguards but also imposes spatial irreversibility through *fait accompli* tactics, rendering legal resistance symbolically powerful yet at times practically ineffective.

## Conclusion

This study reveals a critical contradiction within neoliberal urbanization: while promoting decentralization rhetorically, its implementation often necessitates centralized decision-making to accelerate capital accumulation. Concordantly, Türkiye's urban governance regime has undergone a profound transformation through the centralization of spatial planning powers under the MEUCC, which represents a distinct form of state rescaling that challenges conventional neoliberal urban governance. This trajectory aligns with the logic of variegated neoliberalization, as Türkiye's model blends strong executive centralism with neoliberal market mechanisms in a historically specific and institutionally hybrid form. The Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project serves as a potent case study illuminating this authoritarian neoliberal turn.

The study also reveals another fundamental contradiction in Türkiye's implementation of neoliberal urban policies. While ostensibly promoting market-driven development, the state has in fact consolidated a renewed and significantly intensified control over urban space through legal and institutional reforms. The creation of the MEUCC as an authority-concentrating ministry through Decree Law no. 644, coupled with the expansive powers granted under Law no. 6306, has effectively dismantled the traditional scalar organization of urban governance. This recentralization, far from representing a return to pre-neoliberal statism, constitutes a process where the national executive bypasses local democratic institutions to directly facilitate capital accumulation in urban land markets.

The Bağcılar Square Urban Transformation Project epitomizes this state rescaling process on a micro level. Initially conceived as a municipal initiative, the designation of the square as a risk area and subsequent plan amendments by the MEUCC exemplifies the

hollowing out of local government capacities. The attempt to drive the project forwards based on the risk area designation also reveals that the disaster discourse functions as a legitimizing narrative rather than a genuine planning criterion.

By leveraging such mechanisms, the ministry has become able to effectively bypass legal and participatory processes, enabling urban transformation projects that cater to commercial interests rather than public interest. The erosion of local autonomy and participatory mechanisms has not only marginalized stakeholders but also raised concerns about the legitimacy and accountability of decision-making processes. The exclusion of local governments, civil society, and residents from participation in urban transformation projects reflects a broader trend of top-down governance.

Moreover, the case illustrates how recentralized planning not only excluded local stakeholders from decision-making but also weakened their institutional ability to claim development rights. As observed in the Expert Report (2017, pp. 56), the planning process lacked spatial precision regarding the designated relocation parcels for affected landowners. This vagueness generated spatial and legal uncertainty, limiting residents' capacity to engage with or contest the project.

In this sense, Bağcılar exemplifies how authoritarian planning mechanisms restrict both the procedural and substantive dimensions of urban citizenship. The project had been reactivated through a renewed “risk area” designation in 2016 and the preparation of near-identical plans—commissioned by Bağcılar Municipality and subsequently unilaterally approved by the MEUCC—in 2021. Despite repeated court interventions, the transformation of Bağcılar Square had already been physically completed. This disconnect between judicial decisions and on-the-ground outcomes highlights how authoritarian neoliberal urbanization not only bypasses legal and participatory safeguards but also produces *fait accompli* urban conditions, rendering legal resistance limited in practice, often.

The study's findings have significant implications for urban policy in Türkiye and beyond. First, they call for a re-evaluation of governance structures to ensure a balance between efficiency and inclusivity. While centralized planning may offer short-term benefits in terms of streamlined



decision-making, it risks alienating local communities and exacerbating social inequalities. Second, the findings emphasize the need for stronger legal safeguards to protect public interests and prevent the misuse of legal mechanisms for profit-making. Third, they highlight the importance of fostering participatory governance frameworks that empower local actors and enhance transparency in urban planning processes.

At the same time, this study is not without methodological limitations. While Figure 6 illustrates real estate value increases within the Bağcılar project area, comparative data for the same years across Bağcılar and İstanbul could not be accessed due to changes in data availability from the original online platform. Therefore, although the price trends within the project area indicate rent generation, a broader comparative rent gap analysis remains a limitation due to restricted access to consistent city-wide datasets. Future research would benefit from incorporating such comparative datasets to more precisely assess the differentiated impacts of centralized urban transformation policies on local stakeholders versus commercial/business elites. In addition, comparative analyses across Turkish cities or Global South contexts could help illuminate the broader patterns and variations of authoritarian neoliberalism.

To conclude, the Turkish experience with the rescaling of spatial planning powers offers critical lessons on the adaptability of neoliberal urbanism to authoritarian contexts. As the case of Bağcılar shows, what appears as a legislative measure against disaster risk often masks the consolidation of executive power and the privileging of capital interests over democratic governance. The February 2023 earthquakes and the subsequent establishment of the Urban Transformation Presidency show that these trends are accelerating. Future struggles over urban space in Türkiye will likely depend on the ability of civil society and local governments to gain some degree of autonomy from this rescaled governance regime - a challenge with implications far beyond mere urban politics.

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