

ENTANGLEMENT OF LABOR AND ENVIRONMENT
IN AN EMERGING NUCLEAR POWER LANDSCAPE: THE AKKUYU NPP



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ABSTRACT

Entanglement of Labor and Environment in an Emerging Nuclear Power Landscape: the Akkuyu NPP

The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in the city of Mersin in Turkey marks a turning point for the country's historical nuclear ambitions. Laden with promises of development, catching up with the developed world, and achieving welfare; the Akkuyu NPP holds immense symbolic power in the national imaginary. As an infrastructure megaproject; the Akkuyu NPP has been challenged by environmental mobilization at different conjunctures. However, these patterns of resistance are shaped and constrained by socioeconomic and political conditions at each historical stage. This study looks at these conditions as areas of conflict for environmental mobilization; and in this respect, investigates the impact of uneven distribution of costs and benefits, question of labor and employment, and discursive legitimization. It considers the way in which the Akkuyu NPP persisted and acquired popular consent for its existence, in order to seek answers to the broader question of linking environmental struggles with social injustice.

ÖZET

Nükleer Güç, Emek ve Çevre: Akkuyu NGS

Mersin ilindeki Akkuyu Nükleer Güç Santrali (Akkuyu NGS) projesi, Türkiye'nin nükleer enerji yolculuğunda bir dönüm noktası oluşturmaktadır. Kalkınma, gelişmiş dünyaya ayak uydurma ve refaha kavuşma vaatlerini içeren Akkuyu NGS, ulusal tasavvurda büyük bir sembolik önem taşımaktadır. Çevre hareketi, Akkuyu NGS ve benzeri mega projelere çeşitli noktalarda itiraz ederek direnmiş; ancak bu itirazlar her tarihsel dönemde sosyoekonomik ve siyasi koşullar tarafından şekillenmiş ve kısıtlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, bahsedilen koşulları çevre direnişinin çatışma noktaları olarak ele almakta, bu doğrultuda kazanç ve kayıpların eşitsiz dağılımını, emek ve istihdam sorununu ve söylemsel meşrulaştırma pratiklerini incelemektedir. Akkuyu NGS projesinin devamlılığı için toplum rızasını elde etme yollarını incelerken, çevre hareketi ve diğer toplumsal mücadeleleri bir araya getirmenin imkanlarını aramaktadır.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure projects not only physically transform their surroundings, but create diverse sites of contestation, exploitation, and inequality in their impact zone. Embedded in political and cultural fantasies; infrastructure obscures or exposes power relations, and produces diversified experiences in its confrontation with social, economic, and political domains. Infrastructure for nuclear energy has its own specific characteristics. Nuclear technology necessarily extends beyond the locality, requiring close cooperation between state and capital within the global geopolitical hierarchy of allyship, competition, and national security. Nuclear energy has a multibillion-dollar global market. Approximately 10% of the world's electricity was provided by nuclear energy in 2023; while Bangladesh, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates emerged as newcomers (World Nuclear Association, 2023), currently in the process of constructing their first nuclear power plants. Furthermore, the industry is dependent on the mining of uranium resources; the global demand for uranium is about 67,000 tonnes per year, and the majority of the uranium is provided to the nuclear sector (World Nuclear Association, 2023). As an extractive industry with grave social consequences, uranium mining is linked to colonial relations; land ownership disputes with indigenous communities, physical degradation of mining sites, and exploitative labor regimes.

On the other hand, nuclear power is linked to the capacity to build nuclear weapons, taking shape under the shadow of the Cold War and the global nuclear arms race. In 1970, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons entered into force as a key global arrangement to impose a limit to the creation of nuclear

weapons programs. The treaty promised access to nuclear technology in return for the commitment to refrain from building nuclear weapons. Since then, nuclear energy has been used for a variety of peaceful purposes, however, the risk of proliferation still exists in connection to the enrichment level of reactor fuel (Glaser, 2006).

At the same time, nuclear energy is facing an existential crisis as some of the world's major powers are turning to other renewable sources to fulfill their commitment to achieving climate neutrality. Germany is the leader in conducting a nuclear phase-out; its last three nuclear power plants were closed in April 2023, marking the conclusion of the country's ambitious plan to end its nuclear age after the Fukushima disaster (Federal Office for the Safety of Nuclear Waste Management, 2023). In contrast, France emerges on the global stage as a defender of nuclear energy, criticizing Germany for its vehement anti-nuclear stance (Politico, 2023). The future of nuclear technology is greatly disputed, as some countries consider nuclear phase-out, but many others are in the process of launching their national nuclear programs.

In parallel, landscapes of nuclear power are intertwined with environmental objections, politics of energy and infrastructure, hegemonic discursive practices, and questions on the regime of labor. Various tools of legitimization are deployed by the industry and the state in order to counter the popular objections to nuclear energy and subdue any mobilization against these massive projects. For the environmental movement, anti-nuclear protests have been integral to the struggle since the early 20th century.

Turkey is preparing to enter the league of countries utilizing nuclear power with the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant currently under construction in the city of

Mersin. The history of the nuclear program in Turkey begins in the 1960s, with various attempts to realize this ambition by consecutive governments. The current project was launched after an inter-state agreement between Turkey and Russia in 2010. The environmental movement, the local population, political parties, activist groups, and civil society organizations raised a myriad of objections to the Akkuyu NPP. Some of the concerns were the risk of an accident, impact on physical surroundings, and the involvement of the Russian state. Despite decades of dispute between the state and anti-nuclear activists, at the time of writing this introduction, the power plant construction is ongoing. Mobilization against the project has not yielded any concrete results; while the public opinion on nuclear power is undergoing a significant change.

The Akkuyu NPP constitutes an interesting case study for the environmental movement in Turkey. This is because of its unique characteristics; the history of anti-nuclear resistance and the growth of the environmental movement are concurrent. Turkey's nuclear ambitions start with the selection of potential construction sites in the 1970s; throughout its history, the environmental movement had to coexist with the threat of a nuclear energy initiative in Turkey. The actual confrontation with the project reached its peak in the 2000s, when environmental concerns were becoming increasingly recognized and visible in the public sphere. After this point, the concurrent growth was reversed; while the environmental movement continued to advance, anti-nuclear resistance declined and lost its resonance. Seeking the reasons behind this reversal opens the door to a myriad of factors which have an impact on the trajectory of a social movement; such as power relations and social hierarchies at the local level, ideological framings of infrastructural initiatives, the paradox of labor and environment, and the internal drawbacks of activist groups.

In order to understand the interplay of politics, discourse, resistance, and labor relations at the site of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (Akkuyu NPP) I begin Chapter 2 by tracing the history of environmental objections against nuclear energy. By linking and contrasting the global objections with the history of the anti-nuclear stance in Turkey, the chapter aims to explore the relationship between the global and the local anti-nuclear movement as well as the growth of the environmental movement in Turkey concurrent with the resistance against the Akkuyu NPP. Pinpointing the three stages of struggle, and investigating the main concerns about the project, I seek to establish the basis of the dispute and the trajectory of the struggle against the nuclear initiative, and I conclude with possible reasons behind the failure of the mobilization.

Chapter 3 is a deeper look into the politics of energy and infrastructure governing Turkey's nuclear ambitions. Through an analysis of media coverage and the official discourse about the Akkuyu NPP, I attempt to investigate one of the major causes of the shift in public opinion, namely, discursive strategy, and the extent to which this strategy was effective. Certain key notions emerge in pro-Akkuyu discourse; national interest, national development, competition at the international level, welfare, and employment. These notions form the fundamental tools of legitimization in the face of existing or expected negative impact.

Chapter 4 is an investigation into what I argue is one of the most impactful dynamics in the failure of large-scale resistance, and the eventual realization of public consent. This dynamic is the discrepancy in advantages and damages linked to the project; distributed unevenly across the landscape. I look at how the construction works affected nearby villages, mainly focusing on a comparison between the village of Büyükeceli and the Taşucu. I attempt to build a better understanding of how

infrastructure has an uneven impact across geographies, with certain localities emerging as beneficiaries and others being left in ruin. I deploy a critical geography perspective in order to understand the imbalance of power between different communities. I argue that the Akkuyu NPP had an exacerbating effect on spatial, racial, and class polarizations, with previous power or privilege playing a determining role in the local relations with the project.

Ultimately, the last chapter analyzes the region's changing economic relations in connection to the labor regime at the construction site; with the Akkuyu NPP forming the last stage of a decades-long transformation. I utilize the press coverage, statements of civil society organizations, the interviews I conducted with locals and a construction worker in order to investigate the labor relations, the motivation to find employment at the power plant, and the diminishing means of making a living in the region. As a tool in the strategy of legitimization, I aim to understand how employment led to the eventual cooptation and capture of consent. In this analysis, I note the similarities between other industrial projects and the Akkuyu NPP, which contributed to the failure of the environmental objections to the nuclear initiative.

In post-positivist approaches to methodology in social sciences, languages of structure, processes, and powers emerge as driving forces of social phenomena. With non-binding notions of cause and effect, critical realist methodologies trace the construction of social realities without being dependent on mechanisms of hard sciences (Gorski, 2015). With this approach, the connections between separate material or cultural mechanisms take effect continuously throughout the course of the social reality. Critical realism investigates the effects and causes by way of retrodution (Gorski, 2015). Such sociological analysis which attempts to go beyond

mere causality has been termed “constitutive” from other theoretical standpoints (Pacewicz, 2020).

On the other hand, multicausal approaches utilize notions such as conjunctures and assemblages which entail the complexity inherent in the social world (Decoteau, 2018). Based on the heterogeneity of intersecting forces which create social phenomena; a multicausal approach traverses temporal and spatial domains, attempting to reformulate normative causality. For social scientists, theories of post-positivist multicausality provide useful tools for interacting with complex historical cases. Furthermore; contemporary ethnographic study frees itself from universal statements, moving away from general measures and decontextualized categorization, to integrate a “heuristic” stance (Abbott, 2004). These numerous ways of deconstruction, fueled by poststructuralism, feed into complex theorization based on horizontal and relational thinking (Elgar, 1997).

As I attempt to explore the social dynamics of inequality, the rise and the fall of the environmental mobilization against the Akkuyu NPP, and the interrelation between the two areas of analysis; the deployment of concepts such as powers, processes, and non-linear cause and effect are necessary. As an exercise in investigating the factors which led to the failure of anti-nuclear mobilization, this thesis will necessarily fall short of providing a complete picture of all causes and dynamics as well as the full trajectory of the Akkuyu NPP. This is both due to the limitations of a small-scale fieldwork, and the more general complexity of imposing causality on social phenomena. Therefore, the dynamics detailed in the following chapters, such as neoliberalism and economic precarization, internal differentiation in local communities, and the weaknesses of the environmental movement, do not translate into a strict equation that perfectly captures the eventual outcome. However,

these perspectives can be considered as a contribution to the study of the environmental movement, politics of energy, and social impact of infrastructure in Turkey. Furthermore, a neglected dimension in the study of social movements, energy, and infrastructure is integrated in Chapter 3; geographical divisions of pre-existing social inequalities. I argue that this dimension constitutes critical component determining the trajectory of environmental resistance.

The primary methodology used in this study includes semi-structured interviews conducted in the impacted region; and critical discourse analysis of media coverage, official statements, company announcements, and public relations efforts. I used semi-structured interviews with three main groups who were affected by the project; namely, villagers in the hinterlands, relatively privileged inhabitants of coastal towns, and anti-nuclear activists. I spent two weeks in the region on two separate occasions in 2022; staying mostly in Taşucu and commuting to nearby villages around the construction site. Locals in Taşucu and the nearby villages were eager to talk about the project, openly sharing their opinions and recent experiences. To my surprise, the most difficult part of the fieldwork was finding current employees of the power plant who would consent to being interviewed. I noticed that there is an intense fear among the construction workers about being dismissed from their jobs and requests for interview were met with suspicion.

In the villages, however, I was met with great hospitality. I was offered car rides by villagers, tours around the area of the construction site, food, drinks and places to stay. At the same time, in the village of Büyükeceli I sensed the expectation that I would help them with their circumstances in some way. Feeling abandoned by political figures and civil society, the villagers were hopeful that a record of their dramatic experience would bring an end to the destruction of their village. On one

occasion, they asked me to contact the media and share the evidence of what is happening in Büyükeceli. I was perplexed by my inability to help them and their eagerness to help me conduct my research; ultimately leading to the decision of allocating a chapter on unjust distribution of costs and benefits. On the other hand, the interviews I conducted with anti-nuclear activists informed the majority of my findings on the trajectory of the environmental objections against the Akkuyu NPP. However, I was not a witness to the active phases of the struggle, the feedback from the activists were on retrospect as they re-examined the recent past. This was useful in enabling me to collect important insights and critical evaluations of past strategy, but restrictive at the same time, as I was not able to directly observe the activities, decisions and their consequences.

My findings from all interviews were complementary as they revealed the different components of the story of resistance against the Akkuyu NPP. I adopted different approaches in my interviews; during my discussions with activists, I asked about their own interpretation and experiences regarding the recent history of the anti-nuclear struggle. I followed up with questions on the details of their relations with villagers, touching upon the shift in the public opinion and the processes and powers which they believe caused the final outcome. In my interviews with the villagers, I asked neutral questions on the impact of the nuclear power plant, with a particular lens on which processes of change directly affected their living circumstances. If the villagers were vocally critical, I moved on to specific questions about the reasons for their objections to the power plant and why the resistance have not yielded any positive results. If the villagers were talking positively about the project, I asked if there were any turning points or key moments which changed their perspective, and how their concerns were addressed. Finally, for the inhabitants of

towns such as Taşucu, I attempted to collect all arguments in favor of the project and the positive impact on their living conditions.

By bringing together the findings from these interviews with the analysis of political strategy at the national level, my aim was to evaluate the extent to which the hegemonic tools were successful in creating consent. On the other hand, I compared the global objections to nuclear energy with the formulations of local anti-nuclear resistance, finding common and diverging points. In this comparison, I drew meaningful insights into the broader context of anti-nuclear protest movements such as the inevitable link to democratization. These insights were reinforced by certain findings from the semi-structured interviews which provided a glimpse into the gradual decrease in the decision-making capacity of the villages in question. On the other hand, I attempted to explore the reasons behind the failure of the anti-nuclear movement by way of looking at the limitations in strategy; particularly the legal strategy which proved futile once the grassroots connection and mobilization were lost. Meanwhile, by drawing from studies on the changing economic conditions in the region and the country, I aimed to contextualize the effectiveness of employment as a successful tactic for cooptation when confronting environmental objections.

In essence, all major areas and tools of analysis in this study were linked together at various points, producing a complicated but meaningful basis and context for the rise and the fall of the environmental objections against the Akkuyu NPP; the deep connections with labor and employment, and hegemonic discursive tools which facilitated consent for the realization of the long-standing nuclear ambitions of the Turkish state.

CHAPTER 2

THE INTERSECTION OF NUCLEAR INDUSTRY, DEMOCRACY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Nuclear energy has been a contentious subject of debate for the environmental movement. Despite being hailed by some as a clean source of energy as it does not directly produce carbon emissions, its critics point to the broader scope of the actual environmental and social impact of the technology. Anti-nuclear environmentalism has objections to nuclear energy due to a variety of reasons; such as damage to natural habitats and species, nuclear waste, and the risk of accidents. As the gravity of a nuclear accident holds a significant space in the public imagination after the Chernobyl disaster; skepticism against nuclear technology remains strong around the world.

The objections to nuclear energy on the global level have echoed in Turkey since the decision to build a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu in the 1970s. In this chapter I look at the case against nuclear energy on a global scale and compare it with local objections, trace the history of the anti-nuclear resistance in Turkey as situated within the local environmental movement, and explore the reasons behind the failure of the struggle against the Akkuyu NPP. The resistance against the Akkuyu NPP was based on objections in line with the global anti-nuclear mobilization; with a few diverging points due to particular characteristics such as the agreement with the Russian state. These diverging points contributed to the movement's initial strength in maintaining local mobilization. However, the support from the local community was gradually lost due to internal shortcomings in organization and strategy, and the broader predicament of the environmental

movement in Turkey as situated in a politically polarized context. Equally impactful external factors, which will be discussed in the later chapters, also played a pivotal role in the dissipation of the struggle. Finally, one of the main tools of the anti-nuclear mobilization against the Akkuyu NPP was legal strategy, which proved useful in early stages but eventually was dominated by the aforementioned internal and external factors.

2.1 Nuclear energy and the environment: Global objections

Nuclear energy has been challenged by the environmental movement since its beginnings. The environmental movement itself does not have a starting date (Rootes, 1999), but its dynamics in the 20th century are interrelated with concerns over the impact of nuclear energy. Anti-nuclear protest and the environmental movement are closely intertwined to the point that the grassroots beginnings of Greenpeace emerged in Vancouver, British Columbia due to the protests against a planned nuclear explosion, the Milrow Blast, on Amchitka Island in 1969 (Tucker, 2013). Nuclear blasts became an easy target for pro-environment protests as the fear of nuclear fallout facilitated extensive public recognition and support. Wildlife and wilderness preservation, which was among the early motivations for environmental action, were also present at the time (Tucker, 2013).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the problematic of nuclear energy became an important topic of discussion in the West, marked by increasing tensions between anti-nuclear activists and pro-nuclear organizations. The 1960s were marked by the expansion of nuclear power programs and an increasing number of communities affected by site selection activities, which resulted in intense opposition (Surrey & Huggett, 1976). In the following decade, the rapid increase in anti-nuclear protests

was due to investments in nuclear programs as a result of the energy crisis of 1973. At the same time, the public understanding of nuclear power was increasingly negative, with concerns regarding accidents, radiation, or nuclear weapons (Sanchez-Vazques & Menendez-Navarro, 2015).

In the United States, environmental and anti-nuclear mobilization occurred at the same time saw the growth of civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements within the same period. Interestingly, studies argue that anti-nuclear sentiment serves as a catalyst for political protest in certain countries, eventually culminating in democratization (O'neil, 1999). This is due to the heavy state oversight on nuclear technology which necessitates close monitoring and control by the existing regime. The layers of secrecy, national interest and the global nuclear order necessarily link nuclear technology with forces of de-democratization. Therefore, the institutional background necessary for a high-risk technology such as nuclear power, makes protest against such initiatives inevitably linked to substantive changes in the existing regime (O'neil, 1999). This historical intersection provides useful insights into the links between democratization and anti-nuclear resistance.

On the order of nuclear power at a global scale, Biswas (2014) provides an account of foreign policy behavior of the third world in an unequal regime built on notions of security. The pursuit of nuclearization in the third world is undeniably a strong instrument of gaining recognition; creating the desire to create space for themselves in the global nuclear regime. However, the role and the place of the subaltern state in this regime is also established by a plethora of institutions, policies, agencies, organizations, think tanks and arrangements. Turkey's dream of becoming a nuclear power is an extension of the desire of the subaltern state; built on the

displacement and dispossession of the actual subaltern, the most vulnerable populations in geographically disadvantaged locations.

One of the primary global objections to nuclear energy has been the potential leakage of radioactive material. The most common raw material used in a nuclear power plant is a type of Uranium; namely, Uranium-235. The necessary Uranium ore is extracted in mines and processed in milling facilities, turned into pellets of Uranium oxide which are then preserved in zirconium tubes. After usage, the fuel rods must be held in water for years to cool down. The fuel rods are highly radioactive and require massive safety measures in order to prevent failure or leakage. Fuel rods may be damaged during the active phase of the reactor or during transport and decommissioning processes; creating the risk of radiation leak at any point of production.

During their last phase, nuclear power plants produce nuclear waste which is an entity posing an existential risk to the environment as it can contaminate soil, rivers, plants, rocks, animal and human bodies. Nuclear waste is a question without an answer as an ever-present reality of our world. Different types of nuclear waste are stored near the surface of land, discharged into the sea, or deposited around the world. Nuclear waste will survive indescribable lengths of time, as an example; the half-life of plutonium-239 is more than 12,000 years. Radioactive objects are the burden of humanity and an enduring dilemma, because there is no method for permanently destroying them (Morton, 2013). The dreadful presence of nuclear waste will stretch across deep time, in terms of tens of thousands of years, its preservation requiring stewardship over generations. Nuclear production zones are sacrificial spaces which penetrate space and time to continuously extend their impact on multiple dimensions (Brown, 2016). The networks that produce, collect, transport,

and store nuclear waste are described as “hyperobjects” (Morton, 2013); entities which are nonlocal, interlinked across the world, multicausal with multi-level consequences.

The earliest examples of anti-nuclear protests targeted nuclear waste. In South Korea, the problem of nuclear waste extends back to 1968; as the government has repeatedly attempted to establish nuclear waste facilities, but these initiatives were stopped due to massive public protests (Leem, 2006). The movement against nuclear waste in South Korea is one of the early and significant examples of environmental mobilization having a major impact on government policy. In Taiwan, the anti-nuclear campaigns had a major focus on radioactive waste storage in lands inhabited by indigenous people (Ho, 2018). In India, the protestors against Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant raised their concerns regarding the material and waste which has an impact on the air, sea and land (Khan, 2022).

On the other hand, the most well-known criticism of nuclear energy is the obvious risk of nuclear meltdown. The risk of a nuclear accident has always been at the front line of anti-nuclear actions. An important juncture for anti-nuclear activism was the Three Mile Island Accident, which took place in 1979 in Pennsylvania. The accident began with a failure of the cooling system resulting in overheating in one of the units of the power plant; causing radiation to be released into the air. The accident caused various protests across the United States in April 1979; actions which attracted more people than any previous anti-nuclear demonstrations in the country. Although the accident did not have serious consequences on human life, it fueled anti-nuclear activism due to the widespread anxiety, confusion, and anger, significantly decreasing public support for the technology (Walker, 2004).

The Chernobyl disaster has been the turning point for the anti-nuclear movement, a singular event that caused a public reaction rippling across Europe and the rest of the world. When it occurred in 1986; the Chernobyl accident renewed the momentum of the movement against nuclear and caused a shocking realization of the disastrous consequences of nuclear technology. Anti-nuclear protests emerged in all Western European countries, with a particular effect in Germany due to the political conditions present in the country (Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995). In Poland, the impact of Chernobyl and the consequent protest movement culminated in massive successes for the Polish Green Movement, linking environmental disasters exclusively to the communist regime (Szulecki et al., 2015).

Another focal point of critical approaches to nuclear energy points to unequal social structures which make nuclear power a viable resource. Nuclear power plants have particular characteristics requiring hierarchical decision-making structures and direct intervention and control by the state. State power is essential to the development of nuclear power projects despite privatization and the emergence of competitive market economies in the 1980s and 1990s; due to the complexity and long-term nature of these projects. Thus, nuclear energy cannot be evaluated independently of the social conditions which enabled its existence.

On a global scale, nuclear energy requires externalizing of costs and transfer of the negative impact to the peripheries. These dynamics reveal the contingent nature of nuclear energy production which interrupt the illusion of nuclear power being a sole indicator of technological advancement, making it deeply sociopolitical. Under alternative social conditions and without the existing relations of power, nuclear energy may not have emerged as an energy source in its current form.

Nevertheless, the benefits and costs of nuclear energy production are distributed unevenly across geographies and layers of society.

The most important element of nuclear energy production is Uranium, which is used to produce nuclear fuel for the purpose of triggering nuclear fission in power plants. Uranium mining is a secretive and destructive industry, its impact overwhelmingly concentrated in the peripheries of the globe. The impact of nuclear energy does not begin and end with radioactivity, nuclear waste, and fallout. The upstream and downstream externalities of nuclear energy are not accounted for in policy and decision-making processes of nuclear energy (Jenkins, et al., 2016). For the environmental movement, the objection against the externalizing of costs has not taken center stage, however, certain local reactions and mobilization reveal the extent of the nuclear background grid. As nuclear energy is dependent on uranium mining activity, which majorly occurs on indigenous land, national protests against uranium mining are a part of the broader response to this technology. Due to this dependency on uranium, nuclear energy does not always concern its immediate geographical surroundings. Uranium mining conducted in Australia and Canada occurs on tribal lands which brings questions on sovereignty to the environmental debate (Jenkins et al., 2016). Uranium mining industry in Africa, for example, is the cause behind large-scale contamination which poses a critical risk to public health and the environment; furthermore, the industry is dominated by multinational companies avoiding any accountability while returning only a fraction of their profits to African states (Kate & Wilde-Ramsing, 2011). Extractive industries like uranium mining contribute to the persistence of socio-spatial hierarchies. This mirroring and doubling of inequalities at local and international levels is in line with the account of the non-territoriality of extractive capitalism, as Arboleda (2020) describes as the “planetary

mine”; spatially interconnected, late-stage capitalism which produces dispossession, urbanization, and proletarianization across the globe. On the other hand, when it comes to nuclear technology, state power and the drive of capital are complex and interrelated. Since nuclear power is a state-controlled technology in most of the world, the role of capital is more nuanced than other industries. International corporations may have a major impact on certain sections of the supply chain such as the mining of uranium as nuclear fuel; but the core activity largely remains in the hands of the state which is situated in the global hierarchy of the nuclear industry.

In Australia, protests against uranium mining in the late 1970s and early 1980s were transformed into a mass movement across the country, establishing a strong anti-nuclear public sentiment, and rising in solidarity with aboriginal peoples (Adamson, 1999). The environmental groups and aboriginal inhabitants of the endangered lands built a movement which successfully integrated social justice claims with environmental concerns. In India, government-owned companies have tried to access uranium mining sites for decades but failed because of local objections (Karlsson, 2009). The environmental response to uranium mining was intertwined with the social inequalities embedded in the particular national context.

The long-term feasibility of nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels is questionable because of the myriad of disadvantages linked to every stage of production. The construction of a nuclear power plant requires approximately 10 years or more (Stanford University, 2017), with the record for longest construction time being 43 years for a reactor in the United States. Frequently, the construction phases of nuclear power plants are prolonged due to complex processes of planning, permits and regulations, financing, market fluctuations, and land plotting (Maronati & Petrovic, 2019). The frequent delays in addition to a decade-long median

construction time, contribute to the erasure of relative benefits emerging from the transition to nuclear energy. These processes also consist of risks to the safety of the construction and the personnel, unanticipated effects on the environment, problems with financing, and other costs linked to the project.

In order to cool down the reactor core during production, nuclear power plants require massive amounts of water. Across the globe, most nuclear power plants are built close to water sources for this reason; in a UK study conducted in 2009, all recommendations for nuclear production sites pointed to locations within 2 km of abundant water (World Nuclear Association, 2020). If the water is abundant, vast amounts of water are conveyed through the system and discharged back into the water body. Because discharged water has a higher temperature, it gradually increases the heat in the area of discharge, irreversibly changing the habitat around the power plant. Warm water cannot hold as much oxygen as cold water and accelerates the decomposition of organic matter (Jebakumar et al., 2018). Low oxygen and a higher rate of decomposition lead to increased algae which block sunlight, while fish are starved or driven out due to a lack of resources (Eaton & Sheller, 1996). The increased heat in water bodies utilized by nuclear reactors is the most widely known environmental damage caused by nuclear energy production.

Another tenet of anti-nuclear criticism is the risk of nuclear proliferation which increase the possibility of nuclear warfare on a global scale. The same technology for civil nuclear technology programs can be used for nuclear weapons; uranium enrichment is a persistent risk for nations utilizing nuclear energy. Environmental activists point to secret weapons programs that exist in nations as materials are transferred to produce nuclear warheads (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2022). As a legacy of the Cold War, nuclear proliferation became a

significant risk through the spread of fissionable material. The United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), signed in 1970, was the first international effort to address the emerging danger of nuclear weapons technology. However, the effectiveness of such treaties is questioned by environmentalists; if some countries are able to rely on nuclear weapons for security, other nations may as well follow (Greenpeace, 2018).

The criticism against nuclear energy revolves around safety risks, environmental degradation, exploitative industries, democracy and nuclear weapons. However, the anti-nuclear critique can also extend beyond these direct causes and consequences. The impact of nuclear energy is parallel to the exploitative and extractive relationship between society and nature. This exploitative relationship between society and nature enables certain acts of violence under the capitalist world order (Grear, 2011). Based on modernist and pro-enlightenment thought; the dominant governmentality of the last decades sanctifies the advancement of technology regardless of possible environmental and social impact (Kaygusuz and Arsel, 2005). Due to this rationality, some propose “Capitalocene” as a more suitable term encompassing the origins of ecological crises (Moore, 2017). Various accounts tracing the genealogy of environmental degradation by human hand point to the logic of capital as the driving force behind the metabolic rift (Malm, 2016). The rationality of capitalism consisting of the “law of value” contributes to the exponential increase in labor productivity and the exploitation of non-utilized or under-utilized nature. The apparent correlation between economic growth and social good has gained considerable attention with a proliferation of studies struggling to prove that a “decoupling” between economic growth and resource exhaustion is possible

(Schandl et al., 2016). Against this background, global objections to nuclear technology constitute an integral part of the struggle of the environmental movement.

The intersection of democratization and nuclear industry is due to the exact nature of nuclear power which requires an undemocratic social basis to flourish. This is why the environmental movement has frequently attempted to build a case on democracy and social justice, interlinked with the destruction or gradual degradation of the environment. Looking at the social basis of nuclear power itself enables a clear perspective on the potential integration of social and environmental struggles, on the links which may not be obvious to the same extent in other industries. The specific relations of power, particularly state power when it comes to the nuclear industry, has a determining role in opening this pathway.

2.2 The environmental movement and the case against Akkuyu NPP

In Turkey, economic growth in the context of national progress and the environmental movement with its consequent societal tensions formed two opposing forces. The history of modern Turkey marked by a powerful state leading the country into development undermined the growth of environmental politics at the national level. The negative impact on the environment increased in parallel with the development goals; with industrial waste, pollution in cities and industrial sites, and exhaustion of natural resources (Adaman, 2016). The early republican period was marked by the extensive control of the state in shaping policies of development, with environmental concerns fading into the background. However, since the coup d'état of 1980, the transition to neoliberal economic policies which oversaw hyper-industrialization and urbanization gave rise to the growing environmental protests (Adaman, 2016).

Therefore, the neoliberal economic paradigm paradoxically contributed to the growth of environmental resistance. A notable characteristic of the structural transformation of the economy was the relatively rapid rural-urban migration and extensive geographical transformation; the country experienced a dramatic acceleration in urbanization, economic activity, and industrialization in the last 50 years of its history (Karam, 2015). During the post-1980 period, the lack of environmental regulation was filled by an increasingly active civil society, with environmentalist groups resisting the liberalization policies of consecutive governments (Adaman, 2016). With rapid economic development, pro-environment mobilization started with small-scale local actions of resistance against initiatives, culminating in the formation of environmental NGOs and national environmental organizations (Ozler & Obach, 2018). In parallel, global dynamics contributed to the invigoration of environmentalism in Turkey, international flow of information and activists reinforced the rising environmental consciousness (Adaman, 2016). Gradually, the environmental movement found space for growth in civil society, with the rising grassroots movement and the opening of democratic channels due to international pressure (Arsel et al., 2015).

Since the 1990s, spontaneous actions against ecological destruction have targeted state policy and industrial initiatives embedded in the rationale of neoliberalism. In the early stages, urban ecological mobilizations were local and articulated as resistance to the destruction of nature; Individual projects were targeted such as the Gökova thermal power plant, Yatağan, and the transformation of Güvenpark in Ankara to a parking area (Ozluer et al., 2016). In the 1990s, a selection of socialist parties and organizations were integrated into the environmental movement; creating a politicization that encompassed struggles against the

establishment from anarchist, socialist, or antimilitarist thought and practice. One of the significant environmental mobilizations in the 1990s was against the gold mine in Bergama, İzmir; the local movement gained considerable legitimization in the eye of the public at the national and the international level (Ozluer et al., 2016). In parallel, resistance had begun to take root against plans to construct a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, on the other side of the country.

Local instances of resistance were in protest of mining activities, urban development, harm to water sources, and state-initiated megaprojects, one of which is the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (Arsel et al., 2015). During the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the environmental movement became a target of marginalization, as part of the government-led agenda of suppressing civil society in parallel with the authoritarian turn of the regime which drew from populist discourse. However, despite the state-led marginalization, the movement established itself in the public stage as a constant force. Meanwhile, the economic boom of the 2000s contributed to rapid urban development and industrialization, only coming to a halt with the changing global markets after the 2008 financial crisis and the consequent rise of societal discontent (Adaman et al., 2018).

In the 2000s, policies of urban development causing environmental degradation have been dependent on certain instruments such as privatization, commercialization, deregulation, and government-controlled civil society actors (Çoban et al., 2015). One of the critical pillars of urban and rural development was the destruction of commons through the economist logic of neoliberalism. The 2000s were marked by a new series of local upheaval against numerous hydroelectric power plants mostly in the Black Sea region, causing a significant impact in the public imagination and drawing attention to the destruction of previous economic

relations of traditional communities. Rural resistance against hydroelectricity achieved considerable support from the public and reformulated the ecological crisis in a substantial manner (Ozen, 2014).

With the political reformulation enabled by conflicts over hydropower, ecological struggles did not only concern the destruction of the natural environment but the eradication of ways of living and local socio-economic arrangements (Aksu et al., 2016). Hydropower became a major source of electricity in Turkey in parallel with the privatization of the energy sector, marketization of energy relations and harnessing of natural sources. This process culminated in the upheaval of rural communities who perceived the transformation as a direct attack on their living condition, despite the lack of stable political opposition to the ecological impact of the socio-economic transformation since the 1980s (Aksu et al., 2016).

In parallel with the accelerated growth of the industrial and urban transformation in the 2000s, the government agenda of marginalizing the environmental movement attempted to situate the struggle on one side of the dominant social cleavage. The movement could not escape the impact of this mainstream political conflict; namely, positioning the movement as aligned with secularism in the context of the social polarization between secularism and religious conservatism (Ozler & Obach, 2018). Establishing itself as a promoter of conservative and traditional values, the AKP government's discourse of nationalism and conservatism accused pro-environment actors of representing the worldview of secular opposition. Consequently, the movement has been targeted by the government in the context of the party agenda of defeating and moving beyond the "ancien régime". Because of the social cleavage and the political atmosphere in the country, the inventory, tactics and discursive practices of the environmental

movement were undermined by this structural element, at times halting its outreach to a broader audience.

Against this background, the history of the Akkuyu NPP is closely intertwined with the energy policies of the Turkish government and their social impact; confronting the growing environmental movement at critical points of contention. One of the causes behind the nuclear energy initiative in Turkey is the dramatic increase of energy needs of the population. As a country with a growing economy, the domestic demand for electricity in Turkey increased annually by 6% - 7% from 2003 to 2017 (Kok & Benli, 2017). As a result, an energy policy which meets this growing demand has been a critical subject. The Turkish government aims to produce 30% of the energy demand from renewable energy sources, including the energy produced in the two nuclear power plants both of which to be put into operation with approximately 10,000 MW capacity (Melikoglu, 2016). However, the country is dependent on imported technology for investment in renewable energy (Melikoglu, 2016).

Currently, approximately 60% of Turkish energy consumption is from imported energy sources; in only 2015, Turkey spent approximately \$60 billion to address energy demand (Kok & Benli, 2017). As the demand increases in addition to the international pressure to turn to renewable energy technologies, revival of the decades-old nuclear energy project neatly fits into the energy strategy of the government. Furthermore, as Turkey's energy policy is steered by the logic of neoliberal market economy; nuclear energy production was hailed by capital groups demanding increased competitiveness in the global market (Balkan-Sahin, 2019).

Between the years of 1967 and 1970, Çekmece Nuclear Research and Education Center came into possession of the first test reactor; and officials

conducted preliminary studies for possible locations. In parallel, feasibility studies were conducted by the government in the 1960s and 1970s, to select a plot of land suitable for construction. Consequently, three possible locations were selected; Mersin-Akkuyu, Sinop-İnceburun, and Kırklareli-İğneada. Akkuyu as a location to build a nuclear power plant was selected in 1976. Due to its proximity to the Mediterranean Sea, low population density, and closeness to important urban centers, the bay of Akkuyu was an ideal location (Akçay, 2019). Akkuyu's location license for construction was issued in 1976, and Turkish Atomic Energy Authority (TAEK) was established the same year (Yavuz, 2015). This authority was shut down and replaced with the Turkish Energy, Nuclear and Mineral Research Agency (TENMAK) in 2020.

In 2007, the “Nuclear Energy Act” was established to construct three nuclear power plants in selected locations around the country (Kok & Benli, 2017). The Akkuyu NPP is a part of this plan to meet the increasing energy demands by producing it domestically through non-fossil fuel sources. After several efforts to find suitable international partnerships through tendering processes in the 2000s, the AKP government succeeded in organizing an agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Turkey in Ankara on May 12, 2010. In the same year, a “project company” was established (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). Looking at the history of nuclear power in Turkey, the modernization narrative emerges as the driving force behind the efforts for energy development and technological advancement, similar to other countries of the Global South. The Eurocentric framework of national development produces a universal template to be replicated in all national contexts, underlining a unidirectional line of “progress” in which the West provides guidance for the rest of the world (Bhambra,

2014). In the 1970s and 80s, Mexico, Brazil, and Egypt accompanied Turkey with programs to establish nuclear power plants (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2022).

The early anti-nuclear mobilization in Turkey coincides with this period. Since the selection of the location, environmentalist groups challenged the construction of the power plant; drawing attention to a number of problems with the future Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant. In the 1970s, the chairman of the fishing cooperative in Taşucu initiated the first awareness campaign against nuclear power plants, attracting the attention of national and international civil society. Just after the selection of Akkuyu as a potential location, Arslan Eyce mobilized his community of fishermen and gained the support of a wide range of stakeholders, continuing anti-nuclear activism until the end of his life (Sahin, 2018).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the launch of the nuclear power project was delayed and suspended at various times, due to economic and political reasons as well as the protests of the environmental movement (Yavuz, 2015). Various attempts have been made by different governments, all failing due to political or economic reasons (Sahin, 2011). However, public pressure and environmental protests played a major role in dissuading the state initiative (Kok & Benli, 2017). One of these attempts was the failed deal with Argentina, which was not concluded due to political factors and lack of public support to the initiative of the Turgut Ozal government (Aydin, 2020).

The history of Akkuyu NPP was entangled with the birth and the rise of the environmental movement in Turkey. The main environmental organizations organizing the resistance against the Akkuyu NPP were Nukleer Karsiti Platform (NKP), Greenpeace Mediterranean, Kuresel Eylem Grubu, and Nukleersiz.org

(Balkan-Sahin, 2019). Nükleer Karşıtı Platform, (Platform Against Nuclear - NKP), established in 1993, as one of the successful initiatives drawing support from NGOs, trade unions, and other civil society actors. The mobilization against nuclear energy received the support of Greenpeace which organized an anti-nuclear campaign and several actions in 1994 (Işık, 2020). NKP gradually became the recognized local organization against nuclear power by forming a network of activists across all major cities of the country.

Anti-nuclear and environmental activism maintained and increased its strength in the 2000s with actions against the project intensifying during the AKP era. In 2011, the struggle against Akkuyu NPP intensified with large-scale mobilization organized by NKP, such as the “human chain” from Akkuyu to the center of Mersin with protestors standing in line to form a chain through kilometers of land (Yesil Gazete, 2011). Again, with the initiative of NKP, activists established a ‘green house’ as a center for distributing information to locals about the project and asking for their support (Yesil Gazete, 2011). Furthermore, activists organized demonstrations in front of the Russian embassy in Ankara (Yesil Gazete, 2010), rallies were organized in central locations of Istanbul, and numerous protestors were detained by police (Yesil Gazete, 2010). Activists were detained to prevent them from interfering in an informational meeting on Akkuyu (Yesil Gazete, 2012). These actions and protests included members of the local communities, particularly the villagers in proximity to the construction site of the power plant. Meanwhile, a smaller group of activists broke away from NKP to form Mersin Cevre ve Doga Dernegi (MERCED), adding another group to the resistance efforts. However, the mobilization gradually decreased in the late 2010s and 2020s. One of the last demonstrations against the project occurred in 2023, to protest the opening ceremony

for the transfer of the nuclear fuel, which was attended by activists, politicians, and other civil society actors (Evrensel, 2023). Currently the dominant opinion in the local communities is either neutrality or positive outlook linked to industrial development or employment.

Importantly, the resistance against the Akkuyu NPP can be categorized into three main periods; 1. The early grassroots stage of local resistance in the 1970s which was led by Arslan Eyce as a symbolic leader, 2. organized struggle led by environmental groups such as NKP starting from the 1990s and extending into the 2000s, 3. the latest period of dissipation.

The early grassroots stage reflects the small-scale and spontaneous environmental uprisings in Turkey, which did not cohesively translate into a movement at the national level. The resistance emerged with a local leadership which formulated anti-nuclear arguments based on regional concerns; Arslan Eyce was famously the head of the Cooperative of Fishermen in Taşucu, and the first mobilization began among the fishermen. The second stage, which is marked by national organizations such as NKP, correlates with the rise of the national environmental movement, with civil society actors taking the stage and the production of broader arguments regarding environmental damage and policy. The civil society era extends into the early 2000s, culminating in a resonant struggle in strong solidarity networks with the local population. The last stage is characterized by the diminishing power of the resistance, the disappearance of grassroots connections, and cooptation of the local opinion.

When it comes to reasons behind the objections, the anti-nuclear activists underline concerns about the possible short and long-term impacts. These concerns range from harm to plant species, to endangered animals, damage to agriculture and

the Mediterranean Sea coast, potential leakage of radioactive material, disposal of hazardous waste, and various construction works surrounding the power plant which may destroy the sensitive ecological balance.

Studies on the main arguments of the objections against the Akkuyu NPP since the 1970s are summed up by Akcay (2019) under the following topics; namely, nuclear weapons proliferation, safety, seismic risk, monk seals, radioactive waste and costs, all of which concerning unpredictability and irreversibility (Aydin, 2020). With the additional dimension of an inter-state agreement with Russia and the political environment under the AKP government; and based on my interviews with anti-nuclear activists, I categorize the objections of the environmental movement under the following classifications:

- Safety
- Dependency
- Damage to habitats and animals
- Radioactive leaks and waste

The objections reflected on different dimensions of the struggle against the power plant. Concerns over habitat and safety were effective in attracting local support, damage to habitats was particularly useful in reinforcing the legal strategy which mainly contested the mandatory impact assessments. The argument against a relationship of dependency with Russia was mainly contained in broader political analysis disseminated by activists and political groups. At the local level, the reaction to the relationship with Russia oscillates between positive perception of close cooperation with a more powerful state, to conspiratorial stories embedded in anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

In terms of safety, the danger of radiation leaks, possibility of accidents, a potential targeted attack by foreign states, radioactive waste and seismic activity are

some of the main problems raised by the anti-nuclear activists. Concerns over safety of nuclear energy are not new. As the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 caused a strong public reaction across the globe against nuclear energy; there were reverberations in Turkey. A primary factor shaping the public opinion in Turkey was the impact of the Chernobyl disaster on the northeastern region of the country (Akçay, 2019). At the time of the disaster, the shift in the public perception of nuclear technology was so dramatic that it resulted in the suspension of nuclear research activities.

According to various studies conducted in the region of Turkey closest to the Chernobyl disaster, the number of cancer patients increased dramatically after the incident. Despite the official narrative from the existing government; radioactive contamination had reached Turkey's coasts; in September 2005, the percentage of death by cancer was 47.9% while the national average was 11% (Akçay, 2019). The decades-long period in which the actual impact of the disaster was suppressed by the state resulted in widespread public skepticism about nuclear energy. Tea and hazelnut production in the Black Sea region was heavily impacted by the disaster and its aftermath. Consequently, Turkish public held a negative attitude towards nuclear power; a study showcases that opposition to nuclear technology in Turkey is 62.5% with only 7.2% of the surveyed group expressing favorable opinion (Ertor-Akyazi et al., 2010).

Another critical issue frequently articulated by activists is potential seismic activity. However, it should be noted that the two earthquakes in the southeastern region of Turkey in March 2023 did not cause any damage to the construction site. As all of my interviews were conducted before the earthquake, I could not investigate the reactions of the anti-nuclear activists to its impact. The risk of earthquake damage, however, has been frequently voiced by anti-nuclear experts

(Pamuk, 2023). Safety concerns go beyond seismic activity to include the possibility of a military attack, which may strategically target the power plant.

In terms of dependency; opponents of the project point to the Turkish-Russian agreement to draw attention to a relationship of dependency and lack of national control over the project, due to the concessions granted under the nuclear deal. Turkey's dependence on Russia is continuing to grow with the Akkuyu NPP; the country received almost half of its gas imports from Russia in 2021 (Kozok & Hacaoglu, 2022). This Akkuyu NPP will exacerbate the unequal power relations between the two countries, as Russia becomes the sole benefactor of this arrangement through control over production and technology (Birgun, 2022). Within this context, the official argument for national development through investment into nuclear energy falls apart due to relations of dependency with Russia.

Anti-nuclear groups ask whether Turkish authorities can maintain and protect public safety and security; an electrical engineer from Nukleersiz.org argues that Turkey has been selected as a guinea pig in an international strategy game (Temocin, 2018). This argument is based on the context of a possible regional nuclear arms race that is linked to the Iranian nuclear program. In broader terms, Russia's strategy in the Middle East is brought into question in the discussions around Akkuyu NPP. These concerns arise due to the obscured relations behind nuclear initiatives; nuclear programs involve secretive agreements removed from public input or regular legal procedure, as non-transparency becomes a feature that prevents the involvement of national or international stakeholders (Aydin, 2014). Consequently, many activists in my interviews placed significant importance on the international political arena, the complex layers of Russian-Turkish relations and the strategical shortcomings of the Turkish government. The Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, is a

topic of debate in this critique; Rosatom is criticized for using obsolete technology and lacking necessary expertise (Temocin, 2018).

When the agreement between Turkey and Russia was announced, it attracted considerable criticism due to the conditions of agreement which ensured the ownership and control of the power plant by the Russian state company. The particular conditions of the agreement constitute a historical first for an interstate agreement on nuclear energy; the Russian state company will own the nuclear power plant and the produced electricity. The Turkish government officially guarantees a fixed amount and price for the purchase of electricity from Akkuyu NPP for domestic consumption, critics argue that the fixed prices will be higher than the alternative options in the market (Diken, 2022).

Damage to habitats and endangered species is a broader point of criticism against the power plant. The coasts near Büyükeceli are inhabited by vulnerable species which may be exposed to various risks due to the project. *Caretta caretta* (Loggerhead sea turtle) is a species of sea turtle living on the coasts of Mersin as well as other parts of the southern coastline in Turkey. The coast in which the turtles lay eggs is approximately 50 km east of the Akkuyu NPP. The thermal effect of the power plant might interfere with the species' life cycle due to the fact that temperature determines the sex of the offspring during incubation. The endangered status of sea turtles may lead to consequences which are irreversible.

Another endangered species relevant to the debates around Akkuyu NPP is the *Monachus Monachus* (Mediterranean monk seal); a marine mammal inhabiting the coastal caves around the project field. The coasts and caves used by the animal may be affected by construction works and the commotion during the active phase of the plant. In their correspondence with officials, the project company made

commitments to abide by specific rules determined by the Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs. These particular commitments are mentioned in the environmental impact report of a dredging activity for the plant field. As rocky coasts, islands, caves with subaquatic or above-surface entrances are the primary habitats of the monk seal; the company agrees to inspect the caves for mammal activity before engaging in activities which may pose a danger. However, as this monitoring activity will not be verified by an independent expert group or through transparent mechanisms, the company is not accountable to external bodies for potential damages, making the agreement a non-dependable method of prevention.

The marine mammal is not only under the risk of potential damage to caves; any change in water or weather, as well as the landscaping work during construction will have an impact on the species (Tema, 2017). Furthermore, according to official records, the company acquired the license to engage in transport activities on the coast. An anti-nuclear activist I interviewed, who has an engineering background, expressed her concerns regarding the potential construction of a port on the seaside for the haulage of necessary materials (Toker, 2019). The pollution caused by marine transport poses another danger to the coastal ecosystem and the seawater which can have a rapid impact on fish and other species.

Studies around the project field shows that there are 570 plant species, with 33 of them endemic to the region. The flora is typically Mediterranean; and 6 amphibian, 18 reptilian and 69 bird species have been detected in the region. The plot of land marked for construction is composed of 3 bays and covered with Mediterranean flora; *Pinus Brutia* forests, Mediterranean shrubs and scrubs (TMMOB Peyzaj Mimarları Odası, 2012). This landscape will be inevitably impacted by the project. Nevertheless, Akkuyu NPP constitutes the last stage of a

long-term process of ecological destruction in this region. The city of Mersin is a historical port city which went through rapid urbanization in recent history. Its coastal areas are composed of interconnected ecosystems of animals, plants, and water sources; forming very sensitive habitats with massive genetic diversity. With rapid urbanization already damaging the region (Yılmaz & Terzi, 2019), the impact of Akkuyu NPP will be the point of no return.

Anti-nuclear activists underline the potential damage to these species as well as the local agriculture; underlining that not only the construction of the nuclear reactors will affect the environment, but subsidiary works and the massive transformation of the surrounding area will cause irreversible change.

On radioactive leaks and waste; the activists in my interviews point to the environmental damage caused by nuclear energy production around the world, and with examples such as the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and emphasize that the majority of countries are on a path of moving away from nuclear solutions to renewable energy resources. When the power plants in Akkuyu go active, the vegetation and animals will inevitably be exposed to small doses of radiation. The short-term economic benefits touted by proponents of the project will be erased when trade, agricultural production, and tourism will be impacted by the proximity to the nuclear power plant. These results will not only emerge due to the material effects of the power plant, as even rumors of radioactive leaks and damages to agricultural produce can have a domino effect in domestic and international markets.

Anti-nuclear activism confronted Akkuyu NPP on two fronts; the legal domain and grassroots activities with local communities. In early stages of the resistance, grassroots organizing efforts gathered considerable support from communities affected by the project and anti-nuclear actions gathered significant

attention from the public. Most villagers and locals were opposed to the project to the extent that pro-nuclear voices constituted only a small minority (Cinmen, 2012).

There is a common dynamic in environmental mobilizations in Turkey; the early stages are marked by the active participation of rural inhabitants, with villagers at the forefront of the struggle (Ankahaber, 2022; Osmancikhaber, 2023; Sayar, 2022; Akdemir, 2022). However; in the case of Akkuyu NPP, the initial solidarity with locals gradually disappeared as communities were disconnected from the activists. The general opinion about the project underwent a transformation during this process.

As a response to my questions about the reasons behind the separation between anti-nuclear activists and the locals, which resulted in the eventual failure of the resistance; activists point to a few factors which contributed to the failure of cultivating stable mobilization. These are; cultural differences between villagers and urban activists, internal conflict and problems with decision-making, lack of stable leadership, lack of internal organization and external strategy, lack of capacity and financial means.

Activists argue that the existence of visible cultural disparity between local residents, mainly the villagers in the region and anti-nuclear activists has caused the separation, ultimately resulting in the gradual dissipation of the wider resistance. It must be noted that the anti-nuclear activists mostly came from urban centers within the region, with notable differences compared to the inhabitants of rural hinterlands. These differences engendered prejudice among the villagers. However, it is important to recognize that this dynamic does not emerge out of simple cultural clash; instead, it is influenced by the national political atmosphere. As previously noted, the environmental movement in Turkey is substantially impacted by the

secular-conservative divide perpetuated by the government (Ozler & Obach, 2018). As part of this context, environmentalists have been targeted and portrayed as members of the secular opposition, working to the detriment of the country's welfare and progress. Therefore, the differences in lifestyle and culture between villagers and activists was reformulated by the official discourse of polarizing urban secularism and rural conservatism. As a result, cultural difference, political atmosphere, and social polarization has significantly impacted the anti-nuclear resistance.

A certain self-critique also emerges from my interactions with anti-nuclear activists. The self-criticism sheds light on the internal conflict and lack of leadership during the course of the late-stage mobilization. The activists draw attention to notable divisions emerging among various factions within the movement. Interestingly, these conflicts are not rooted in substantive debate over strategy, but are linked to power struggles within the movement. One activist strongly emphasizes that a leadership segment has not emerged, leaving the mobilization fragmented and impossible for locals to rally around.

The movement was composed of various stakeholders and activists from non-governmental organizations, to political parties, experts, activist groups; all loosely affiliated and united by their opposition to the nuclear power plant. According to some of the activists I interviewed, the contemporary struggle lacked a leadership structure and a clearly defined strategy. This contrasted with the early local struggle, and Arslan Eyce becoming a symbol of anti-nuclear resistance. The early stage coincided with the era in which the environmental movement in Turkey had not yet taken the national stage as an influential civil society actor. At the same time, the basis of objections at the time revolved around the immediate effect on locals; most famously the fishermen's cooperative was mobilized with Arslan Eyce as its leader.

In the 90s and afterwards, the emergence of national environmental groups created a broader national framework for nuclear objections, influenced also by international dynamics and global anti-nuclear arguments.

Another critical factor contributing to the failure of the resistance is the lack of capacity and resources to maintain effective mobilization. Compared to the project company and government officials, who hold enormous resources to advocate for the pro-Akkuyu agenda, anti-nuclear activists found themselves in a disadvantaged position. This disadvantage prevented them from accessing critical resources, engage with stakeholders, and navigate bureaucratic processes at correct moments with adequate capacity. Consequently, the lack of capacity also stopped anti-nuclear activists' from maintaining a continuous and effective presence within the local community. These shortcomings caused the failure to address the evolving needs of the community, and to align with constructive objectives.

The environmental movement in Turkey was shaped by the two opposing forces of development and environmental defense, taking its contemporary shape largely during the urbanization and industrialization policies since the transition to neoliberal economic regime in the 1980s. The movement's previous form was local instances of resistance against particular initiatives; after the emergence of civil society organizations and closer relations with international activism, the struggle was substantiated in a broader framework. The history of Akkuyu NPP, with its roots going back to the 1970s, is intertwined with the different stages of environmental resistance in Turkey; the early period of local mobilization, involvement of national political actors and groups since the 1990s. Various local and national groups, different political factions and civil society organizations became involved in the struggle against the nuclear power plant. The grassroots connection was strong in the

beginning, but dissipated in the later stages. As the fieldwork of this study was conducted after the fact, my interviews with activists who were involved in the struggle provides partial insights into some of the internal causes; lack of capacity, cohesive strategy, and leadership. As will be discussed in the next subchapter, the movement also became trapped in its own legal strategy, gradually losing its mobilizing dynamic. In later chapters, three major dynamics which are external to the movement will be investigated; discursive strategies and political framing, spatial inequality and uneven distribution, and the rush to find secure employment in a precarious economic regime.

2.3 Methods of resistance: Akkuyu as a legal battleground

Litigation strategies have been at the forefront of environmental activism in Turkey. Legal strategies are deployed to influence public policy, participate in governance and decision-making, and intervene through court proceedings. However, the movement is in a disadvantaged position in its legal strategy in a system inherently inclined toward the interest of the state and private capital. This bias is particularly visible in state-controlled infrastructural investments and initiatives. Going beyond the systemic disadvantage, the Turkish government strategically undermines public deliberation and consultation through new measures; one example being the deregulation of the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure fifteen times in the recent past (Eren, 2017).

The official processes to acquire permits for the Akkuyu NPP turned into a legal battleground between the environmental activists and the state through the project company. One of the modes of the battle revolved around the acquisition of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (CED). The CED process in Turkey

facilitates the assessment of positive and negative impact on the environment, oversees measures to prevent or minimize the negative impact, evaluation of siting and technologies, and enables the monitoring of projects. The CED requirements were first introduced in 1993 by regulation, necessitating certain procedures and measures for public and private entities. In 10 years, the regulation went through four revision procedures which resulted in lower-quality CED reports, as the focus was shifted to ensuring a shorter time period for acquisition in line with the interest of the business (Serter, 2006).

As a method of environmental activism, the process was contested by environmental activists through litigation (Turk Tabipleri Birliği, 2022). In 2017, the number of lawsuits against the power plant were reported as 13 in total (Akdemir, 2017). This number has increased in the following years. Environmentalist organizations and activists filed lawsuits against the project based on various reasons such as the use of the Mediterranean Sea as cooling water (Yesil Gazete, 2023) and legal invalidity of the ÇED report (T24, 2022). Despite criticisms and uncertainty over legality, the ÇED report was approved by the Ministry of Environment, Urban Planning and Climate Change in 2014 (TC Çevre ve Şehircilik, 2014). The approval provided the greenlight for the Akkuyu NPP, functioning as the legal permit for construction and certifying that the project is not detrimental to its natural environment.

One of the lawsuits against the ÇED report is based on a recent legislative amendment. According to the recent amendment, the first stage in environmental impact assessment is a preliminary license which precedes the ÇED report and the production license. In 2015, a preliminary license was issued for Akkuyu NPP which technically places the project under the scope of the new legislation. The activists

argue that this makes the ÇED decision from 2014 invalid, because the project is under the scope of new legislation and requires a new ÇED report. After losing the court case at the local level and rejection at the regional court, activists submitted the case to the Council of State and the results are yet to be seen (T24, 2022). Other lawsuits followed similar trajectories and concluded with failure on various levels. Some of these lawsuits have been referred to the European Court of Human Rights claiming exhaustion of domestic remedies (Sarihan, 2021).

The role of law in progressive politics is a topic of debate in studies of social movements. The contention is based on the function of legal strategies in the name of achieving social progress or challenging structural injustice. Barkan (2013) argues that there is a gap between law and justice, due to the articulation of law in close connection to the state and capital; instruments of force and injustice. Consequently, this distinct gap shapes and limits the claims for justice in the domain of law, because of the intrinsic necessity to accommodate the foundations of the liberal legal order. Thus, arguments for social or environmental justice are dependent upon conceptualizations which emerged based on specific articulations of power; such as personhood, rights and property.

The gap between law and social justice is revealed in some claims of anti-nuclear activists against the Akkuyu NPP at the European Court of Human Rights. An attorney of Mersin Medical Chamber argues that one of the justifications of their case at European Court of Human Rights is a violation of the “right to life” which is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (Sarihan, 2021). However, the right to life inescapably assumes meaning within the existing structures of inequality; making arguments for the right to life impossible to delink from the concepts of nation, state and national interest. Despite evidently composing a threat

to life, it is more probable that the Akkuyu NPP will be shut down due to shortfalls in technical or procedural necessities, rather than the violation of the right to life.

As in the case of Akkuyu NPP, social movements often deploy legal strategies to achieve their objectives. As social movements seek to implement social change, the use of litigation is one of the means of reaching this goal. Some criticism on the “function” of law comes from legal scholars raising doubts over the effectiveness of law, court cases and litigation in introducing and maintaining social change (Roggeband & Keandermans, 2017). The role of law in achieving progressive goals within social movements is intertwined with the risks of institutionalization maintaining horizontal support from the grassroots base. Strategic legal action for environmental enforcement includes many hindrances; for example, the paradox between the continuous attempts by the environmental movement to pursue legal action despite the structural lack of opportunity (Vanhala, 2012). The structural disadvantages are present in the context of Turkey as well. The shift to authoritarianism in the country was facilitated by the co-optation of the judiciary around the year of 2014 (Ozbudun, 2015). With judges and prosecutors functioning as intermediaries of the state, the new regime is characterized by the top-down restructuring of institutions. As the judiciary effectively becomes an agent of the government and lacks impartiality, the fight for democracy through the legal realm becomes problematic.

As a parallel example, in the United Kingdom, studies show that the environmental movement follows litigation strategies despite repeated failures in court, and despite a lack of any substantive achievement (Vanhala, 2012). Furthermore, the necessity of experts for deployment of litigation strategies for social reform necessitates a partial mitigation of the struggle. The conflict must be

transferred to another area in which a remote group of experts take the lead instead of ordinary people (Sarat & Scheingold, 2006).

Another risk associated with litigation is the potential reduction of the movement to legal services, moving away from broad mobilization as the movement becomes trapped in institutional grievance mechanisms (Sarat & Scheingold, 2006). In the case of Akkuyu NPP, some activists I interviewed referred to the difficulty of keeping local communities engaged in the legal processes. This reflects the separation between the experts and ordinary protestors when court cases become the front line of the struggle. These hindrances lead some critics to describe legal strategy as a demobilizing force in the life cycle of a social movement. This critical perspective pertains to alienation from grassroots origins, hierarchical reorganizing of movements, and the emergence of profit-making mechanisms which are dependent upon experts.

However, litigation strategies in social movements yield a diversified range of results that cannot be reduced to the success of a court case and immediate legal resolution. One of the direct and concrete consequences of legal strategies is achieving credibility and proving the movement as “rightful” in the eyes of the broader public. As an example, studies showcase that the activities of NGOs in the United Kingdom and the United States draw from a multitude of benefits from their legal actions, and achieve results which produce useful for the movement in the long term (Vanhala, 2012). The domain of law can therefore be a resource for achieving greater social impact and building capacity for the movement. Emphasis is made on the indirect results that are produced through legal strategies, such as a gradual social shift that may change the political and social climate.

In other words, it is possible to build counter-hegemony through legal strategy, contributing to the fight for justice in the long term. Around the world, legal tools have been successfully utilized to reclaim commons in ecological struggles, even some work being done to lay down the foundations of a future legal basis for non-subjects, and a path beyond human-centric legality and justice (Pecile, 2021). In Akkuyu NPP, the construction has not been delayed or halted on legal grounds, however, the struggle in the legal domain by anti-nuclear activists is persevering. Some activists in my interviews described the legal struggle as a fundamental basis of fighting injustice in Akkuyu, describing “illegality” as one of their crucial arguments against the nuclear power plant. They argue that the litigation is an avenue for opening up the struggle to various other stakeholders such as civil society organizations, trade unions and political parties.

The relationship between law and social movements has multiple determining factors; some argue that legal action does not lead to social change in a unidirectional form, but it requires a social crisis or a normative shift in order to successfully induce large-scale social impact (Coglianese, 2001). This impact can be visible in times of crisis. Moreover, law functions as a useful resource for social movements which are positioned outside of the normative institutional context (Roggeband & Klandermans, 2017). This is based on a relationship of exchange; the outsider social movement seeks reform in cooperation with a normative domain, with law assuming a legitimizing function.

Extending social movement strategies to the legal realm can further provide the social movement with a new set of tactics and actions. In social movement studies, the repertoire of activities is often categorized into disruptive and non-disruptive. Legal action deployed by a social movement as a non-disruptive tactic for

gathering public support can clear the path for disruptive tactics to be initiated through broader mobilization. Additionally, legal action can facilitate disruptive tactics when there is concrete involvement of grassroots activists in appropriate spaces and processes (Sarat & Scheingold, 2006).

An example of the entanglement between disruptive and non-disruptive tactics is the ÇED process in Turkey. As previously described, the ÇED report and its legal validity has been a central focus of the struggle against the Akkuyu NPP. In addition to contesting the legality and validity of the CED process in courts, environmental activists organized protests against meetings of the Ministry of Environment under the ÇED process, frequently disrupting them and causing many ÇED meetings to be canceled (Cumhuriyet, 2012).

In my interviews, some activists indicated that there are drawbacks to litigation strategies, such as locals and villagers not being able to actively engage in legal processes. Due to the requirement of expertise, following and monitoring legal strategy necessarily stays in the hands of educated activists and lawyers. Other factors which may be considered as a hindrance are the lack of impartial judiciary in the country and the liberal legal order based upon normative conceptualizations. On the other hand, at various stages the activists were able to challenge decision-makers, attract greater support from the public, disrupt routine official procedures, and transfer their struggle to other platforms such as the level of international law on the basis of human rights violations. Against all barriers, the struggle against Akkuyu NPP continues in the legal domain as part of the broader strategy of the environmental movement in Turkey.

In the case of Akkuyu NPP, litigation has proved strategically useful for the movement as it contributed to gaining broader support and legitimization of the

struggle in the eye of the public. A combination of grassroots actions and legal strategies were deployed by the movement which resulted in achieving justification for the cause and mobilization of larger segments of the population. However, these legal strategies ultimately resulted in failure to halt the project; with numerous lawsuits stranded at different levels of litigation. As a complementary tactic for the social movement, legal strategy contributes to the core dynamics which move the mobilization forward. However, legal strategy by itself does not have this function; the lack of grassroots organizing and political mobilization means the absence of the fundamental driving force of a social movement.

2.4 Conclusion

The global environmental movement raises the following argument against nuclear energy; damage to the natural habitats and species, reinforcement of exploitative industries, nuclear waste, and the risk of accidents or radioactive leaks. Again, at the global level, the Chernobyl disaster had a massive impact on all forms of environmental mobilization, cementing the anti-nuclear position and gaining public support. Global criticism of nuclear energy has echoed in Turkey as well; the Akkuyu NPP was contested due to safety, damage to endangered species and habitats, and radioactive waste. For the movement in Turkey, the Chernobyl disaster played a determining role in shaping the anti-nuclear mobilization as well, causing a significant shift in the public opinion which stayed effective for decades. Again, at the global level, anti-nuclear struggles are closely intertwined with democratization or de-democratization due to extensive control of the state and its close cooperation with capital. This tendency reflects in the case of Akkuyu NPP, the interstate agreement with Russia and high-stakes geopolitical dynamics of nuclear technology

causes the exclusion of any democratic mechanisms of monitoring and decision-making. The local population is stripped from all capacity of intervening in the process which permanently and irreversibly changes their livelihoods. Democracy emerges as an important pillar of objection to nuclear power at the national and global level.

Turkey's turn to nuclear power has a long history beginning in the 1960s and culminating in an agreement with the State of Russia to launch the construction of a nuclear power plant in the Büyükeceli village of Mersin. Since the initial announcement and the selection of a location, the project has been a topic of controversy due to environmental concerns; the resistance began in the 1970s at the local level, reaching the national stage in the 1990s through organizations such as NKP, and accelerating before and after the deal with Russia in the 2000s. The birth and the rise of the environmental movement in Turkey occurred in parallel to the resistance against nuclear power initiatives of consecutive governments. The environmental movement in Turkey emerged as a consequence of the urbanization and industrial development through massive investments into infrastructure as well as a deruralization process. These conditions occurred within the context of the neoliberal transition starting from the 1980s, and accelerated urban development and destruction of commons during the 2000. The state realized the neoliberal transformation through authoritarian measures which also positioned it in opposition to environmental protestors (Ozen & Ozen, 2011). In parallel, the movement was affected by conditions of massive political polarization and has been targeted by the state through the populist discourse of antagonism between conservatism and secularism.

However, the movement was impacted by massive political polarization and has been targeted by the state through the populist discourse of antagonism between conservatism and secularism. The birth and rise of the resistance against the Akkuyu NPP were intertwined with that of the environmental movement. The two major stages of anti-nuclear resistance; local instance and national civil society organizations, occurred in Akkuyu as well. In the last decade of this struggle, the mobilization gradually disappeared; this was in contrast with the rising successful environmental mobilization across Turkey in terms of socio-ecological justice during the 2000s; community struggles against hydropower (Yaka, 2019), coal power plants (Arsel et al., 2015), dam projects (Warner, 2015), mining and other industrial initiatives. Anti-nuclear resistance was not as successful compared to the other socio-ecological mobilizations in Turkey (Balkan Sahin & Bodur Un, 2022; Akbulut et al., 2017). As illustrated in this chapter, the causes behind this phenomenon include the internal shortcomings and lack of cohesiveness of the movement; and the limitations of the legal strategy which had an important but complementary role but lost its effectiveness due to the dissipation of more vital forms of struggle.

CHAPTER 3

ENERGY AND POLITICS; AKKUYU AS A SYMBOL FOR THE NATION

In the Global North, energy is a constant force located in the underground of society, only visible to the eye when it is disrupted or breaks down, not for display purposes and not subject to aestheticization (Gupta, 2015). This is in contrast to the visibility of infrastructure in Turkey as a developing country. Massive infrastructural investments in the form of ‘megaprojects’ have been instrumental to the authoritarian and populist governance of the AKP; furthermore, they consistently possess an aesthetic purpose through striking visibility and grandeur (Hoyng & Es, 2020). The populist discourse of the party was reinforced by the magnitude and visibility of newly built infrastructure in urban and rural regions. There is an insightful contrast between infrastructure as a conspicuous sign of state power in Turkey and infrastructure as an underlying and ever-expanding background network in the Global North.

This chapter will investigate the extreme visibility of the Akkuyu NPP as an infrastructural project in the Turkish media, and the narratives formed around the ‘national’ significance of the initiative. I argue that the Akkuyu NPP has been a highly prominent instrument of politics and a symbol of the development and progress promised by the state. Furthermore, despite the Russian control, the narrative effectively reformulated the project as a nationalist initiative; securing its place in the hegemonic nationalist ideology. This framing contributed to the government and company efforts to subdue criticism against the nuclear power plant; and the eventual consolidation of public opinion.

3.1 Destiny of nations; ideology, hegemony and discourse in energy infrastructures

The study of energy has recently moved into the territory of humanities and social sciences by way of critical engagement with the production and distribution of energy with an eye on social tensions, political discourse, and economic activity (Szeman & Boyer, 2017). A critical approach to energy production reveals its intersections with history, politics, and culture. (Szeman, 2020). Natural resources and energy production entail a crucial connection with political discourse and governance over populations. This dynamic is more visible in the developing world, where energy production becomes intertwined with collective national dreams. As an example, petrol states transform into magical states, where ambitious development projects appear out of thin air (Coronil, 1997). Politics of energy are contextualized in progress, welfare, and national interest.

In studies of energy from a critical perspective, the impact of state power and energy governance are prominent; according to Boyer (2015), the flow of electricity is simultaneously an instrument of governance and a basis for the existence of state power, due to the perpetual drive for the expansion and exhaustion of existing infrastructure. The national imagination on energy also has a temporal dimension; energy resources are intricately embedded within visions of the future and the past, entangled with certain affects such as nostalgia, hope, and dread (Ferry & Limbert, 2008).

The epistemological framing and discursive layer of critical pieces of energy infrastructure impact the community's experience of it, creating a knowledge system that reinforces or criticizes the uneven distribution of wealth and risk (Murrey, 2015). Infrastructural projects have the function of being "political dreamscapes" for the people and the state (Firat, 2016). They are deployed as mechanisms of political

meaning-making, holding enormous symbolic power as the shapers of public opinion. The excessiveness of the costs, both environmental and social, help reinforce the significance and the potency of these endeavors. More importantly, in the case of Turkey, the dreamscape quality of energy projects precedes their material impact or utility; infamous failings of infrastructural projects in the last decade of the AKP rule reinforce the immaterial function of these initiatives (Firat, 2016).

Furthermore, networks of energy become instrumentalized by biopower for the governance of life and population; giving birth to the term ‘energopower’ to describe the intervention into the social body (Boyer, 2014). Studies on energopolitics showcase that the governance of living is dependent on the organization of infrastructure and energy resources (Boyer, 2014; Mitchell, 2009). Boyer describes the term energopower as a respectful intervention into the study of biopower, with the aim of reconsidering the significant interconnection between conditions of life and energy in the contemporary era. Mitchell’s (2009) study of carbon energy and modern democracy which reveals the simultaneous rise of fossil fuels and capitalism, is in line with this type of analysis. Energopower engages with history because it attempts to trace the genealogy of modern power by way of looking at its interaction with electricity, fuel, grids, forces, and networks of distribution; all of which form the dominant regime of energopolitics. Hence, investments in energy and infrastructure are reinforced by the existing regime of truth. In the Global North, the rhetoric that accompanies the recent turn to renewable energy, which seeks decarbonization and eco-efficiency, is built on the growth and advancement of industries with minimal environmental damage. When confronting climate change, the underlying rationality in the Western response presumes that economic growth is an unstoppable process that must sustain a link with resource use

through the most rationalized and efficient method (Boyer, 2019). This perspective is conducive to maintaining the dominance of the market, as technology and innovation are prioritized within the ideology of neoliberalism. The established basis of these arguments is biopolitical intervention (Boyer, 2019) that objectifies the population and prescribes remedies for processes that are beyond human control, such as technological advancement, resource use, and market forces. At the same time, infrastructure and energy politics are often grounded on nationalism as a persistent characteristic of our contemporary reality.

Economists who promote a “catch-up” theory of development often look to Asia for evidence for a technologically determinist notion of development (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003). The problem with this approach is the neglect of contradictions linked to class and the domination of the West over the rest of the globe which is made possible through the global division of labor. In this context, the national development model reinforces the mechanisms enabling the exploitation of cheap labor; excluding workers and underprivileged communities from participation in the path to development (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003). The models of national development in the Global South are dependent on a constantly increasing degree of exploitation in the name of competition with other nations, resulting in a race to the bottom.

In the discursive framework of national development, a political facade obscures the networks of exploitation and environmental degradation. Nationalist myth-making has a sociopolitical function which becomes a useful instrument in domestic and international politics (Guevara, 2016). Governments of the Global South pursue such narratives in electoral and political campaigns, deploying the concept of progress without regard to social and environmental costs, in the name of

propelling the nation towards an ideal vision of the future. This vision is oriented toward claims of sovereignty, independence, and climbing up the global hierarchy, despite inherent contradictions in ensuring hegemony in deeply polarized societies (Saracoglu & Demirkol, 2015).

In many countries of the Global South, energy infrastructures are irreplaceable components of the dominant programs of development. One example is Latin America, where politics of energy are intertwined with the exploitation of natural resources through transnational cooperation between local elites and foreign extractors (Cloke, 2018). As revealed by ethnographic studies of energy politics in peripheral landscapes, development narratives are simultaneously entangled with legacies of colonialism. In the 21st century, the legacy of colonialism does not only occur through foreign intervention but through the self-colonization of the nation-state targeting particular localities whose autonomy is undermined in the name of progress, resulting in communities of resource-rich regions experiencing a long-term process of dispossession (Powell, 2018). In studies on energy transitions in the Global South, transnational and socio-material processes reveal the significant influence of foreign capital (Power et al., 2016). The investigation of energy transitions in Kenya showcases that the perpetual process of neo-liberalization enables foreign capital to establish the terms and conditions of political decision-making on energy (Power et al., 2016). Powell (2018) points to colonization as an “unfinished and open-ended” project which relies on a variety of actors on the local, national, and international stage. Beyond colonality, the relations of resource extraction between countries are marked by the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens.

The relationship between Turkey and Russia is marked by a power imbalance which is to the disadvantage of the former (Aydın-Düzgıt & Noutcheva, 2022). Turkey's isolation in the international political stage was simultaneous to the changing dynamics of its relations with Russia. As the periphery of Europe became a landscape of tension with Russia undermining the hegemony of the West; the Turkish state shifted closer to the China-Russia axis in economic, political and defense dimensions (Kutlay & Onis, 2021); described by some as a discursive turn away from Western hegemony (Zengin & Ongur, 2020). On the other hand, the political shift in Turkey, marked by a turn towards an authoritarian state dominating the market, has similarities to Russia in terms of overtones of state capitalism (Kutlay & Onis, 2021). The close relations and the imbalance of power between the two countries have been described as "asymmetric interdependence;" making Turkey the party with less bargaining power and a significant vulnerability to the other party's retaliatory actions (Kostem, 2018). As the economic and political relations between the two countries are reinforced and strengthened, Turkey's weaker position becomes more pronounced.

Within this context of dependence and imbalance of power, positioning the Akkuyu NPP within a national development framework, and emphasizing its significance from a nationalistic perspective, may appear contradictory at the first glance. However, this paradoxical framing is in line with the politics of energy and infrastructure in the rest of the Global South. In such political framings, the imbalances of power between developing countries and imperial powers are justified through nationalist myth-making practices, which serve as hegemonic tools of capturing public consent. Collective dreams, aspirations and visions of the future reflect on such projects of development; obscuring the relationship with foreign

capital and extractive relations with colonial powers. As will be discussed in the rest of the chapter, certain key notions emerge in the discursive strategy of “nationalizing” a development project. In the case of the Akkuyu NPP, the official narrative was centered on particular themes; such as technology transfer, employment, and energy independence.

In projects of energy infrastructure, justification occurs through an appeal to grand narratives, with promises of economic growth, security, modernization and welfare; in connection to national well-being and collective interest. The fate of the nation is closely linked with advancing and expanding infrastructure, with an obscured dimension of foreign interest or colonial legacy. As a global phenomenon, politics of energy infrastructure enable centralization, reinforcement of state power and governance, and the exclusion of mechanisms of public intervention and decision-making. Therefore; the sociopolitical landscape of energy reveals a common and persistent narrative of legitimization; technocratic arguments advocating for the necessity of development, and nationalist arguments which solidify the link to the hegemonic ideology but also serve to conceal foreign interest. Amidst the complex interplay of market forces and relations of dependence; legitimization necessitates a delicate game of strategic framing and selecting the appropriate discursive tools.

3.2 Politics of energy and infrastructure in Turkey: Neoliberal developmentalism

Energy and infrastructure are highly visible in the political landscape of Turkey; adorning the government’s election campaigns and occupying the media narrative. This is in contrast to the Western context that mostly obscures the infrastructure of energy; mystifying the distribution of costs, benefits, liabilities, and describing

energy as an ever-present reality. In Turkey, energy and infrastructure are a pronounced, striking component of national politics. The reasons behind this phenomenon are intertwined with the government policy over the last two decades.

The AKP's neoliberal developmental plan has an important pillar; a subset of policies on massive urban transformation, with consequences such as displacement, social exclusion, and gentrification (Elicin, 2014). In Turkey, this rapid urban transformation became possible through oppressive and authoritarian mechanisms of governance. Striving to attract investment from domestic and foreign capital (Elicin, 2014), neoliberal economic restructuring and developmentalism paved the way for a new model of accumulation in Turkey. AKP's policies of urbanization, large-scale investments into urban infrastructure, and social housing projects such as TOKİ have been the driving motors of establishing neoliberal hegemony (Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014). Energy infrastructures played a determining role in this new paradigm; investments in harnessing and distributing energy were utilized to obscure the interest of capital and silence the opposition (Bridge et al., 2018). Some studies describe the socio-economic paradigm of post-2011 Turkey phase as a state model with key features of authoritarian developmentalism (Onis, 2019).

In parallel, geopolitical conditions have a substantial impact on politics of energy. The location of Turkey as a historical bridge between the East and the West created an opportunity to function as a transit channel for Russian gas (Bridge et al., 2018). With geopolitical opportunities, growth through energy infrastructure contributed to ensuring the relevancy of Turkey in the international arena, particularly against the European Union, in a critical time of growing authoritarianism (Firat, 2016). Patterns of international trade are closely linked with the geography of energy; the territoriality of energy intersects with factors such as

labor, investment, geopolitics, and capital (Bridge, 2018). In Turkey, energy is intertwined with concepts of nationhood, independence, and state power, and used as a weapon against the growing criticism of the government. The discursive agenda in legitimizing nuclear energy is built on a paradigm of endless growth in energy demand, linking modernity and prestige with nuclear power, and trivializing concerns about risks and accidents (Niphi & Ramana, 2023).

On the other hand, the accumulation model pursued by the government is dependent on clientelist networks and close political connections with certain factions which emerge as the main beneficiaries of the new regime. In the Akkuyu NPP, the Turkish company responsible for construction works is IC İttaş İnşaat; one of the few companies which received the highest share of state tenders during the AKP rule (Simsek, 2022). Due to their alignment with the government, these companies are immune to legal accountability and public scrutiny; exacerbating the undemocratic nature of nuclear industry.

The new economic regime under the AKP government has been driven by megaprojects ranging from infrastructure to energy, public housing, and urban infrastructure; undertaken by companies which possess political privilege, benefit from special contracts, secret deals, and tax benefits. IC İttaş signed a contract with the Russian state company ROSATOM to manage the construction works of the Akkuyu NPP project; this relationship has been tumultuous but consistent (Reuters, 2022). The Akkuyu NPP is situated in a context of neoliberal development fueled by a rapidly growing construction industry, which is delicately contingent on clientelistic relations between the government and certain industry players.

Real estate development under the AKP government has been a critical focus of sociological investigation, enabling the analysis of the commodification of urban

space, centralization and increasing state power (Gulhan, 2022); infrastructural endeavors have been repurposed as projections of national development (Hoyng & Es, 2020). The turn to nuclear energy is in line with the developmentalist goal, reinforced by a corporatist view of national interest which promises to provide welfare for all sections of the social body. A vitalized economy, energy independence, and national pride constitute the premise of this framework, justifying temporary sacrifices. Developmentalism has been particularly relevant for the rise of construction and extractive industries across Turkey (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021). Environmental objections that emerged due to the rise of the construction industry were countered by this development discourse, delegitimized as harmful for the future of the nation.

On the other hand; a prominent characteristic of authoritarian governance in Turkey has been the politics of non-governance which withdraws responsibility from state institutions to create space for arbitrary decision-making by the central government (Acara, 2019). As a way of centralizing decision-making and circumventing autonomous institutions of public intervention; non-governance played an important role in politics of energy. This is parallel to the global phenomenon of decreasing public control and intervention through politics of energy infrastructure. In Turkey, a crucial example is the water sector and the diminishing power of State Hydraulics Works (DSI) on irrigation policy and water governance, which enabled the central government to intervene with authoritarian decision-making (Acara, 2019). The decline of regulatory independence in Turkey through government policy was linked to certain institutional legacies; centralization, executive discretion, and politicization of the bureaucracy (Yalman & Bedirhanoglu Toker, 2010).

At the same time, neo-liberalization of energy production and distribution gave rise to widespread protest and opposition based on environmental concerns against initiatives of rural transformation (Aydin, 2016). At the intersection of neoliberalization and an increasingly authoritarian regime, the state adopted the role of a “brokerage” between capital and the people concerning rural disputes (Erensu, 2018). Therefore, despite frequent confrontations in rural localities, the opposition of local populations and civil society did not translate into influence over policy; as grievances were absorbed by the state as a negotiator between parties with differing interests.

To justify instances of authoritarian intervention, the government made use of ideational narratives as hegemonic tools (Yılmaz et al., 2020). An important component of such strategic narratives was the creation of an antagonism between environmental activists and the people, which served to normalize extreme measures taken by the state to subdue mobilization (Ozen, 2022). Based upon a vague definition of the people whose interests are contradictory with that of environmentalism, this manufactured antagonism was deployed to undermine the long-term viability of environmental mobilizations. Thus, the government endorsed a mentality of “us vs. them” which was strategically utilized to suppress dissent. This discursive tactic creates a manufactured contrast between the demands of the people and elites (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021); both terms functioning as empty signifiers to be substantiated according to the particular context. The antagonism between ordinary people and an elite group that pursues the objective of undermining collective interest is a historically established discursive tactic in populist politics (Laclau, 2005). Adopting populist governance in line with the neoliberal model, the government successfully propagated a discourse that allowed perceiving

environmental costs as necessities in the name of greater national welfare (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021).

The discursive turn necessitated by these grand endeavors of national development was dependent on the co-optation of the media; the government adopted a variety of legal and financial methods to influence or capture media organizations. Direct intervention in the domain of media resulted in the consolidation of patronage relations and marginalization of oppositional voices (Yesil, 2018). This became possible through government pressure and disciplinary methods; as well as pro-government factions investing in the industry. According to the data published by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Turkey ranks as fourth in the world in terms of the number of imprisoned journalists (Getz, 2022). In the resulting picture, the overwhelming majority of the media landscape in Turkey legitimizes and ensures authoritarian continuity (Coskun, 2020).

3.3 Turkey steps forward: Akkuyu NPP as the dream of a nation

A poll by Greenpeace in Turkey, in 2011, showcases that 64% of the surveyed group disagrees with building a nuclear power plant in the country (Karaca, 2011).

Considering this widespread opposition; how did the opinion of the local population on nuclear power go through a dramatic shift, with dwindling opposition to the Akkuyu NPP? In order to find the answer, I look at the discursive tools utilized by the media which are reflected in the arguments provided by pro-Akkuyu locals during my fieldwork. I argue that mainstream media plays an important role in attributing national significance to the Akkuyu NPP and legitimizing the necessity of nuclear energy. Despite the controlling power of Russia, the Akkuyu NPP is firmly contextualized as a national initiative, serving developmental goals with an aim to

increase the welfare of the nation. This framing is embraced by pro-Akkuyu inhabitants of the region, in the everyday interactions of communities around the Akkuyu NPP.

In order to investigate the framing, contextualizing, and meaning-making practice of the national media with regard to the nuclear power project, I will deploy the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is instrumental in studying social structures because it is based on an understanding of discourse as evolving, situated within societal context, and inclusive of various social forces and power relations (Tennan et al., 2015). It enables an analytical look into layers of text and other modes of communication. With such critical approaches, discourse is not only a passive relay of social reality but is constitutive of an action in itself; assuming a role in shaping the social world. Thus, the underlying functions of discourse are revealed through the interplay between action and process, context and social structure, in-group and the out-group (Tannen et al., 2015).

At first glance, one of the significant concepts in these discursive endeavors is a constant reinforcement of the growing “strength” of the country within the international order (Yesil, 2016). In this framework of national strength, infrastructure is attributed an important role as a marker of progress and development. Increasing national strength, prestige and influence are further signaled by certain keywords that implicate promises for the future. For the Akkuyu NPP, “transfer of technology” has been an important notion in formulating its national importance. The Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources notes that: “Akkuyu will enable the transfer of nuclear technology to our country, while contributing to the establishment of a domestic and national nuclear industry” (Milliyet, 2022).

The phrase “transfer of technology” was repeated in most of the interviews I conducted in the town of Tasucu by people who held positive opinions about the nuclear project. Interestingly, this argument was not thoroughly contested or deconstructed by the critics either; as some of them refer to the “transfer” as a potential positive impact. The absorption of new technologies as a possible benefit emerges from the accounts of state officials and company statements. Transfer of technology indicates that through the acquisition made possible by the Akkuyu NPP, the project will not only contribute to the training of skilled personnel, but enable potential future projects to build national reactors (Yeni Safak, 2022). It marks a long-term strategy for the Turkish state, moving beyond the existing political order, separating the “the national interest” from the immediate benefit of the existing regime. Moreover, this angle creates a counter-argument to the criticism of Russian control on the power plant.

Media coverage underlines that the Akkuyu NPP is the single biggest investment in the history of Turkey. More importantly, the existence of nuclear power is a major indicator of the level of development in a country, and the project is a move to strengthen Turkey’s competitive position against global superpowers (Mersin Gazetesi, 2022). National interest is at the forefront of discussions around the Akkuyu NPP, as even the opposition fails to sever the link to nationalistic ideology (Erdem, 2022). The size and the cost of the project mark the passing of a threshold in the country’s history and signify that Turkey will be among the developed countries utilizing nuclear technology.

In April 2023, an official ceremony for the first transfer of nuclear fuel to the power plant was broadcasted live on national TV. High-level state officials from Turkey and Russia attended the event, making speeches on the importance of

cooperation between the two countries. In Turkey, the pro-government media covered the ceremony as an international event for a “great national project”; repeating the arguments to reinforce Turkey’s increasing competitive advantage. Newspapers noted that the ceremony was reported by the press around the world (Yenisafak, 2023); indicating the recognition of Turkey’s rite of passage into the developed world.

Another discursive element linked to the Akkuyu NPP is phrase “the dream of the nation”; implicating historical efforts to initiate the project, recurrent delays over the last decades, all of which ultimately came to an end with the agreement with Russia. In an official statement of President Erdoğan, he notes that “our country has *finally* [emphasis added] risen to the league of countries which hold nuclear power” (TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2023). In the path of progress, Turkey’s integration into the developed world will be enabled by nuclear energy; as the AKP government claims the prestige of putting an end to sixty years of waiting. An analysis of media coverage reveals that the phrase “a dream of the nation” may have been first used by the previous Minister of Treasury and Finance, who said in a speech that the dream of strategic nuclear power is becoming reality; and reiterated that the country will continue its path towards becoming great and powerful (Milliyet, 2023).

At the same time, the statements of the company are in line with the key arguments of the state. The Chief Executive Officer of the Akkuyu NPP claims that the majority of the project workforce is composed of Turkish nationals; and Russian engineers are eager to convey their experience and knowledge to young Turkish engineers. (DHA, 2023). This statement is a confirmation and reproduction of two official arguments; serving the national interest through employment of Turkish citizens, and transfer of technology/expertise through the interaction between

Russian engineers and Turkish experts. In other statements, she makes reference to the ongoing education program for Turkish experts, an initiative introduced and funded by the project company. She goes further to make a remark that one of the priorities of the project is to train highly qualified Turkish experts.

The local and national media report about the social engagement and community outreach activities undertaken by the project company. Notably, the company organizes an annual art competition for children in the age groups of 6-10 and 11-16 (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). In 2023, the theme of the drawing category in the competition was “atomic superhero”, a combination of the superhero concept with atomic energy. One of the drawings by the participating children



Figure 1 One of the drawings from the children's art competition depicts a female

superhero creating a natural scene out of a grey background, her cape filled with nuclear reactors and highways for vehicles. Through these activities, the company

boosts its popularity and interaction with the community; reinforcing and distributing the discursive tools of legitimization. In this case, the “greening” argument is emphasized by way of linking the benevolence of the superhero concept with nuclear energy.

The company organizes various other activities targeting children; in 2023, more than 150 students visited the construction site (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). During this visit, the company officials provided information about nuclear energy, describing it as the safest and most stable source of electricity. On the other hand, the company makes efforts to improve its image through social media. Project employees filmed a music video for the song “Je Veux” at the site of the construction, with the CEO Anastasia Zoteeva making an appearance and singing with experts and construction workers (Akkuyu Nukleer Anonim Sirketi, 2023). The company website published an article about the music video which includes the following quote by the CEO: “The project is developing, and our team is getting bigger! There is a well-known expression in Russia, which means "The song helps us to build and live!" (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). The visibility of project employees, inclusion of the CEO, and the selection of a cheerful song, reinforce the position of the company as a positive presence in local life.

After the Turkish earthquake on the 6th of February, in 2023, the company launched a donation effort to send essential supplies to earthquake victims (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). The donations were collected in central locations such as Taşucu and Silifke; making it a highly visible activity. At the same time, in order to counter the environmental objections, the company regularly participates in pro-environment activities. In 2022, employees joined the environmental project titled “Breath of the Future” to plant trees in Aydıncık and Yeşilovacık (Akkuyu Nuclear

Power Plant, 2022). The company also organizes concerts in central locations and hosts dance and performance groups arriving from around the world (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2022). These activities, branded as charitable and altruistic initiatives, serve the objective of changing the public perception of the project.

“The century-long dream of Turkey is coming true.” (A Haber, 2022). This sentence is repeated by a journalist in A Haber, a media company with close links to the AKP. The promises of wealth and prosperity through nuclear energy are abundant in pro-government media. Reports underline that with the Akkuyu NPP, Turkey will become free of its energy dependency and continue its path toward becoming a superpower. Mainstream media regularly releases updates from the construction site, encouraging a spirit of ambition and nationalist pride. “Energy dependency”, “development” and “national progress” are frequently used in the coverage of the project. In a short clip filmed in the construction site, a journalist conveys the information that construction is continuing at full speed while the camera pans to the location of the first reactor. He notes that when four reactors are activated, the power plant will reach 4800 megawatts of electricity. Within a context of increasing demand and energy precarity due to global crises, the promise is that in 2026, 10% of the consumed electricity in Turkey will be produced at the Akkuyu NPP.

The video clip continues with shots of workers on the construction site, their faces not visible. The camera scans the towers, the vast landscape, and scattered residential units built for construction workers. The phrase “a century-long dream” is repeated as the deadline of 2023 is announced for the activation of the first reactor (A Haber, 2019). At the end of 2023, no reactor was activated as the construction work is ongoing. In the video clip, the journalist comments that with the Akkuyu NPP,

Turkey is on its way to becoming a leading energy provider in Europe (Gonultas, 2022).

On the other hand, both official and company statements point to the global objectives for reduction of carbon emissions, greening, and climate neutrality. Government representatives celebrate Akkuyu as a modern and environment-friendly project that is suitable for a developed country; nuclear energy is a “climate-friendly” alternative that is in line with the global paradigm. The greenwashing of nuclear energy, which is a result of decades-long aggressive lobbying by the industry, attempts to position nuclear energy as the only solution to the climate question (Caldicott, 2006). Critics demonstrate that greenwashing is a front for the industry; nuclear energy is not carbon neutral due to emissions at all stages of production, uranium mining, water usage and waste production (Greenpeace, 2023; WWF, 2022; Tidey, 2022).

To reinforce the aspect of national interest, officials accuse the critics of the Akkuyu NPP of undermining the developmental goals of the country. They argue that the energy produced will be the energy of the nation (Uslu, 2022). Through the close connection to collective welfare, objections to the Akkuyu NPP are discarded on the basis of being detrimental to the nation. The heavy emphasis on nationalism reflects on the arguments of high-level critics of the power plant; as even the opposition cannot avoid the rationality firmly established by the state. In February 2022, the Parliamentary Commission of Industry and Technology held a meeting to discuss energy projects and legislation (Subasi, 2022). The Commission meeting included representatives from the opposition parties, some of which drew attention only to the dependency on Russia and demanded the nationalization of the power plant. Critics of Akkuyu NPP navigate a difficult path, often seeking to prove that

their position is in line with the interest of the nation, and they are solely advocating for better alternatives in the path of national development.

As the project will increase Turkey's international competitiveness, it is only natural that Turkey's regional adversaries will be critical. This is why the media frames criticism of the Akkuyu NPP from outside of the country as proof of its importance. The comments by a Greek minister about the security risks of the power plant (Yeni Safak, 2021) are positioned in line with this perspective; contributing to the legitimization of the project as a critical step towards development and progress. The same article also reformulates the internal criticism of the project; arguing that "the opposition (political parties) object to the project, as they always do." Internal and external criticism of the project is further evidence that the project will serve the interest of the nation.

The media coverage includes arguments on the positive contributions of nuclear energy to national economies, providing examples from other countries with nuclear power (Hurriyet, 2020). Others draw attention to "increased tourism, agricultural activity, and employment" in the region, underlining that the project had a positive impact on local life (Star, 2023). Taking into consideration the environmental degradation and changing economic patterns in the region, the claim of improved agricultural activity is questionable. As an example, the agricultural development cooperative in the Büyükeceli village began facilitating the construction of residential buildings on agricultural land (Yagmur, 2023), conforming to the rapid urbanization in the village and its surroundings.

In summary, the analysis of media narratives on the Akkuyu NPP reveal the deliberate utilization of key notions in order to frame the project as beneficial to the country; some of these concepts were transfer of technology, competitive power, a

long-awaited dream of the nation, sustainable energy production, increased economic activity in the region.

3.4 Conclusion

Social sciences and humanities have recently moved into the territory of energy and power relations, tracing the interaction between energy regimes and political and institutional structures. The sociopolitical landscape surrounding energy infrastructures, carbon-based or nuclear, demand attention to statecraft and modern power, distribution of costs and benefits, and the significant power of discourse. In the Global South, expansion and exhaustion of energy resources are intertwined with sovereignty and national interest; at the same time, foreign interest and colonial legacies of extractive industries are concealed behind the nationalist framing.

Turkey's turn to nuclear energy is situated in the global energy regime which strives for de-carbonization and the AKP's neoliberal development model. As in other national contexts, the project is effectively attributed a national significance through the discursive framing in national media. Manufacture of consent for the nuclear initiative is dependent on these discursive tools and narratives. A critical analysis of the media coverage of the Akkuyu NPP reveals that certain key concepts were important in this discourse; such as technology transfer, international competitiveness, increasing employment, and adjusting to the global turn to renewable energy. The costs and risks associated with the project are rearticulated in the context of serving the long-term interest of the nation; with exaggerated promises on economy and welfare. Consequently, support for the nuclear energy project becomes a confirmation of the hegemonic nationalist ideology.

At the same time, the relations between the Turkish state and national media played an important role in cementing the narrative on nuclear energy; the authoritarian capture of media through pressure, forced transfer of media companies to pro-government factions, and censorship of content resulted in a media landscape barren of criticism or alternative voices. As such, pro-nuclear arguments in official statements, news articles, expert opinions, and company communications trickle down into the everyday conversations of the local population. The evolution of the public opinion and gradual compliance is connected to this discursive strategy which is reflected in the rationality of arguments made by pro-nuclear actors in the region. Consequently, politics of energy infrastructures in Turkey, solidifying the nationalist ideology surrounding the Akkuyu NPP, had a considerable influence over the trajectory of anti-nuclear resistance.

CHAPTER 4

UNEQUAL GEOGRAPHIES OF NUCLEAR POWER; TAŞUCU VS BÜYÜKECELİ

The Director General of ROSATAM, the State Nuclear Energy Corporation, Alexey Likachev says the following about the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant:

“Not only do we contribute to the new energy sector in Turkey, but also the infrastructure of the region. New housing, modern highways are being constructed in the region. There are developments in the areas of education, agriculture, hotel industry, and others. The residents of the region already feel the impact.” (TRT Haber, 2023).

The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant was launched with promises of development, economic prosperity, improvement of livelihoods, and various benefits for the local population. However, the impact of the project was not spread equally across the region. While some segments of the society benefited and profited from the construction of the nuclear power plant, others were exposed to its negative impact. The Akkuyu NPP resulted in spatial inequality and social segmentation between different localities, particularly with the polarization between coastal towns and small agrarian villages. The result was an unequal outcome and growing discrepancy based on previous social and economic status.

While the launch of construction works was a disaster for small villages near the construction field, the relatively prosperous, touristic towns of Taşucu and Yeşilovacık emerged as beneficiaries. The main causes of the creation of a beneficiary segment were increasing economic activity for business owners and skyrocketing profits in the real estate sector. I argue that the resulting picture of

unequal distribution had an enabling function for legitimizing the project; as local beneficiaries became co-opted in the narrative of prosperity, the previously widespread dissidence gradually decreased. The official narrative on the benefits of the project was channeled by the local elites and distributed to the rest of the population. This impact was apparent from my interviews with business and landowners in Taşucu and Yeşilovacık; those with prior social, economic or political privilege were repeating the official arguments coming from the state or the company; such as increasing welfare of the region, invigorated economy, futility of resisting industrial development, and importance of national interest. The shift in the general public opinion was steered by these arguments, while ongoing precarization and displacement were disregarded. As a result, the project gradually gained significant popular approval, leaving the opposition in the minority.

4.1 Unequal outcomes, spatial inequality and infrastructure

Exercise of power by capital and state can rearrange or reinforce inequalities at different localities, resulting in a discrepancy between the livelihoods of different communities. The categorizing and dividing functions of capitalism dictates who will be the insiders and outsiders in its violent practices (Fraser, 2016). The capitalist spatial system produces geographical agglomeration due to the dominating interest of enterprises (Clark, 1980). Geographical partitioning is part of this practice of mapping the beneficiaries of production and distribution; and a critical look at geography reveals the variety of dynamics in play within spaces of capital (Harvey, 2002). Infrastructure, closely intertwined with geography, plays a critical role in the distribution of advantages and disadvantages unevenly across the spatial plane. Environmental impact, social and economic development are unevenly distributed

across geographies. Uneven development is exacerbated by neoliberal globalization, as the illusion of equal outcome and collective welfare is broken down by the unjust distribution of economic benefit through development (Harvey, 2006). On the other hand, as described in the previous chapters, state power and control are essential for nuclear technology due to massive scale, risk factors, and the international dimension. The strong presence of the state has a significant effect in the uneven development produced by nuclear technology. Spatial inequality is shaped by a number of reasons, some of which are only characteristics of our physical world, such as the existence of mountains or sea; but natural features are surpassed by the effect of the distribution of other features such as infrastructure or public services (Kanbur & Venables, 2005). Uneven geographic distribution of benefits can accumulate and evolve over time, increasing or decreasing on the basis of contingent alliances and existing power relations.

Spatial inequalities are persistent under capitalism: A study on spatial equality and development showcases that underdeveloped regions are integrated through 'ruling coalitions' with their political elites, a tendency which exacerbates spatial inequality due to the terms of their inclusion (Abdulai, 2017). Providing an account on how political dynamics shape uneven development in the global south, Abdulai (2017) points to how economic and political elites in a certain region compete to integrate into development projects, resulting in specific distributional patterns. This perspective of political settlements illuminates the layered and complex characteristics of welfare and development, showcasing the importance of previous social and economic standing. Strict dichotomies are not adequate in explaining spatial inequality and assessing the dynamics of disadvantaged regions;

elite groups and hierarchical structures within disadvantaged communities determine how the developmental initiative re-shapes the region in question.

The unevenness in spatial distributional patterns is observed across the world in different national contexts. In China, power transmission infrastructure has an uneven impact on different groups, exacerbating income inequality within urban and rural sectors (Huan & Yao, 2023). As it is the case with any geographical extension of infrastructure, the benefits belong to certain groups while the rest are vulnerable to the damage and costs. Another example is the impact of mining projects and the struggle against mining companies; dependent on the exploitation of labor and natural resources, mining projects rework the living arrangements of communities, changing or reinforcing certain social relations (Lochery, 2022). However, the mining industry is contradictory in the peculiar way it impacts individuals and groups with varying backgrounds, mining capital depends on contingent alliances with people and produces a diverse set of experiences in confronting the project (Lochery, 2022). Therefore, the impact of an extractive industry is distributed unequally across different landscapes and the separate layers of affected communities.

Particularly in the Global South, infrastructure plays a critical role in the consolidation and fragmentation of the socio-economic landscape. During the expansion of road infrastructure in Ghana; middle and high-income groups moved into the area of expansion, while low-income groups were displaced due to rising prices and the gentrification process (Adugbila et al., 2023). Harvey (2006) articulates that a geopolitical approach to uneven development showcases territorially-organized power blocks competing to achieve the upper hand over marginalized communities.

The areas of degradation through industrial and extractive projects are akin to “sacrifice zones” which is a term recently reutilized to describe their uneven impact (Holifield & Day, 2017). Sacrifice zones are places where the livelihoods of inhabitants are disregarded for private interest, development or common prosperity. Deeply intertwined with spatial politics and geography, the sacrifice zone is a useful concept in explaining the categorical divisions between different regions, and how the degradation of particular localities, such as the destruction of a village near a nuclear power plant, is legitimized. The framing helps categorize zones which are at the receiving end of destructive activities, providing a resonant method of contestation (Martin, 2003).

The spatial inequality linked to industrial development approached from the lens of critical geography; a geographical framework of analysis which draws from Marxism and critical theory to investigate geographical divisions caused by the impact of social structures and unequal power relations. Grounded in social inequality, critical geography sheds light on the underlying dynamics causing spatial separations which may be obscured or perceived as factual or natural without a critical viewpoint. On the other hand, an integrated perspective that brings together precarity and its geographical distribution only enriches the study of spatial study of capitalism (Waite, 2009).

Positioned at the intersection of human and physical geography, critical physical geography is a tool which can vitalize the efforts to reveal the interdependence between natural and social systems. History, racism, colonialism, and patterns of development play a role in partitioning along geographical lines (Lave et al., 2014). Physical characteristics and transitions in certain geographies have implications for infrastructural investments, climate change, relations of

property ownership, land usage, and employment. Recent work on critical development geography, on the other hand, combines a political economy perspective with postcolonial theory, divulging various facets of geographical inequality by drawing attention to internal differentiation in the Global South (Glassman, 2011). Critical developmental geography points to regions favored or marginalized by the transnational movement of capital, as well as patterns of uneven development within and among countries of the Global South.

This framework enables looking at the Akkuyu NPP from a critical perspective, with an eye on spatial differentiation, revealing particular factors which lead to different consequences for locals. Geographic inequality emerges on the micro-scale, between the coastal and hinterland spaces, center and the periphery, reflected and exacerbated along the lines of class and ethnicity. The advantages of Akkuyu NPP have been accumulated in the hands of certain groups holding power over the rest of the population; people who previously owned property, or belonged to privileged communities. In contrast, people lacking capital or privilege, villagers who relied on small-scale agriculture or families dependent on wage labor were vulnerable to the repercussions of the project. In order to understand the dynamics of consent and contestation, spatial inequality and distributional patterns can be deployed as useful tools of analysis. The gradual shift in the public opinion about the project has been driven by these dynamics; the uneven impact enabled the acceptance of partial benefits as signs that the project was serving public good. Hence, there is a contrast between the promise of overall increase in welfare and prosperity and the actual impact of nuclear power in the region; a contrast which yields insightful reflections.

4.2 Villages as collateral damage; unequal landscapes of the Akkuyu NPP

During my fieldwork, I visited the small villages around the construction field and met their inhabitants, in Büyükeceli, Yesilovacik, Işıklı, Boğsak, and Akdere. These villages historically relied on small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry. The people historically adopted nomadic practices which meant moving to pastures during warm weather and overwintering during the cold months. Although diminished in time, this historical type of living partially persists to this day particularly with the cultural a lifestyle patterns of these communities (Harunoğulları & Polat, 2018).

Map of the villages around the Akkuyu NPP

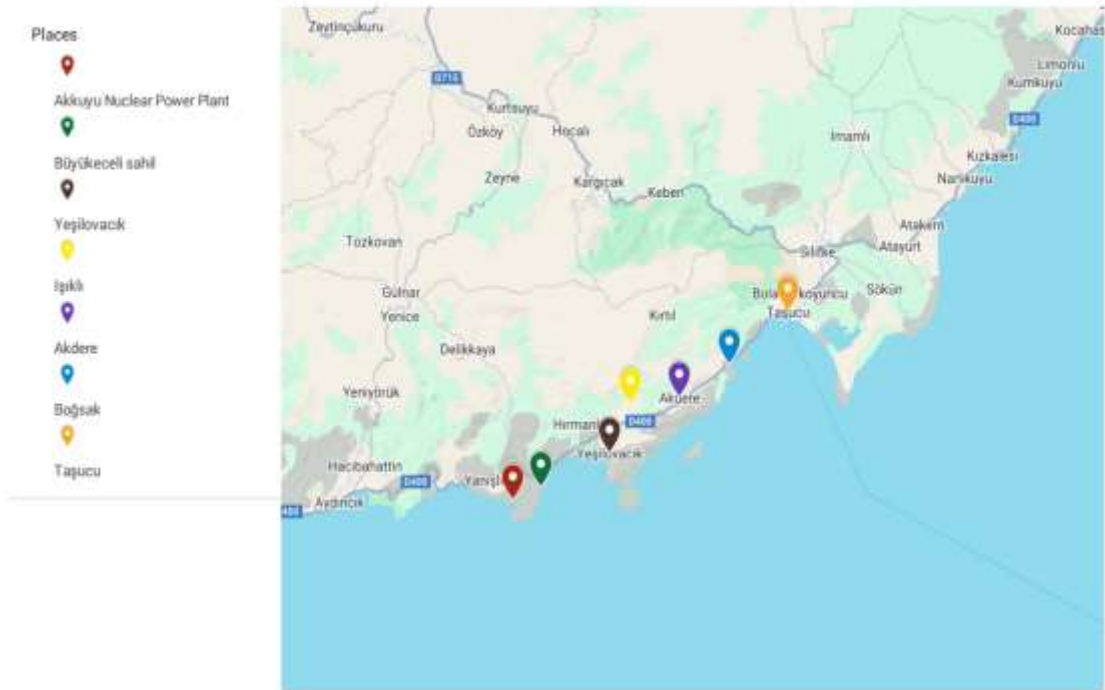


Figure 2 Map of the area around the Akkuyu NPP

Below is a table¹ which details the characteristics of the aforementioned villages; based on the name, population, and driving distance to the construction site. It should however be noted that these numbers were recorded in 2022; they include migrant workers and expats who relocated to the region after the construction of the plant started.

Table 1. Information about villages near the Akkuyu NPP

Village	Distance to NPP	Population in 2022
Büyükeceli	5,9 km	2,529
Yeşilovacık	18,8 km	3,877
Işıklı	19,8 km	1,532
Akdere	24,2 km	1,268
Boğsak (İmamuşağı)	31,2 km	634

For the purpose of substantiating the unevenness of development, I determine two categories of villages; the coastal/touristic towns, and impoverished hinterland villages which used to rely on agriculture. Yeşilovacık and Taşucu are two locations which became the beneficiaries of the project while the rest were impacted negatively by the construction. My findings indicate that the previous economic and social standing of villages and particular sections of the village population had a determining role in the allocation of developmental benefits.

I started my fieldwork in Akdere, talking to the people who were willing to share their experiences with the Akkuyu NPP. In the village of Akdere, inhabitants conveyed that their initial reaction was hope for a rise in their income and new

¹ Population data is retrieved from Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK).

economic opportunities. The first insight provided by these interviews was that a prominent tool of creating consent for the project was employment. Job opportunities at the plant were exaggerated with gossip, and some older villagers hoped that their children working in urban centers of Turkey would move back to the village if they could find jobs at the power plant. However, it later became apparent that local workers could only find low-skill jobs at the plant and the high-paying positions were reserved for Russian expats. According to two of my interviewees in Akdere, villagers who managed to find employment were those that had connections to the local networks of the ruling party. This, however, does not mean that the number of villagers who work at the plant is low, but that there is a separation between those who could find employment and those who could not, based on political affiliation. Similar statements were made by villagers in Işıklı.

The villagers expressed their disappointment about the project, however, almost everyone had a relative or a neighbor who works at Akkuyu. These close links and dependence on employment led to passivity and silence, even among the villagers who were previously opposed to the project due to the potential damage to small-scale agriculture and natural resources. As villagers described, the silence became stronger due to family connections; when one family member is recruited at Akkuyu NPP, the rest of the family is effectively silenced, and they stop interacting with the opposition and ignore the protestors.

I conducted most of my fieldwork in Büyükeceli, the village next to which the power plant is being constructed. Büyükeceli is the village closest to the construction field, and includes the access point to the field for the workers. Due to its proximity, Büyükeceli is the center of industrial transformation and urbanization; it is the ultimate victim of the project and as an area of collateral damage for this

massive inter-state initiative. Büyükeceli was once a lively village, with its population making a living through small-scale farming of mainly lemons, strawberries, and similar agricultural products, with a virgin coastline that attracted tourists in the high season. The villagers also engaged in touristic services on the beach to earn extra income.

When I visited Büyükeceli on two separate occasions in July 2022, more than half of the village was destroyed. What remained was a sprawling construction area, with residential buildings and asphalt highways surrounded by bare hills. The plant cover and trees were removed to make space for the construction. The construction field was hidden behind a hill, and the sprawl spread beyond the village and formed what looked like a small industrial town.



Figure 3. Vehicles and recently constructed buildings in Büyükeceli

Construction workers commute to the field in shuttle buses which are lined up in a massive parking area on the edge of the village. These workers who use the shuttle buses live in nearby villages or towns. Inhabitants of Büyükeceli complain about the workers, some accusing them of stealing or other unruly behavior.



Figure 4. Buses and trucks in Büyükeceli

On the other hand, a great number of construction workers reside in prefabricated residential units in and around the village of Büyükeceli. The streets of Büyükeceli are covered in dirt, residential garbage, and construction waste. One example can be seen in Figure 4 below, which is an image from an inner street showing the garbage and the new viaduct farther ahead.



Figure 5. Büyükeceli village inner area

A small river runs through the region, visibly contaminated and with a strong smell. Most villagers I talked to complained about the smell, and conveyed the rumors that the waste from the nearby residential units is being disposed of in the small river. During our tour around the village, we stayed away from the river, however, I managed to take a few photos of the visible waste.



Figure 6. Small river in Büyükeceli contaminated with waste

There is constant noise from cars, buses, construction, and all types of commotion; a few villagers express that it is impossible to sleep during most nights. According to villagers, there are controlled explosions routinely carried out in the construction field and this is a constant source of fear and disturbance.



Figure 7. Trucks and the new viaduct in Büyükeceli



Figure 8. Vehicles and residential units in Büyükeceli

During my second visit to Büyükeceli a few villagers offered to give me a tour around the village to observe the changing landscape. We saw plots of land with ongoing construction work to build residential units for workers or ancillary facilities for the project. The villagers informed me that most of the area around us used to be agricultural land, which were later leased or sold to the company or one of its subcontractors. One villager made the following remark about the transformation of the village:

“People do not have trust in their future. That is why they sell their agricultural land. They know that they will be exiled from this place, no matter what they do”

As we walk into an area filled with housing units for construction workers, one villager noted: “Here we used to grow strawberries, there we used to grow apricots. Now they are destroyed, turned into residential units for workers... The remaining agricultural lands, which are few, do not yield healthy produce. It’s because of the dust in the air, and the low quality of water...”

When I ask if the construction works provided any benefits to Büyükeceli, one of them replied: “We do not receive any benefit from the construction. Nothing turns into a profit for us. For example, we do not sell anything to the workers who live here. Their food, vegetables and fruits for workers are transported from the other side of the country by the company. This region is famous for its high-quality products and fertile agricultural land, why is food transported from elsewhere? We cannot sell any of our products to the workers.”

The inhabitants of Büyükeceli are also able to observe the conditions of construction workers, and they have been witnesses to accidents: “There have been many accidents with shuttle buses transporting workers. We heard that many workers lost their lives.”

Work-related accidents occur very frequently in Akkuyu NPP. The most infamous examples are accidents of shuttle buses, in only 2022, numerous bus accidents occurred resulting in injuries and death (Sen, 2022; Evrensel, 2022; Diken, 2022).

The population of the village has grown by thousands; construction workers from around Turkey arrive in Büyükeceli to work in the construction field. A significant share of construction workers is of Kurdish descent, coming to this area for work from Kurdish cities in the east of Turkey. Providing cheap labor from impoverished regions of the country, Kurdish workers are trapped in extremely exploitative work relations.

Nurol and Unal (2018) study the relations between the precarization of work in a sector which goes through a period of alteration, subjecting labor to further exploitation and competition. The fragility arising out of migration and its effect on labor relations are at the intersection of geography and labor. On the other hand, McIlwaine and Bunge (2018) shed light on the agency of migrants in situating themselves in precarious positions and the complications of bargaining for power in a transitional context, with many interval points between the place of origin and the place of arrival. Studies show that migrant labor exists in a more precarious state; with less power to forge a place for themselves in labor relations (Schiller & Çağlar, 2013), carrying a deeper precarity not only in the workplace but in physical residence (Banki, 2016).

The circumstances of migrant construction workers at Akkuyu NPP demonstrate the interconnection between precarity and discrimination, marking the racial lines of division. The power of industry and capital is established in the capacity of attracting and exploiting certain segments of the workforce. Unal and Nurol (2018) argue that particular employment structures and labor regimes exacerbate previously existing inequalities due to the exploitation of these divisions by employers and the state. The question of Kurdish internal migration to the Akkuyu NPP region traverses along these lines of partition and exploitation.

The Kurdish question in Turkey has a complex background which necessitates a detailed and comprehensive analysis. Although the limits of this study do not allow a broader introduction into the topic, the migration patterns which took shape with regard to the project are linked to the societal position of Kurdish labor in Turkey. As a historically marginalized ethnic minority, Kurdish workers constitute one of the most disadvantaged layers of the working class.

Historically, Kurdish workers migrated from underdeveloped areas in the east to the industrial or touristic centers in search of employment in precarious conditions (Gambetti & Jongerden, 2015). These migrational patterns include urban centers where the demand for labor is mostly in the construction sector, agricultural labor in rural areas, and tourism resorts on the Mediterranean coast (Gambetti & Jongerden, 2015).



Figure 9. New construction workers arrive in Büyükeceli

Furthermore, studies show that spatial divisions are maintained after such migrations; in the case of Akkuyu NPP, migrant Kurdish construction workers take residence mostly in prefabricated residential units near the construction zone. This is in sharp contrast to Russian expats who reside in the relatively more affluent and touristic

towns of Tasucu or Yesilovacik and commute to the power plant for work. There is a massive discrepancy in the comparison of Kurdish migrant workers and Russian engineers, showcasing that the Akkuyu NPP maintained and exacerbated existing ethnic and spatial divisions.

The villagers of Büyükeceli argue that they are ignored, silenced, with no attention paid to the destruction of their living conditions. My interviews with them include similar phrases such as: “Left alone, being disregarded, not being heard, not being seen”.

The villagers feel abandoned in the face of a direct attack on their livelihoods. One example is politicians; villagers report that politicians from opposition parties visited and communicated with villagers at certain times, but disregarded them afterwards with no concrete action taken to solve their problems. With the construction continuing at full speed, and the failure of incessant attempts to change their circumstances, villagers found themselves in a state of desperation. Within this state of desperation, they lost their belief in the possibility that they will be able to bring concrete change. They resorted to selling or leasing their plots of land, previously used for farming, to companies building residential units for construction workers, or engaging in other subsidiary work in connection to the power plant. Some of them had to relocate to other towns or cities, leaving behind their ancestral home.

Some anti-nuclear activists argue that a type of opportunism grew among the locals which exacerbated and accelerated the failure of the resistance, and enabled the eventual compliance with the project. On the majority of landowning villagers selling their lands to companies, one activist commented that they “lost their trust” in the villagers. This tension that arose out of shifting alliances and questionable choices of villagers contributed to the separation between anti-nuclear activists and

the locals. Based on my interviews, I observed that while activists talked about doing what is right, villagers expressed their fear that the result would be the same with or without struggle. My analysis of the locals' attitude towards mobilization against the power plant, which diminished gradually throughout the years, is that a deeply embedded precarity became the driving force behind their conformity. Although some locals stay in opposition to the project, their numbers are decreasing.

4.3 Local beneficiaries; the impact of the project on Tasucu and Yesilovacik

In sharp contrast to Büyükeceli, Taşucu greatly benefits from the vitalization of their local economy and the influx of resources and opportunities thanks to the Akkuyu NPP. Russian expats began moving to Taşucu around the year of 2012, and their numbers increased throughout the years. The migration of Russian expats had a significant impact on the local economy.



Figure 10. Taşucu from above

In Taşucu, there are two primary groups which profit massively from the project; small business owners and landowners. Taşucu became an attractive business location when Russian engineers and their families relocated to this small touristic town. These were largely affluent, middle-class Russian families, who had considerable purchasing power due to the attractive salaries offered by the project company. Russian families in Taşucu caused a massive hike in the real estate sector as locals who owned a plot of land, an apartment or a summer house in Taşucu witnessed their investments double or triple in value.

Before the launch of the project, Taşucu was already a relatively wealthy town with Turkish families arriving in summer to spend their vacations near the coast, however, with the presence of Russian expats, the town was in-season

throughout the whole year. Small business owners saw their earnings immensely increase over the years thanks to the spending habits of Russian families. Increasing profits attracted investment; more and more residential buildings with expensive rental apartments have been constructed across Taşucu. The construction industry and realtors became one of the most advantageous beneficiaries of this transformation. Simultaneously, working class families who did not own any property and students who resided in Taşucu to commute to a nearby university were forced to find accommodation elsewhere.

In Yeşilovacık, the locals' reactions to Akkuyu NPP are similar to Taşucu, as it is another coastal and touristic town which is the second in line to benefit immensely from the project. I had the chance to interview a person in Yesilovacik who holds considerable power in the region. He is one of the wealthiest inhabitants of Yesilovacik, with abundant investments in real estate. My first question to him was about people's reactions to the launch of the project:

“Actually, the protests against Akkuyu were not the biggest. The locals were more resistant to the construction of MEDCEM, the cement factory. The protests were not on the same level for Akkuyu. A lot of villagers were arrested, and there were actions for quite a long while. Everyone I know used to be opposed to the construction of MEDCEM.”

With his emphasis on MEDCEM, and his account of the significant local resistance to the construction of the factory, it is revealed that the Akkuyu NPP constitutes only a stage in a series of events which transformed the region in recent history. Recently, locals and activists had protested MEDCEM over significant environmental concerns, due to experts' warnings on damage to water resources and destruction of forests (Baskavak, 2021). Again in the last decade, the rural inhabitants of Mersin

have been affected by the destruction of forests due the new factories and stone quarries, and extensive damage to the Mediterranean ecosystem due to rapid and uncontrolled expansion of fish farming (Karadag, 2022). The Akkuyu NPP has been a continuation of this historical process of deagrarianization, dispossession, and degradation of natural resources.

My interviewee in Yesilovacik expressed his gratitude about the positive impact of the project: “After the launch of the Akkuyu NPP, we received great economic benefits. Most importantly there was a positive impact on tourism. In the past, we had 9 or 10 months of what we call the dead season, and we used to go into debt every year during this period.”

I took note of his emphasis on economic vitalization, and asked him about the potential negative impact of the power plant: “Maybe in the long term there will be damage because of the power plant. But would our state do this if there was harm in it? This is a golden opportunity for this region. Our people have been lucky, our villages have been revived. Land prices, house and apartment prices have gone up. The rents are increasing. Russian families moved here to work in the power plant, and we are grateful for them”

Talking positively about the immigration of Russians, he has interesting observations about Kurdish construction workers: “There are many Kurdish workers who moved to this region for construction work. They don’t have any jobs in their cities, this is a mistake that needs to be fixed. There are approximately 1,000 workers like this in the construction field. Their living conditions are not good, they live in very small housing units.”

Despite his general positive views about the project, he is able to empathize with Kurdish construction workers, perhaps due to his own ethnic background. I asked

him a question about his views on the opposition to the power plant and the protestors:

“People need jobs. They don’t have many options. There are nuclear power plants everywhere else in the world, why not in Turkey? It is too costly to be an agricultural producer, we need jobs. It does not make sense to be against the project, the protests are political maneuvers by the opposition.”

For the beneficiaries of the project, the profit made due to the power plant overrides other concerns. They are convinced of the government-led narrative of attributing to the project a role in national development and increased economic activity. They support this argument by underlining the lack of job opportunities for locals and the barriers in front of maintaining agricultural production.

As described before, landowners and business owners expressed positive views about the project. There were numerous references to the 9-month long “dead season” in the past which was marked by a halt in business activity and pushed them into debt. The dead season has disappeared thanks to Russian immigration. Landowners spoke highly about the vitalization of the real estate sector with the construction of new buildings and increasing prices. Furthermore, according to my interviews with business owners and other locals, there is increased public investment into infrastructure after the Russian immigration. The streetlights, garbage cans, and sidewalks have been renovated by authorities. However, the central subject matter when it comes to Russians in Tasucu is about their spending and the increased earnings of local businesses.

One of my aims was to explore the local attitude towards Russian immigrants with the interviews I conducted in Taşucu. In my interview with a restaurant owner, he had the following reply to my question about Russian expats: “We appreciate the

cultural change brought by the Russian expats and their families. They are civilized people. They have active social lives, they go out with their children, even small children...”

He reveals that in the beginning they were bothered by the difference in lifestyles: “At first we had a nationalist sentiment, of course they are different, they drink alcohol on public buses; their women dress well and they sunbathe naked on the beach...However, we realized later that they are a source of income for us. They socialize with their families frequently and come to our restaurants, even single expats come here to have drinks and food. I would not talk badly about people who provide me with my income. There is no conflict between us, people are happy with the Russians, they brought good things with them”

When I ask about the positive impact of Russian expats, apart from spending habits, he replies: “The social life in this region is also changing thanks to Russians. Our streets have been improved with better infrastructure, which makes them busier and lively, even the garbage cans have been replaced recently.”

On the other hand, the perception of Russians by the locals includes a racial dimension based on preconceived notions of civility and modernity. During my fieldwork in Tasucu, a family who owns and leases a two-storey house near the coast made the following comments:

“The Russians who moved here are progressive, civilized, and well-mannered. They changed the culture of the local community. Yoruks who live in villages around this region are backwards people, they are extremely conservative. With the Russians’ involvement in social life, they had to adapt as well. Now women can dress more freely, since the beginning of Russian immigration.”

They note that because of the visibility of Russian families in public life, some conservative families left Tasucu: “Some conservatives had to sell their lands and move to other places. They were bothered by the presence of Russians, especially Russian women. Most conservative Turkish families who used to stay in Tasucu during summers do not come here anymore. In public, there are fewer women wearing headscarves.”

The general sentiment for Russians was positive, including the random people I met and spoke to on the street, in shops, and in front of vacation houses. They were described as “civilized, kind, proper people with good manners.” Inhabitants of Taşucu talked positively about the cultural change caused by the presence of Russian families, in contrast to the bad-manners of “easterners”. These accounts incorporate a highly racialized approach to immigration. An environmental activist that I interviewed in Taşucu, made a memorable comment on the perception of Russians; “It’s all about the eye color, the skin color, the hair color...”

It is important to note that most of the interviewees that I talked to who owned houses near the coast are not originally from this region. They moved from other cities in recent past to purchase property when the prices were significantly lower: “People who made investments in this area in the past, when everything was cheaper, are now rich. They made so much money that they bought multiple houses or apartments.”

An interesting component of my discussions with landowners in Taşucu was learning about their contempt for Yörüks who inhabit the mostly landlocked villages around the region. Yörüks are an ethnic subgroup of Turkey who historically had a half-nomadic tradition of living. In contrast, the landowners who bought property in the last two decades have liberal tendencies and do not embrace a conservative

lifestyle. Therefore, they were not comfortable with conservatism and were happy about the decreasing visibility of conservatives after the migration of Russian families.

The political atmosphere in Turkey throughout the 2000s has been configured by the rise of the AKP as an Islamist-oriented political party which acquired massive political and social power (Ozler & Obach, 2018). In this process, an emerging line of division within the population has been the polarization between secular and conservative segments of society, with the conservative and religious groups mostly aligning with the policies of the government. The sharp duality in Turkish society was shaped by the ideological and socioeconomic contrast between rural and urban regions (Carkoglu, 2008). This center-periphery polarization is dominant in the sociopolitical fabric of the country, parallel to the division between the secular and conservative populations. This separation reflects upon the relations between wealthy landowners in Tasucu and the impoverished and conservative population in the villages.

On the other hand, the racial dimension becomes more visible in a comparison with the attitude towards Syrian immigrants and refugees in Mersin. After the war in Syria, refugees arrived in Mersin and Silifke in search of residence and employment. None of my interviewees spoke positively about Syrian refugees. This difference in attitude goes beyond the racial aspect but intersects with class as well: An inhabitant of the village of Akdere, while explaining the reasons behind seeking employment in Akkuyu NPP, says that seasonal, per diem jobs at farms are no longer accessible for Turkish villagers as Syrians workers accept extremely low amounts of pay. The competition for low-skilled manual work creates a conflict which is not replicated in encounters with upper class Russian families. Russian

families in Taşucu are middle to upper class families of engineers, contributing to the positive perception among the local population.

These interviews reveal the layers of power and privilege at play in the attitudes against the nuclear power plant, its impact in the region, and how the consequences are different along the lines of ethnicity, class and residence. Kurdish construction workers, Russian expats, land and business owners, working class families are confronted differently by the project, producing twofold results; lack of consistent solidarity and the increased effectiveness of the hegemonic discourse on nuclear power.

4.4 Conclusion

In regions impacted by the Akkuyu NPP; economic, social and political power determined the circumstances of people during and after the transition. Political, economic or social privileges resulted in the differentiated paths of development or ruin, wealth creation or complete dispossession. This differentiation not only resulted in economic segmentation but shaped the consequences across the geographical landscape. All forms of ‘costs’ associated with the construction of a nuclear power plant were transferred to the marginalized and the voiceless in addition to the natural environment.

Increasing earnings through tourism, profit through new investments, and the lucrative real estate sector were the main advantages produced by the launch of the project. This resulted in a polarization between rural hinterlands and coastal towns, creating an inner layer of elites who facilitated consent by reproduction of hegemonic discourse on the energy infrastructure. Ethnic and racial lines of division were maintained in the social impact of the project; while Russian expats are

embraced by the inhabitants of Taşucu who perceive them as a symbol of progress and prosperity, Kurdish construction workers and Syrian refugees are excluded and disregarded. As an additional instrument of power, political connections to the ruling party proved useful in finding employment at the power plant.

Consequently, Akkuyu NPP had an exacerbating effect on spatial, racial, and class polarizations distributed through spatial lines. A sharply visible contrast is the difference in outcome for Büyükeceli and Taşucu, while the former is a silenced victim, the latter became a minor beneficiary of this massive transformation. While affluent coastal towns were able to absorb the benefits, villages became exposed to the costs of the nuclear power plant.

The complete disregard for villagers' concerns and their lack of agency in decision-making processes were enabled by recent policies of centralization and legal intervention into local autonomy. The political characteristics of nuclear energy production which require close links to the state and the ongoing process of de-democratization in Turkey played a role in exacerbating inequalities and circumventing public scrutiny. In the emerging discrepancy between the village and the coast, the local elites played an important role in dissuading protestors. In this context of economic precarization and spatial segmentation, there were insurmountable barriers in front of the success of the anti-nuclear resistance. For the majority of the population, it was impossible to consider the Akkuyu NPP as a generational, environmental, and deeply political subject.

CHAPTER 5

THE QUESTION OF LABOR OR “BETTER TO DIE WITH A FULL STOMACH”

The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant encountered significant opposition from the local population beginning from the launch of the project. However, this resistance transformed into quiet compliance over time. One of the determining elements of this rupture was the prospect of employment at the construction field. As the villagers received promises of secure and stable employment through official and company communication channels, their opinion on the project went through a transition. This chapter looks at this gradual compliance enabled through the illusion of stable employment, concluding with an analysis of current labor relations in the construction field.

My findings indicate that gradual compliance was due to the attractiveness of finding secure employment in an increasingly precarious economy. At the same time, an underlying factor to this process was a sense of continuity as the nuclear power project resembled other recent industrial initiatives in the region. Despite the apparent novelty and the magnitude of the Akkuyu NPP, the local communities perceived it as a process already in motion, unfolding over several decades.

The ‘process’ was the changing economic patterns and labor relations in the region; characterized by cyclic stages of initial resistance, suppression of protests, and eventual normalization. Over the last decade, industrial activity penetrated into the region and dismantled previously existing economic relations; and in return, offered limited opportunities for employment. This was accompanied by a decreasing ability to maintain agricultural production due to market forces and lack of state support. In the middle of the struggle to find secure employment; the Akkuyu NPP

did not possess the same level of gravity in local imagination compared to the state and the national public. Nuclear energy production, despite its grandeur, had little distinction from a stone quarry.

Ultimately, the promise of secure and stable employment was revealed to be an illusion. Despite the locals' hope of guaranteed income through the power plant, the current labor regime at the Akkuyu NPP showcases an extremely insecure way of living, contributing to the perpetuation of precarity in the region.

5.1 Employment as a cooptation tactic; the challenge of linking environmental concerns with social injustice

The intersection of social justice and the environmental movement have been studied extensively in social sciences. There are different approaches to this intersection, i.e. the convergence of the environmental concerns with structural injustice, one of the most well-known being the framework of environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2003). Within the capitalist world economy, the incentive to extract resources from territories populated by disadvantaged communities enables the alignment of this injustice with concerns over the destruction of environmental resources. The intersection between deteriorating economic conditions of communities and the environmental impact of industrialization can speak to this question of potential consolidation.

Structural violence in the form of extraction of natural resources from the Global South has been analyzed in depth by Nixon (2011) who provides an account of how the environmentalism of the poor is based on long-term processes which result in a non-visible, gradual, and multifactorial impact on certain regions. Due to the 'slow' nature of this impact, there may not be a spectacular moment of visible

harm such as the burning of a forest. Instead, vulnerable ecosystems are gradually exploited and poor communities are driven to intensifying states of disempowerment and displacement. Moore (2015) suggests that double exploitation of nature and labor can be articulated through the concept of “productivity and plunder”; describing the parallel between capitalism and the ecological crisis through a world-system perspective which establishes the primary forces of capitalism as the law of value and reduction of nature to interchangeable and simplified parts, serving the profit-making machines of the world-system.

The paradox of the conceptual framework of environmentalism ‘for the poor’ is linked to neoliberal notions of environmentalism which seek to find a balance between the market and the environment (Stoner, 2011). On a global scale, neoliberal environmentalism remains the dominant form of responding to the climate crisis. Based on the regulation of the self in line with forces of advanced capitalism (Stoner, 2011), neoliberal environmentalism undermines potential paths to challenging the structural roots of the climate crisis and prevents the formation of solidarity with other struggles against injustice. One evidence of the market-climate balance is the European Union’s ambitious goal of achieving climate-neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2023). The EU goal is in line with the Paris Agreement of 2015, adopted by 196 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, with the objective of keeping the increase of global temperature levels below 2°C above pre-industrial levels (United Nations, 2023). However, the EU framework of climate neutrality is integrated with policies of liberalization and austerity, resulting in falling real wages and a cost of living crisis (The Left, 2022). Policies of labor flexibilization and liberalization targeting specific industries always include climate objectives, enabling the integration of the neoliberal ideology of the European

institutions with the fight for the environment. This form of neoliberal, eco-consumerist environmentalism plays a role in destabilizing organic bonds with dispossessed communities, forming barriers between the struggles of environment and social justice.

The global climate agenda reflects on the Turkish government's policy of endorsing the nuclear power project; official statements include references to "zero emission" targets (TC Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanligi, 2018), Turkey's inclusion in the global green energy initiative; while the project company proudly demonstrates their commitment to "sustainable development" (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023). With the contrast between actual impact and institutional agendas, the question of environmental becomes convoluted.

The challenge of articulating environmental concerns in a way that intersects with economic injustice is influential within the struggle against Akkuyu NPP as well. In general, there has been a growing distance between locals and anti-nuclear activists throughout the years of struggle. This has first caught my attention in my visit to the region and initial discussions with anti-nuclear activists, who were critical of the locals' decreasing support, and their cooptation by state or company policies. However, when I took a closer look at the recent history of the struggle, I was able to observe that this discrepancy between the locals' attitude and activists' objectives did not always exist; the initial phase of the resistance was marked by solidarity and strong cooperation at the local level.

During my semi-structured interviews with anti-nuclear activists, I asked them questions about the reasons for this gradual estrangement with local communities and the eventual failure of the anti-nuclear struggle which previously had strong grassroots links. The activists' responses indicated several factors;

namely, the promise of secure employment, profits in the real estate sector and opportunism, and charity efforts of the project company. Challenging and responding to each of these factors has been difficult to impossible for anti-nuclear activists, but the promise of employment had a dominant role for the shift in the opinion.

The real estate sector and opportunism is analyzed in detail in Chapter 4 by looking at the impact of the project depending on capital, locality, and identity. When it comes to the impact of development, different layers of communities may have diverging interests depending on previous economic and social standing. Local elites, or those who hold privilege, can actively contribute to the production of consent, enabling intervention and dispossession justified by narratives of development (Powell, 2018). Similarly, the production of consent for the Akkuyu NPP depended partly on those who became the small-scale beneficiaries of the project colluding with private and public powers to be able to reinforce their elite status or achieve an advantage over the rest of the population.

Employment, on the other hand, was the most significant factor in gaining the recognition and approval of the local population. Several activists point to the changing views of figures who initially assumed leadership roles in the rising protest movement. However, they later changed their stance and began working for the benefit of the project company. One widely known example is a leading figure in the village of Büyükeceli, who abandoned the anti-nuclear struggle as soon as his son was recruited by the company.

On decreasing solidarity, one activist from Tasucu makes the following remark: “The most significant factors in convincing the local community were the real estate sector and promise of employment for the villagers.”

The activist is originally from the area, which makes him committed to the cause of defending the interest of his people. He is one of the few activists based in the region, closely following political and economic developments of environment and social justice. He engages with civil society actors, politicians, and other organizations, attempting to draw public attention to the damage to natural resources and the environment. My interview with him revolved around the changes in public perception of the project. On the cooptation of locals by the project company, his argument is the following:

“The company attempted to silence people by force in the earlier stages of the project. Both in the construction area and other locations, they were careless and vulgar, not interested in looking nice or favorable. However, in time they changed their strategy to soft power and methods of cooptation, providing support to villagers, and promising beneficial outcomes...”

The “soft power” tactics used by the company included financial and material support offered to the locals; and charitable initiatives which the anti-nuclear activists were not able to match. An example given by another activist is the payment of healthcare costs for an older woman who lived in the Büyükeceli village and needed an urgent medical procedure. Another ongoing tactic was recruitment by the project company for various activities related to the project.

The activist from Tasucu highlighted a recurring issue that many others also pointed out; the determining power of the real estate market and the locals making a massive profit by selling their agricultural land. Land dispossession, despite being fueled by short-term economic advantage, is concurrent with proletarianization and deagrarianization. Throughout the recent economic transition in the region; those who were previously “producers” have to make a living by turning to wage labor.

The issue of locals making a profit from land sales is reminiscent of the question of imperative vs. opportunity in studies of the early transition to capitalism. As a case of industry penetration into the hinterlands and an extension of control over previously autonomous producers; the Akkuyu NPP showcases similar characteristics to this structural shift. Based on the drive to extract surplus value through the expansion of wage labor (Gibson & Graham, 1997); the economic transition in the region is a process of proletarianization under capitalist relations of production. The driving force behind the lucrative real estate sector is also linked to the financialization of housing through government policy (Celik, 2021).

Moore's (2015) note on the "correspondence project" indicates the elimination of previous relations of production, as capital recreates space in line with its own logic with the aim of extracting surplus value. Parallel to the reconfiguration of under-utilized natural landscapes and resources, the shift to wage labor is in line with Adorno's argument on instrumentalization; the movement of capital through rationalizing, quantifying and scaling. It constitutes the reorganization of space in line with the extractive industry. The consequent separation between nature and society redefines nature as an instrument for the industry (Moore, 2015).

In this context, small-scale producers sell their agricultural land within a process of a generational shift to wage labor. In parallel, employment becomes the determining force in justifying exploitation and environmental degradation. A historical account of this transformation points to the popular willingness to conform to capitalism as a structural necessity to adapt in the face of rapidly changing economic conditions: Wood (1995) argues that in the early transition to capitalism in Europe, the flocking of big and small peasants, rentiers, and landowners to capitalist economic activity was an imperative born out of a structural necessity.

Given this broader economic transition, the problem of locals selling their land extends beyond a conscious effort to have the maximum profit in the short term. Instead, it becomes a hasty adjustment to rapid change. Around Akkuyu NPP, villagers began selling their lands at double or triple of the original value; because preserving land ownership would prove to be insufficient in maintaining the existing standard of living. With small-scale agriculture and other economic alternatives lost to market forces and state expansion, the economic imperative to sell off and move on became one of the few options available for the villages.

In this framework, the economic interest of ordinary people which operates in the short-term becomes contradictory with the long-term preservation concerns of environmental activists. Overcoming the polarization between the two realms can be enabled through different methods of politicizing the environment. Environmental concerns can be linked to economic precarity by way of dismantling this dichotomy and deconstructing the dominant narratives on the environment. Latour (2013) points to depoliticized struggles in the name of nature which take nature as self-evident; in contrast, nature can be reconstructed in a conscious engagement with a political struggle.

During environmental struggles against governments and multinational corporations, there are instances of nature politicized to pave the way for alignment with the economic or social struggles of different communities. Yavuz (2015) conveys a similar argument from within the anti-nuclear movement in Turkey; discussions on nuclear energy are confined within the rhetoric of the state and mainstream political thought, focusing on infrastructure, potential dangers, and alternative sources of energy. On the other hand, the environmental movement can extend beyond technical necessities and establish alternative avenues of

politicization, relating to economic circumstances, de-democratization, and dispossession.

Against this background, the “continuity” in the locals’ perception of Akkuyu NPP which caused the failure of substantial mobilization emerged out of the decades-long processes of economic change and the necessity to find employment. The overall result was compliance and the quiet acceptance of the project with its multifaceted consequences. The politicization of the environment requires an understanding of the economic and political insecurity which may reinforce the notion of employment as a co-optation tactic. The insecurity faced by locals is caused by processes of precarization in the neoliberal era which shrinks the temporal perception of dispossessed communities; distancing them from their future as surviving the present becomes an urgent matter. Similarly for the Akkuyu NPP, employment at the construction site promises a few years of security and most are content with this arrangement, despite the highly exploitative labor regime. When environmental activism refers to the next generation, or the state of the region over the next decade, this does not correspond with the survival mentality and short temporality of local communities.

5.2 Shifting economic patterns in the region; the decline of agriculture and the rise of the mining industry

One of the underlying factors which led to the separation between the activists and locals was the changing economic relations in the region. As described in the previous subchapter, the communities affected by the Akkuyu NPP exist in a constant search for secure employment in the face of growing precarity. In my interviews with villagers near the power plant, there were frequent references to a

decrease in agricultural production and the impossibility of depending on agriculture as the only source of income. In Turkey, the dispossession of rural communities in parallel with rural-to-urban migration has been a prominent and accelerated trend of the transition to neoliberalism.

When the Republic was founded in 1923, agricultural and rural development was one of the driving forces of the transition to the new regime. State support and subsidies for agricultural production, the introduction of modern technology, the expansion of farmlands, and investment into land productivity resulted in a successful case of agricultural development (Ozturk, 2012). State support for agricultural production was reinforced in the cultural realm through the significance of the “peasant” figure, as a representation of the new regime and a symbol of national identity (Yildirmaz, 2016). As a specific feature of the rural development of Turkey, agricultural centralization did not reach its full potential through the establishment of bigger farms by land consolidation, except for a few areas in the Aegean region and the “Agha system” in southeast Turkey (Ozturk, 2012). This era of national developmentalism came to an end with the transition to neoliberalism and the consequent shift in production patterns.

The introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s changed the previously established land regime and established patterns of agricultural activity. Turkey’s turn to an export-oriented economic strategy was enabled through the withdrawal of state subsidies for agriculture, shifting patterns of industrialization, privatization, and the destruction of institutional support systems resulting in the dispossession of rural communities (Adaman et al., 2018). As a case of deagrarianization, the new developmental model was characterized by large-scale investments into infrastructure and industry. The consequence was proletarianization

in farming households and further acquisition of underdeveloped and agrarian regions by domestic and international capital (Ozturk, 2012). In the consequent state of dispossession, rural communities are trapped in a newly established economic model in which they are seeking secure ground in an increasingly insecure context.

According to the data from the World Bank, the share of agriculture in employment decreased from 27% in 2000 to 18% in 2019.² The rapid transformation in the 2000s was reinforced by the Agricultural Reform Implementation Project (ARIP) adopted in 2001, supported by the World Bank (Karapinar et al., 2010). Consequently, Turkey's agricultural production lost its status as a primary source of income, with new economic patterns emerging in the rural regions. With the country moving towards market-oriented agriculture, declining state support, and deregulation, rural communities lost their previously established means of making a living.

On the other hand, various sources of secure employment were lost in the region in recent decades, contributing to economic precarity. One of the highly publicized turning points is the shutting down of the SEKA paper factory in 2006 (Hurriyet, 2019). Most of my interviews with the villagers included frequent references to the closure of the paper factory, as a response to questions about employment opportunities. Villagers assert that the factory was an essential source of employment, providing secure income for thousands of workers and their families in the region. The loss of the SEKA paper factory holds a strong presence in the local imagination and indicates a continuity between the gradual loss of income and job opportunities and the nuclear power plant.

² Data retrieved from World Bank. (2019). Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate).

Due to the geographical characteristics of the region, industrial mining activity has also significantly affected the villages of Mersin over the recent decades. Mining initiatives were met with protests from village inhabitants with the support of environmental activists. In particular, stone quarries have recently expanded their area of operation around the villages, despite the objections and protests of the local population. In the village of Turunclu, hundreds of villagers protested a stone quarry project because of damage to the environment and village life (Yagmur, 2022). In the Karadiken village of Tarsus; houses are routinely damaged due to dynamite explosions in a nearby stone quarry, with locals receiving little to no support from authorities despite their repeated complaints (Evrensel, 2014). In Gozne, a stone quarry built in 2015 is threatening the natural “plateau” status of the area, which hosts an assemblage of ecosystems under its climate regime (Yagmur, 2020). In the village of Esenli, the construction of roads for the stone quarry triggered a series of actions by the villages (CNN Turk, 2017). In Anitli, authorities granted an operation license for a marble quarry on a 100-hectares forest land; an area which was a grade 1 archeological site (Yavuz, 2022).

Stone and marble quarries are not new for the villages of Mersin. The area of land used for mining activities has exponentially increased in a short time period. As an area with unique and invaluable natural characteristics, the rural Mersin faces the threat of massive environmental destruction because of the mining industry. Some protestors describe the trend as an “ecological assault by the government.” (Evrensel, 2021). Despite a few small-scale achievements, locals and protestors have not been able to halt the expansion of the mining industry. Consequently, these projects are eventually normalized and become a part of the everyday life for the local

communities. The Akkuyu NPP was not only perceived as, but it materialized as identical to this ongoing pattern.

On the road to a small village near Büyükeceli, I met a young man spending time with his handful of friends from the same village. When he agreed to be interviewed, I asked him about his village, the power plant, and recent changes to village life. To my surprise, he was extremely critical of the project and had many concerns about its extensive impact. My other encounters with the inhabitants of this village were with people who had positive attitudes towards the project. The young man told me that many people used to be critical of the power plant, but their opinions changed very recently. I asked him why this happened:

“The people living in this village are very poor. They need factories, they need jobs. This is why they stay quiet. They have been silenced with secure jobs, but they don’t have any rights and their pay is low. The wages in the power plant are relatively better because pay is even lower in other workplaces.”

After conveying the problems with poverty and the difficulty of making a living, he mentions that he is a worker at MEDCEM, a cement factory in the same region. MEDCEM has attracted significant objections and criticism due to the destruction of the forests in the area (Baskavak, 2021).

“I am a subcontracted worker at MEDCEM. There are unionized workers in the factory, but they are directly employed. Subcontracted workers are not unionized. I was in touch with unions and I tried to convince my friends to join the union. I was not successful. I lost my hope of convincing people. I don’t enjoy life anymore and I’m tired of other people. Life is just difficult. Everything is expensive and it is impossible to make a living.”

He attempts to describe how agricultural production became almost impossible to maintain for the villagers: “We do not receive state support for agriculture anymore. The simplest example is water. Even watering the land is too expensive. We recently went to regional authorities to ask for support. They did help but it was too little and not enough.”

“There are not enough job opportunities, and continuing agricultural production is impossible. We used to do per diem work on others villagers’ land. But now the landowners prefer Syrian workers. Because the Syrian workers accept ridiculously low amounts of money. They work like animals. We have no jobs left.”

This quote by the villager reveals the challenges faced by the inhabitants competing with low-wage workers who recently immigrated from Syria. In Turkey, Syrians are concentrated in particular sectors which enjoy a boost in profitability due to low wages and mostly informal arrangements of employment. Such labor market integration of unequal nature, dependent upon the exploitation of vulnerability, caused competition to arise for low-skill and low-wage work between native and immigrant workers.

The young man’s account illustrates the main factors behind the legitimization of the nuclear power plant. As indicated by both villagers and the anti-nuclear activists, employment had a determining factor in the villagers’ changing attitude. The increasing difficulty of maintaining agricultural production played an important role in establishing compliance with the project.

Other recent structural changes contributed to the economic and political dispossession of the villages of Mersin. One of the examples is the legal status of village administrations. During an interview in the Büyükeceli village, a villager shared their experience with a plot of land rented by his family on the coast of

Büyükeceli. This rental land served as a source of income, as the family provided services to tourists and beach-goers, such as the sale of food and drinks. In addition to small-scale agricultural production, the family was able to sustain a sufficient income from both activities.

However, in 2012, a national legislative amendment concerning all metropolitan cities in Turkey resulted in the upheaval of this economic arrangement. With this legislative change, villages in metropolitan areas were deprived of their administrative and legal autonomy and reclassified as “neighborhoods” controlled directly by metropolitan municipalities (Birgun, 2022; Yilmaz, 2021). Consequently, village inhabitants were not able to rent publicly owned land from their village administration. The family in question lost access to the rental land. The defining characteristic of this legislative amendment is centralization; the transfer of local decision-making capacity to city administrations with closer connections to the state and government, resulting in villages losing their political autonomy, legal personhood, and access to property. The AKP government consistently implemented policies of executive centralization through administrative and legal reforms, concentrating decision-making powers to allow large-scale urban transformation projects (Tansel, 2020). Such centralization effectively suppressed the relative autonomy of the local community and created conditions that reinforced precarization and state intervention.

The centralization of decision-making powers and diminishing local autonomy are parallel with the historical link between anti-nuclear resistance and democracy. As outlined in Chapter 2, the global anti-nuclear movement has been concurrent with democratization or de-democratization processes in different national contexts, due to the necessity of heavy state oversight on this particularly

high-risk and politically sensitive technology. This is why anti-nuclear resistance had to demand the capacity to intervene through democratic mechanisms for the people. With the restructuring of the legal status of villages in Turkey; decreased local autonomy allows a deeper state intervention into the locality, leaving the village population with less political power against an initiative which threatens the foundation of their lives.

Essentially, Turkey's historical transition to a neoliberal market-oriented economy, the decline of agricultural production, difficulty of maintaining previous ways of living, and policies of centralization were impactful as larger economic patterns. These larger economic patterns and seeking employment in a precarious context contributed to the decline of the struggle against the Akkuyu NPP.

5.3 Labor regime at the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant; reinforced precarity

The statements of government officials and the licensing applications of the project company produce a narrative in which the promise is clear: Akkuyu NPP is a source of temporary and permanent job creation. The new employment opportunities will effectively vitalize the local economy, while the demand for materials and services during the construction and operational phases will serve as major contributors to local businesses. Furthermore, the purchasing activities of the incoming personnel will be beneficial elements in terms of economic activity in the city.

On the official website of the nuclear power plant, the project company claims that “human capital is the most valuable resource of the nuclear sector.”³ In

³ Article was deleted from the website. Anadolu Ajansı. (2013). İşte Akkuyu'da çalışacaklarda aranacak özellikler. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/iste-akkuyuda-calisacaklarda-aranacak-ozellikler/216888>

the media, the nuclear power plant is marketed as a responsible employer which will provide for thousands of people.



Figure 11. Aerial view of the construction field

The campaign line on employment reached a significant degree of official recognition, resulting in the creation of an “Akkuyu NPP Communication Office” in the district municipality of Gulnar. The office operates as a channel for job seekers to submit their applications, which are communicated to the company to find suitable vacancies at the construction site (Gulnar Belediyesi, 2023). Local authorities work with the company and reinforce its “job provider” status by channeling the labor force to the construction site.

An academic in the field of nuclear energy engineering states the following: “In the peak phase of construction, 12,000 people will be employed at the power plant. Approximately 3,000 people will move to the region with their families for work, these people will engage in commercial activities and stimulate the economy”

(Haberturk, 2019). According to the academic, thousands of employees will not only benefit all other sectors but contribute to the creation of a skilled workforce.

The company claims that the power plant, as the largest cooperative initiative between the Turkish and Russian states, will contribute to the socio-economic development in the region and the country. Creating thousands of new job positions, the project will improve the quality and standards of job training programs (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, 2023).

In April 2023, during the inauguration ceremony of the first transfer of nuclear fuel to the construction site, Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech included a particular emphasis on the employment opportunities created by the project. Putin stated that the number of workers exceeds 20,000 and is close to 30,000. Two-thirds of the workforce are Turkish citizens. Putin underlines that this number only constitutes a portion of the total number of jobs that will be created by the Akkuyu NPP (Cura et al., 2023).

In sharp contrast to the promises of the officials, the current state of employment at the construction of the power plant presents a disastrous picture. I was only able to interview one construction worker because many people I attempted to contact rejected my interview request out of fear of dismissal. The threat of dismissal for construction workers is an ever-present reality. Locals frequently share stories of unpredictable and unreasonable dismissal of workers by subcontracting companies. These stories are heard from friends, family, or distant relatives who currently work at the construction site. It is widely known that workers are dismissed for slight mistakes or transgressions without prior warning. One villager, who lives near the entrance of the construction site, expresses that it is normal to frequently

witness workers' access cards being rejected at the gates, meaning that they were dismissed without their knowledge.

On the other hand, news agencies which are positioned as opposed to the government line are filled with news from anonymous sources revealing shocking information about the working conditions at the construction site. Only in August 2022, hundreds of workers were dismissed for demanding a raise in their wages (Evrensel, 2022). Reports showcase that facilities used by workers have unacceptable hygienic conditions and daily meals provided to workers are low quality, consisting mostly of potatoes and bulgur (Celik, 2022). Wage payments are frequently delayed. There are worker accounts claiming that information about workers killed in work-related accidents is kept confidential and not released to the public. A few trade unions are in contact with a small network of construction workers; however, unionization is prevented through threats and intimidation (Saglam, 2023). Even rumors about unionizing are met with immediate dismissal.

In 2023, news reports emerged about the wristwatches workers are obliged to wear within the construction field, which are equipped with a GPS tracking system in order to trace the movements of the worker. According to the reports, if the workers remove these wristwatches, they do not receive their pay for the day (Tele1, 2023). Strict behavioral control over workers is in line with the global deterioration of working conditions in the supply chains of multinational corporations. As an example of a shift in the labor regime within late global capitalism, studies point to 'Amazonification' of the workplace. Based on the analysis of the organization of work in Amazon warehouses, academics argue that similar regimes have been replicated by other corporations; precarious labor under high-level surveillance (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2021) One mechanism identified in establishing

hegemonic labor control is coercion tactics through technological tools such as algorithmic technology (Vallas & Mommadova, 2022). Vallas and Mommadova (2022) use the term “techno-economic despotism” to indicate labor control through technological coercion. The tracking of construction workers with a GPS device is a mechanism of such techno-economic control, which is solidified through embedded precarity. Furthermore, automation and surveillance have a disruptive or preventive effect on potential worker struggles (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2021).

In my interview with a worker who is a driver at the construction site, I had the opportunity to ask questions about the current state of employment. To convince him for the interview I had to call him several times, assuring him of his anonymity and the purpose of my study. He declined meeting in a café or a restaurant because Russian engineers may be able to recognize him. After some time and effort, he was persuaded by my offer to take a walk around the coastline and have a short and informal chat, without any recording equipment.

When we met, his first remark was that he is afraid for his family, because he has lost many jobs in the past. According to his experience, this job pays well and it is good for his family. His children advised him not to have an interview about his job, but he decided to meet me in secret. He looked extremely anxious about being seen by random people walking around the coast.

“Because the project is conducted by Russians, they are very strict with the rules. They are more disciplinary when it comes to rules and procedures. They can dismiss workers easily without a good reason, for minor mistakes.”

By linking job insecurity with Russian involvement and clear adherence to rules, he attempted to justify the working conditions at the power plant. He had an extremely cautious attitude throughout the interview, as he stopped himself in

moments he came close to complaining about his job, composing himself, and shifting to a defensive attitude. I asked him about the recent media coverage on procedural and technical mistakes because of the pressure to complete the construction in a short period of time: “There is no rush, they do everything by the rules. They take all the necessary safety measures”

He continues telling me about the conditions of the workers: “There are more than 100 subcontracting firms. The problems with pay are because of the subcontracting firms, not the project company. But just last month about 500 workers were dismissed. For the smallest mistakes. They issue written warnings immediately, if you make a second mistake, you get dismissed.”

I asked him if he witnessed any accidents, and whether the news about worker deaths was accurate: “I saw two people die. One of them fell from a high place, and one of them was electrocuted in one of the construction vehicles. But this happens in every construction, it is normal.”

On frequent dismissals, he says: “There were many dismissals where we did not know the reason why. For example, my foreman was dismissed suddenly one day, we never learned why”

Despite this claim, he defends the company's decisions, even contradicting his previous remarks: “The construction workers are living in prefabricated housing units. I know that there are complaints about the food. But our people are ungrateful as well. They create problems out of everything, they complain too much. The companies are right in dismissing workers who slack off.”

My last question was about possible unionization: “It is impossible to unionize this workplace. It is just not suitable. There are too many people and too much subcontracting.”

The pattern that emerges from my discussion with the construction worker indicates a helplessness and a strong motivation to maintain the current status quo despite unacceptable conditions. This approach to a living situation is reminiscent of “bare life” which is articulated in Agamben’s work on the state of existence under extreme conditions (Lechte, 2013). Given the deep precariousness which is embedded in the lives of local communities, one can argue that a state of bare life is reached due to a strong conviction to keep the minimum standards of income. Agamben establishes the basis of bare life on Aristotle’s differentiation between life as constitutive of fulfilling basic needs, and life which enables moving beyond the necessities of survival in the name of politics and creative freedom (Agamben, 2002). Life beyond the bare minimum is strongly linked to political community and social existence. In the case of extreme violence by the sovereign, political life is reduced to its bare minimum form.

The local patterns of helplessness, hopelessness, and the drive to maintain the existing order to ensure survival, indicate that a similar process occurred in the communities affected by Akkuyu NPP. Due to the link to political subjectivity, social life, and solidarity; the state of bare life relates to diminishing local mobilization and resistance, and consequently the severing of the links between activists and local communities. Despite cooperation and joint resistance in the early stages, the pressing necessity of survival overcome and destroy the links of solidarity.

This phenomenon crystallizes in a sentence uttered by the construction worker I interviewed; “Like the old people used to say, it is better to die with a full stomach”.

The dynamics of employment at Akkuyu NPP showcase a clear discrepancy between the promises made by the government and the company; and the actual

conditions of employment at the construction site. While the developmental narrative puts a strong emphasis on job creation with high standards, workers endure poor working conditions and reinforced precarization in the Akkuyu NPP. Unionization is impossible due to the employer pressure, the secrecy linked with state involvement and international geopolitical dimension, as well as the non-accountability of the company in its conduct. For the locals, the Akkuyu NPP reinforces the ongoing process of deterioration of their living conditions; evidently exacerbating precarization despite the promises of security and stable income.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter investigates the gradual separation between anti-nuclear activists and local communities from a perspective of labor relations as the dominant cause. This analysis is done through a closer look at the changing economic patterns in the region and the current labor regime at the construction site of the Akkuyu NPP. Previously dominated by small-scale agriculture and tourism activities, the local economy in the region was dismantled over the last decades by industrialization, centralization policies, and precarization of labor. The villages of Mersin were encircled by the growing mining industry which penetrated deeper into the region; triggering instances of local upheaval due to the impact on the natural environment and agricultural activity. However, the mobilizations against industrial mining did not reach success; locals were not able to stop the ongoing destruction of their natural environment and economic arrangements.

The ongoing economic change in the region caused cyclic instances of resistance, failure, and normalization, resulting in a perception of continuity for the locals. As the Akkuyu NPP was another instance in the decades-long economic

transformation, it reproduced the same dynamics of co-optation through employment opportunities. In exchange for the dismantled local autonomy, the industry offered secure and long-term employment to the local population. The promise of secure employment was successful in swaying the opinion of villagers in rural areas.

Despite the illusion of economic security, the current labor regime at the construction site is marked by extremely poor working conditions, lack of job security, and a hostile work environment which only reinforces precarity. The Akkuyu NPP was not the harbinger of unique and dangerous change for the local communities. Despite the size of the project, its geopolitical implications, an inter-state agreement, and the nature of nuclear energy; its impact at the local level has been similar to other industrial projects. During my interviews in the villages, locals frequently made such comparisons, to the extent of equating a massive state-led nuclear energy project with a mine or stone quarry. This material and perceived continuity contributed to the failure of the anti-nuclear struggle, while employment maintained its dominant function as a tool of cooptation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The environmental movement, starting from its roots in struggles for the protection of wildlife (Tucker, 2013), always held an anti-nuclear dimension. Anti-nuclear objections initially emerged at the local level and targeted particular initiatives in the Global North (Sanchez-Vazques & Menendez-Navarro, 2015). In time, the objection to nuclear energy extended into a broader and cohesive framework with established arguments, some of which are; potential damage to the natural environment, danger to animal and plant species, reinforcement of exploitative relations of production, radioactive waste, and the risk of an eventual nuclear disaster. The Cold War, the nuclear arms race and the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident in 1984 were the turning points for the anti-nuclear movement (Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995), revealing nuclear power to be a danger to life itself. Particularly after the Chernobyl accident, environmental and anti-nuclear movements intensified across Europe, significantly changing the public opinion on nuclear technology in Turkey and beyond (Akçay, 2019).

The environmental movement in Turkey unfolded in parallel to successive attempts to initiate a nuclear energy project since the 1970s (Yavuz, 2015). The movement has experienced massive growth since the 1980s, taking shape under a myriad of different dynamics at each conjuncture, but also reacting to accelerated urbanization and industrialization that was caused by neoliberal restructuring of the economy (Adaman, 2016). Urban and rural pro-environment mobilization occurred simultaneously with the growing resistance against the construction of a nuclear power plant in the selected area in Mersin (Arsel et al., 2015).

The first instance of anti-nuclear resistance after the site selection was the emergence of a local figure, Arslan Eyce, who succeeded in gathering support for his anti-nuclear stance. In the 1990s and the 2000s, the resistance gained national prominence through the expansion of actors involved; these were NGOs, trade unions, political parties, professional associations, and various environmental groups (Balkan-Sahin, 2019). In 2010, Turkey's nuclear ambitions reached a conclusion with an agreement which cemented a deal that the Russian state company Rosatom would build and operate a nuclear power plant in Mersin. After the deal, the resistance persisted with extensive mobilizations taking the frontline of the struggle. At the same time, the anti-nuclear movement adopted a legal strategy which was reinforced with disruptive tactics at the grassroots level. However, the initial surge of solidarity between the local community and environmental activists was lost over time due to internal and external factors. The internal factors were identified as strategic shortcomings of the anti-nuclear movement; lack of leadership, growing disconnection with grassroots activities, and the limitation of the legal strategy which lacked the critical basis of disruptive mobilization.

Externally, there were significant dynamics which undermined the growth of a strong anti-nuclear stance against the Akkuyu NPP. One significant factor was the discursive strategy deployed to legitimize the project and situate it within the context of nationalist ideology. In this discursive strategy, certain angles were pronounced to counter some of the most well-known criticisms against the project; “technology transfer” which implicated the acquisition of the necessary technology to build national power plants in the future, increased employment, training of Turkish experts, new investments and an invigorated economy. These key notions reframed the project as a net benefit for the society, while any criticism was painted as an

attack against the collective national interest. Despite the involvement of a foreign state, the Akkuyu NPP was marked as an achievement of the nation, independent of the current political regime and its immediate interest. Furthermore, government and company officials acknowledged the global paradigm of moving to renewable energy and reducing carbon emissions, hailing nuclear energy as an environment-friendly solution to increasing energy demand. In parallel, the authoritarian consolidation and cooptation of media facilitated the reinforcement of this narrative which helped reconfigure the project and its objectives (Yesil, 2018).

A neglected dynamic in studies of environmental struggles is the assemblage of spatial, ethnic, and class-based inequalities which are exacerbated and taken advantage of to foster divisions. My fieldwork in villages around the Akkuyu NPP reveal that pre-existing social hierarchies shaped the eventual cooptation and normalization of the project. These pre-existing inequalities determined the distribution of benefit and cost; while some groups emerged as beneficiaries, others could only be categorized as collateral damage. Holding capital in terms of real estate or a local business ensured a short-term and highly attractive economic benefit linked to the launch of the project. Ethnic and racial divisions persisted as well; while Russian engineers live in the relatively affluent town of Taşucu, Kurdish construction workers remain in prefabricated housing units around the construction field, under extremely poor working and living conditions. The attitude of the local population towards Russian engineers differs tremendously from the exclusionary approach to Syrian refugees or Kurdish construction workers. The inner group of beneficiaries were useful in dismantling solidarity and influencing the local opinion on the project.

Furthermore, the project inevitably intersected with processes of de-democratization in Turkey; combined with the influence of the secretive and state-controlled characteristics of nuclear industry. This is similar to other national contexts where the connections between nuclear energy and democracy are revealed through historical studies (Szulecki et al., 2015). One specific example is the erosion of the decision-making capacity of villages, such as the village of Büyükeceli which is located next to the construction field. The lives of the inhabitants of the village of Büyükeceli have been permanently and irreversibly damaged by the power plant; the village is destroyed and absorbed by the ongoing construction, and previous means of living are no longer sustainable.

Ultimately, promises of secure employment played a dominant role in ensuring the acceptance of the project by the local population. The rural economy was transformed by industrialization over the last two decades, marking the end of previous economic arrangements (Adaman et al., 2018; Ozturk, 2012). In Mersin, the expanding mining industry resulted in an extensive degradation of the natural environment in the region. The economic change and precarization of labor created the conditions in which the locals were dependent on employment opportunities in the face of declining standards of living. The promise of employment is repeated in official statements, company communications, by the national media, and Russian state officials. However, the reality hidden behind this promise is revealed by the existing labor regime at the construction site. Construction work at the Akkuyu NPP is characterized by poor working conditions, extreme job insecurity and general precarity. Any attempt of unionization is countered with immediate dismissal while workers' protests and actions are rapidly suppressed.

On the other hand, I encountered a significant tendency during my interviews with the villagers. Due to the continuity in recent history with the expansion of mining industry, precarious wage labor, and successive dismantling of environmental protests, the Akkuyu NPP was not perceived as categorically different from any recent project for a marble mine. The trajectories of numerous local upheavals against industrial initiatives to defend villages were similar, leading the locals to believe that the end result will be the same for the Akkuyu NPP. In the final analysis, the Akkuyu NPP has not marked a monumental turning point for the lives of the local population. On the contrary, there were pre-existing dynamics of economic transformation, increasing precarity and the unequal geographical divisions. These factors ultimately led to the failure of a consistent and effective resistance against the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant.

At the same time, this study is an attempt to understand the decline of anti-nuclear resistance in parallel with a growing environmental movement in Turkey. Not strictly limited by the study of a movement, I bring together additional facets such as the intersection of labor and environmental concern, ideological connections and discourse, and pre-existing inequalities in the region. The study relies on discerning the continuities which shaped the trajectory of the resistance against the Akkuyu NPP. Other questions lay at the core of the study: How did the villagers accept a massive transformation of their living conditions, and who were the beneficiaries of the project?

The answers sought in the course of the study are necessarily limited by a small-scale fieldwork and the inability to have access to all concerned groups: Such as construction workers who were mostly unwilling to be interviewed, Russian engineers who moved to Mersin to work at the power plant, and company officials

who could have provided deeper insights into the internal mechanisms of the initiative. Further studies based on the experiences of these particular groups could fill in this gap and contribute to a complete analysis of the Akkuyu NPP. On the other hand, a temporal limitation also underlies this study; at the time of my fieldwork, the peak of anti-nuclear mobilization was in the past. This necessitated a retrospective look at the rise and the fall of the movement; lacking direct observation of crucial moments of decision-making, action and consequence. In the end, this study constitutes a glimpse into an emerging nuclear landscape that is post-resistance; a picture of the decline in the villages, growing business and industry in the “center”, and hopeless acceptance among activists and the community at large. Yet, this is still an important moment to study in an age of social, environmental and political uncertainty; as it speaks to the important question on the possibilities of building a joint struggle against environmental degradation and social injustice.

APPENDIX A

APPROVAL OF ETHICS COMMITTEE

Evrak Tarih ve Sayısı: 27.05.2022-67792

T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL VE BEŞERİ BİLİMLER YÜKSEK LİSANS VE DOKTORA TEZLERİ ETİK İNCELEME
KOMİSYONU
TOPLANTI KARAR TUTANAĞI

Toplantı Sayısı : 32
Toplantı Tarihi : 26.05.2022
Toplantı Saati : 10:00
Toplantı Yeri : Zoom Sanal Toplantı
Bulunanlar : Prof. Dr. Ebru Kaya, Prof. Dr. Feyza Çorapçı, Doç. Dr. Arhan S. Ertan, Doç. Dr. Senem Yıldız,
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Yasemin Sohtorik İlkmen
Bulunmayanlar :

Ekin Öztürk
Sosyoloji

Sayın Araştırmacı,

"Emek, Çevre ve Siyaset; Akkuyu Nükleer Güç Santrali" başlıklı projeniz ile ilgili olarak yaptığınız SBB-EAK 2022/43 sayılı başvuru komisyonumuz tarafından 26 Mayıs 2022 tarihli toplantıda incelenmiş ve uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya çevrimiçi olarak katılımı ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. COVID-19 önlemleri kapsamında kurul üyelerinden ıslak imza alınamadığı için bu onay mektubu üye ve raportör olarak Yasemin Sohtorik İlkmen tarafından bütün üyeler adına e-imzalanmıştır.

Saygılarımızla, bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Yasemin
SOHTORİK İLKMEN
ÜYE

e-imzalıdır
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Yasemin Sohtorik
İlkmen
Öğretim Üyesi
Raporör

SOBETİK 32 26.05.2022

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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