Pathways of entrepreneurial urban governance

Spatial dynamics and community politics in Istanbul's regeneration

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CHAPTER 5

In-Depth Case Study II

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5. Community politics in urban regeneration under authoritarian entrepreneurial governance

This article explores the authoritarian entrepreneurial approach to urban governance and its transformative influence on community dynamics in Istanbul's Fikirtepe Urban Regeneration Project. As a large-scale urban redevelopment initiative, Fikirtepe has become a contested ground of competing interests, where strict regulations coexist with flexible planning practices, forming a complex governance model that turns community actors into quasi-developers. We argue that a governance framework characterized by a fusion of authoritarian and entrepreneurial traits—through mechanisms like the Disaster Law No. 6306 and the 2/3 majority rule—embeds profit-seeking behaviors within regulatory practices and state-market alliances, sidelining local authorities, marginalizing stakeholders, and intensifying conflicts. Unlike typical capitalist frameworks, this model compels both developers and residents to adopt opportunistic, profit-driven strategies—a phenomenon termed 'entrepreneurial citizenship'. This redefines the roles of urban actors and disrupts traditional planning processes. In connection with this convergence of governance extremes, negotiation-oriented approaches to planning emerge, where all stakeholders—from residents to property developers to policy networks—engage in competitive adaptation. By illustrating the distinctive challenges unique to Fikirtepe, we conclude by evidencing an imperative trend in urban governance—subject to both progressively authoritarian and entrepreneurial turns—and issue an urgent call to examine their broader implications for urban studies.

5.1. Introduction

This article argues how the authoritarian entrepreneurial governance models generate unique profit-seeking dynamics that transcend typical capitalist incentives by using the Fikirtepe case in Istanbul. Like many areas in Istanbul, Fikirtepe reflects the city's history of the regeneration of squatter areas. After the 1950s, urbanization gained traction with increased migration and industrialization in Turkey, leading to the proliferation of informally developed housing areas known as *gecekondu* neighborhoods

in Turkey. These neighborhoods reshaped Istanbul's landscape, becoming opportunity zones for residents, property speculators, and politicians seeking electoral support. Contrary to being unplanned squatter settlements, many *gecekondu*s were legitimized through governmental amnesties from 1949 to the 1980s, allowing residents to obtain title deeds (Balaban, 2011; Esen, 2009). This evolution reflects Istanbul's broader urban governance dynamics, where *gecekondu* areas remain focal points for state-led interventions aligned with political and economic agendas.

Since the early 2010s, the Turkey's authoritarian turn has reshaped *gecekondu* regeneration while repurposing these areas into market-driven transformations led by central and local government agencies. These changes reflect the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) broader political trajectory, which has instrumentalized entrepreneurial policies as a core tool to drive economic growth since the early 2000s, building upon 1980s neoliberal reforms. From 2010 onward, central agencies often circumvent the authority of local governments through by-laws and legal instruments (Tarakçı & Türk, 2020), even using earthquake regulations as a pretext. The study looks at transformative processes in Istanbul's informally developed housing areas, emphasizing the role of state-authoritarian power and entrepreneurial governance in urban regeneration. Residents are not seen as active participants but are instead treated as barriers in speculative urban regeneration projects.

Our long-term observations document that communities take action in unexpected ways in reaction to being excluded or marginalized. They form informal coalitions and cultivate tangible and intangible community resources, including public spaces, collective knowledge, and shared goals. This phenomenon resonates with concepts of social capital (Granovetter, 2018; Putnam, 2000). In this context, the Fikirtepe Urban Regeneration Project—a large-scale redevelopment initiative in Istanbul—exemplifies this convergence. By leveraging legal instruments such as disaster regulations and a mechanism known as '*2/3 majority rule*' (explained in section 4), the AKP-led government centralizes control, promotes market-oriented redevelopment, and marginalizes local government and resident influence. Fikirtepe illustrates how authoritarian entrepreneurialism functions as both a centralized governance model and a mechanism of constrained space for entrepreneurial entities, as demonstrated in this research.

Operationalized through interviews, focus groups, and long-term observations, we explored how combining authoritarian control with entrepreneurial tendencies, this governance framework reconfigures community roles, encouraging residents to adopt developer-like strategies within a centralized environment. This adaptation, termed 'entrepreneurial citizenship,' illustrates how profit motives are embedded within state-market alliances, reshaping interactions between actors.

The current governance framework restricts local authorities' capacity to mediate development processes. Historically, local governments facilitated stakeholder discussions through populist strategies, especially during election periods, integrating community interests into development plans and enabling negotiation (Stiglicht & Lerner, 2019). However, their ability to perform these roles is now changing. This research highlights how urban actors adapt to these combined effects by initiating populist reactions and devising innovative policy engagement methods. Often, these actors mimic market opportunism and entrepreneurial strategies of the state, perpetuating existing trends—a phenomenon that, while not widely documented, aligns with observations from Brazil (Abers, 2000; Auyero, 2001), South Africa, China, India, and other contexts (Burayidi, 2015).

In areas like Fikirtepe, the government's authoritarian entrepreneurial approach to urban regeneration prioritizes top-down decision-making, limits community input, and enforces policies favoring large-scale developments and public-private partnerships over local needs. This shift marginalizes local authorities and stakeholders, neglecting property rights and public interests on both sides of the spectrum. However, authoritarian interventions within state entrepreneurialism generate environments where property developers and residents face new forms of conflict and imitation. However, without public accountability or reliable government support, residents develop novel negotiation strategies with private actors, intensifying community politics and urban planning challenges that are not widely covered by the scholarly literature.

In this complex governance landscape residents face ambiguities surrounding housing security, disruptions to community networks, and heightened risks of displacement or gentrification (Sakizlioğlu, 2014), further complicated by uncertainties in legal rights, redevelopment

procedures, and the future cohesion of their communities. Public sector actors, including urban planners, must navigate the tension between the demands of rapid development and the imperative to safeguard community interests while fostering sustainable urban growth (Béné et al., 2018). In the sections to follow, we first delve into the theoretical grounds of authoritarian entrepreneurial governance in relation to community politics and introduce the distinctive characteristics of Fikirtepe's regeneration; and then provide a detailed analysis of how these conditions enable residents to navigate profit by adopting strategies through community politics.

5.2. Authoritarian entrepreneurial governance and community politics: How are property developers and residents connected in this setting?

Authoritarianism often sparks social movements, giving rise to new realms of hope, which are well-documented (Ozduzen, 2019). Authoritarianism also frequently marginalizes stakeholders and create conflicts, which lead new negotiation strategies between residents and property developers (Elsayed, 2018). However, authoritarianism also goes hand in hand with entrepreneurialism in the urban context. Authoritarian entrepreneurialism refers to a governance model where a state takes a proactive role in driving economic development and urban transformation, by utilizing urban policies and practices to legitimize the enhancement of the state apparatus (Eraydın & Taşan-Kok, 2014; Kurt-Özman et al., 2023). Within this framework, the intricate relationship between the state, the market, and local communities remains underexamined (Eraydın & Taşan-Kok, 2014; Piffero 2009; Swyngedouw 2010; Peck 2010). In some contexts, such as China, market-driven development has led to a blend of exclusive power and participation known as 'authoritarian deliberation' (He & Warren, 2011). Furthermore, fueled by developers' profit-seeking behavior, megaprojects pose barriers to the delivery of social value (Siva and Gajendran, 2023). Instead of legally steering market-led development, state authorities become partners with property actors and seek public service delivery through various contractual mechanisms (Taşan-Kok, et al, 2021).

In squatter areas, during the 1970s clientelism was essential to state relations with the urban poor, enabling authorities to pacify disadvantaged

groups by offering assistance or resources in exchange for political support, loyalty, or votes (Eraydın & Taşan-Kok, 2014; Mattina 2007). Community politics, a term rooted in political science, sociology, and urban studies, often referred to as 'local politics' or 'grassroots politics', constitutes a critical area of investigation in informal settings that scrutinizes the intricacies of political activities and local decision-making (Leitner, 1990; Leitner et al., 2008). In informal settlements, community politics usually refers to the way people position themselves by engaging with each other and making decisions within their local community. This process involves power dynamics within and outside the community and governance of collective needs and challenges by the community members. Community politics plays a crucial role in shaping the social, economic, and political life of the neighborhood community through informal leadership structures, grassroots initiatives, and negotiations among residents to address issues such as access to basic services, land tenure, and other communal concerns. In that sense, community politics is defined outside conventional urban policy through the relations, the ethics, and politics of neighbors and neighboring as Painter (2012) puts it.

From a political science perspective, community politics serves as a comprehensive examination of how political power, governance, and regulatory formulations operate within local communities. Political scientists usually focus on the interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions at the community level (Chatterjee, 2004; Sabatier, 2014). In the sociological context, community politics focuses on social structures, norms, and values in relation to collective actions within communities (Mills, 2023; Putnam, 2000). In urban studies scholarship, community politics generally refers to how communities organize, engage in decision-making processes, and advocate for their interests within the political and social landscape of urban areas (Steward & Lithgow, 2015; Elwood, 2006). Furthermore, community politics relates to the politics of urban development, neighborhood transformations, and the influence of local residents in shaping their living environments (Jacobs, 1961; Fainstein, 2010).

Interestingly, within an authoritarian entrepreneurial environment, community politics stimulate opportunistic behavior, whereby market and community actors get closer to each other and mimic behaviors. In some authoritarian settings, such as Egypt, the open practice of politics

enables civic associations to assume a broader political role through unconventional forms, including the creation of spaces for leisure and creativity (Elsayed, 2018; Hasso 2015). Kreitmeyr (2020) refers to social entrepreneurship networks in Jordan and Morocco that lead to co-optation processes in authoritarian urban renewal settings. In this milieu, without substantial support from the state or experts, the residents try to cope with authoritarian entrepreneurialism by devising their own, mostly informal mechanisms, support networks, and clubs (Peric, 2020). This form of entrepreneurial authoritarianism also enables a loyal business class through a system of rewards and punishments (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018). In the Turkish context, such actions are implemented through the politicization of state institutions, the erosion of the rule of law, and the use of these mechanisms by the ruling government to benefit its supporters, redirect resources from opponents, and manage dissent within the business community, ultimately leveraging the political landscape to its advantage (ibid.).

Within this framework, networks and informal mechanisms gained importance in distressed areas, supported by what Hasmath et al. (2019) call as 'policy experimentation'. Criticizing the scholarly literature for disregarding the role of private businesses and civil society organizations in authoritarian regimes, they suggest studying the complex relationships between the lower-level bureaucrats and citizens, which lead to 'innovative personalities' (ibid.). In fact, the citizens, communities, and social groups under authoritarian urban settings are usually pictured as victims and losers of the system (Humphrey, 2012; Pojani. 2018; Yabanci, 2019), and their entrepreneurial and opportunistic tendencies are rarely mentioned.

The discussions on the complex dimensions of community politics and its impact on urban dynamics are especially relevant given the increasing importance of state-sponsored gentrification resulting from the formation of pro-growth coalitions alongside the creation of community spaces and informal network dynamics. In an authoritarian regime, meaningful negotiation and dialogue among diverse stakeholders, such as property owners, developers, and local authorities is usually missing, which may lead to conflicts, polarization, and increased mistrust within the community (Li et al., 2022; van Hüllen, 2019). However, as we will show below, some actors actively pursue entrepreneurial goals, and their actions are intensified by the political context. Their profit-centric behaviors center on

land value and financial gains, reflecting the intricate interplay between government regulatory decisions and the profit pursuits of these actors. As we are going to demonstrate in the next sections, these dynamics are channeled through community actors that leverage local politics for their own profit.

5.3. Data & methodology

Fikirtepe, located on the Asian side of Istanbul, along with neighboring districts Dumlupınar, Eğitim, and Merdivenköy, spans 134 hectares and comprises 61 blocks (Figure 15). Previously, this area consisted of individually owned plots with unregulated construction. From 2010 onwards, however, it has become a focal point for extensive urban renewal efforts through collaborations between private construction firms and the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change. The ongoing regeneration project targets 57 blocks, excluding three due to their archaeological significance. According to the Fikirtepe Association's February 2021 report, the initiative covers 6,341 buildings with 17,728 independent units and 14,663 residences, housing approximately 50,000 residents.

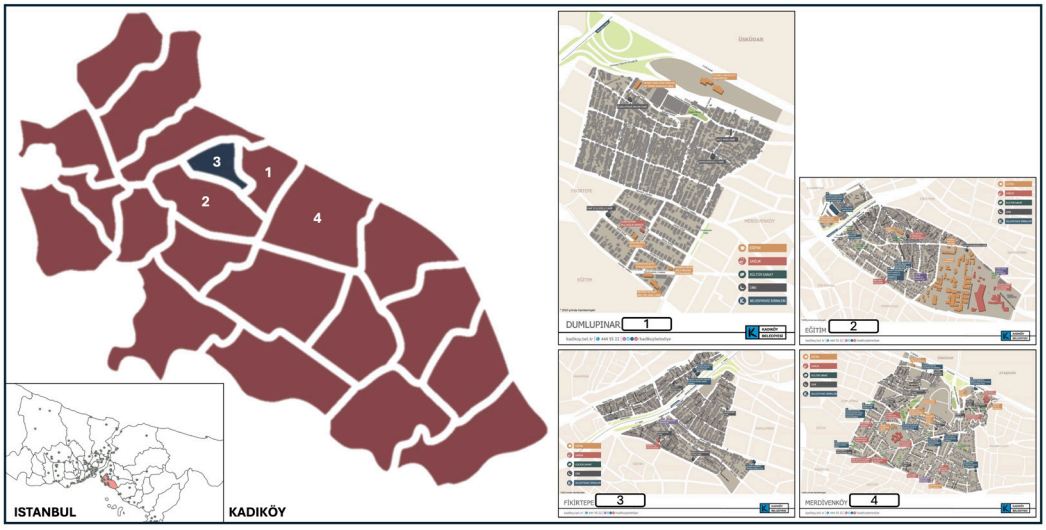

Figure 15. Map of Fikirtepe and neighboring districts. Prepared by the authors using input from: https://anlat.kadikoy.bel.tr

For data collection, we employed both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and extensive and long-term observational research focused on urban transformation processes and ongoing projects in Fikirtepe. This qualitative analysis incorporates information flow and discourse analysis derived from interviews with key stakeholders, representing firsthand data. To capture a wide range of perspectives, we utilized a snowball sampling method to reach a diverse set of institutional representatives.

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the Fikirtepe Urban Regeneration Project, including:

- Residents and property owners (5 participants): Shared insights on displacement concerns, negotiations with developers, and the impacts of urban transformation on their livelihoods.
- Central government bodies (2 participants), including the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change: Provided insights into regulatory frameworks, policy objectives, and governmental oversight in Fikirtepe's urban transformation.
- Municipal officials (3participants) from Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and Kadıköy Municipality: Offered perspectives on regulatory practices and inter- governmental coordination.
- Community stakeholders (2 participants), such as the Fikirtepe Association: Provided views on local organizing efforts, community advocacy, and resident concerns about the regeneration process.
- Local neighborhood representatives (2 participants) (muhtarlıklar): Highlighted the local community's responses and organizational challenges.
- Urban planners and Chamber of City Planners members (2 participants): Discussed planning implications and technical constraints of the project.
- Developers and private sector stakeholders (2 participants): Elaborated on the project's financial and logistical challenges.

In addition to interviews, we conducted two focus group discussions with 11 participants from the above categories, offering deeper insights into shared concerns and collective strategies among stakeholders. These interviews and discussions spanned from February 2021 to late-September 2024.

Secondary sources encompassed policy documents, municipal records, planning reports, and relevant literature on authoritarian neoliberalism, entrepreneurial urban governance, and informal urban settlements. Legal documents, such as Law No. 6306 on Disaster Risk Areas (enacted in 2012) and related municipal decrees, were crucial for understanding the regulatory framework governing Fikirtepe's transformation. Additionally, documentaries (e.g., the 2018 film *Saf,* an internationally co-produced Fikirtepe documentary directed by Ali Vatansever), video content from platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion, and columns from newspapers and thinktank publications (e.g., the Center for Spatial Justice: *İstanbul'da Kentsel Dönüşüm ve İyilik Hâli)*—provided contemporary perspectives and insights into public perceptions of urban governance and regeneration both in the Fikirtepe project and in Turkey more broadly. This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulating findings across diverse sources, ensuring a robust, multi-dimensional analysis of Fikirtepe's governance dynamics.

5.4. The distinctive fusion of authoritarian and entrepreneurial traits in Fikirtepe's urban regeneration

Fikirtepe's historical development reflects decades of unplanned and unregulated construction, driven by rural-to-urban migration since the 1960s. Initially announced in October 2010 by Kadir Topbaş, the former Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the project gained traction in January 2011 when the AKP-led metropolitan council approved increased zoning rights. Characterized by entrepreneurial adaptability and centralized government power, these regulatory decisions created a 'critical juncture' in the project's trajectory (Kurt-Özman et al., 2023).

Fikirtepe's transformation involved a dynamic network of actors whose roles evolved over time. Central government agencies—including the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change; TOKİ (the Housing Development Administration), and Emlak Konut (a publicly traded property investment company established in 1953 as a subsidiary of state- owned Emlak Bank)—played central roles in the project's stakeholder scheme. These agencies not only aligned the project with national development goals but also maintained financial interests

in its outcomes. At the local level, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and KİPTAŞ (a property development company established in 1987 as a subsidiary of İBB) were initially involved but were later deliberately sidelined as key powers were transferred to the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change. Community stakeholders—including property developers, fragmented landowners, *gecekondu* residents, and tenants—engaged in both formal and informal platforms to navigate governance complexities, such as disputes over land shares and contract terms. Meanwhile, informal brokers (*çantacı)* emerged as key intermediaries, mediating between property owners and developers to exploit opportunities.

The project's timeline reveals significant regulatory and policy changes, including the designation of Fikirtepe as a 'special project area' and later as an 'urban transformation area'. A significant adjustment in the master plan was lowering the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) for non-complying landowners. This approach, reflecting Turkey's urban renewal strategies since the 1980s, utilizes FAR to manage urban density and drive economic-growth-

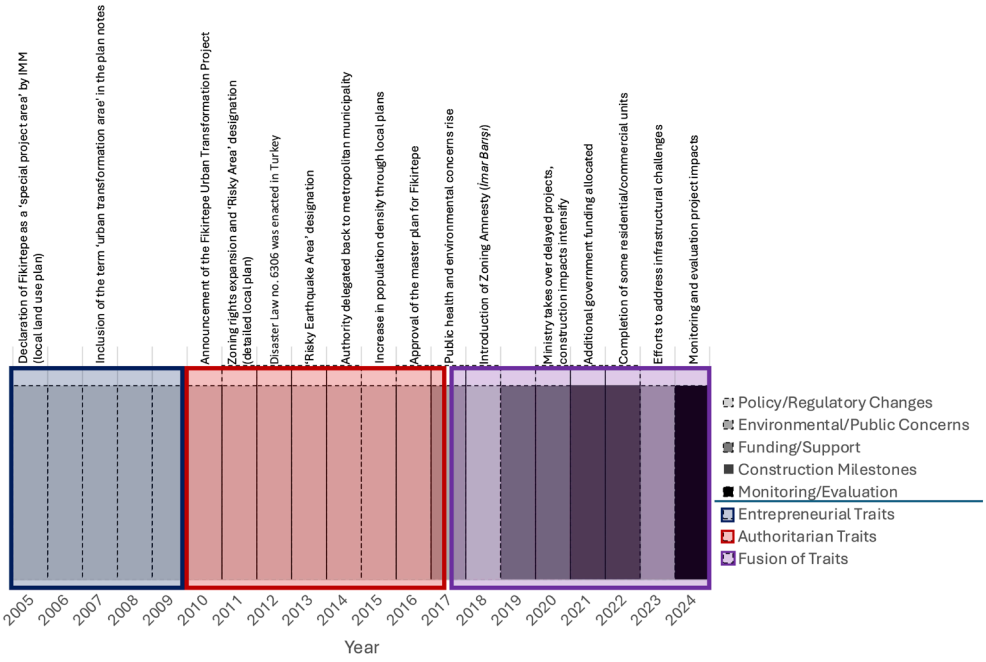

Figure 16. Fikirtepe project timeline with authoritarian and entrepreneurial highlights (prepared by the authors).

oriented development through the renewal of profitable urban lands. The following chart (Figure 16) provides a visual representation of the key events, policy changes, and milestones that shaped Fikirtepe's urban regeneration process, highlighting the authoritarian and entrepreneurial governance dynamics, as well as fusion traits. Each shaded period illustrates the dominance or overlap of these traits, while event categories track specific milestones contributing to the project's trajectory.

In 2013, under Disaster Law No. 6306, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change designated Fikirtepe as a 'risky earthquake area,' which significantly influenced its legal framework for regeneration. This designation fast-tracked processes under risk mitigation and authorized 'urgent expropriation,' bypassing property rights of one-third of owners if two-thirds agreed. Decision-making in Fikirtepe thus relied on a 2/3 voting system, which introduced complexities, heightened tensions, and further marginalized local voices. The 2/3 majority rule, is a voting mechanism intended to facilitate decision-making, requires a two-thirds of property owners to agree for collective decisions.

Throughout its transformation, Fikirtepe has faced challenges and 'innovative' solutions from various actors. For instance, in March 2013, a contractor with agreements involving 380 families sought bankrupt deferment due to financial difficulties. This strongly shows how developers navigate the fine line between pursuing profit and agreements with community actors. These challenges were intensified by both the central and local governments' back-and-forth taking over of roles, e.g., the delegation of powers from the Ministry back to the IMM in January 2014 to accelerate the process. The aforementioned maneuvers have concreted the fusion of top-down control and entrepreneurial flexibility in the field.

Fikirtepe became a battleground of competing interests, with frequent clashes between community actors and developers. Mapping company involvement per block demonstrated how the project catalyzed entrepreneurial competition among developers and residents seeking favorable agreements[27]. The introduction of 'urgent expropriation' in June 2014 added complexity, allowing the government to quickly appropriate private property for redevelopment. This was evidenced in August 2014

27 http://megaprojeleristanbul.com/#fikirtepe-kentsel-donusum-projesi

Figure 17. The 'single house' in Fikirtepe, 2014. Photograph by Murat Germen. Source: Blue Rhino Art.

by the demolition of a property owned by Alaaddin Demirel, known as 'single house' (Figure 17), completely surrounded by the construction site and standing in solitary resistance for three years. Its demolition also symbolized the dramatic decline of local opposition in Fikirtepe.

As the project evolved, it sparked debate, with stakeholders dissatisfied with both central and local authorities including metropolitan and district municipalities. The government's role was not merely a neutral moderator but was intertwined with profit-driven motives, exemplified by Emlak Konut's dual function as a policymaker and stakeholder. With TOKİ holding a 49% share in Emlak Konut[28], the central government and developers operated as partners, aligning regulatory authority with financial interests. By prioritizing market-driven urban renewal over participatory planning (Ergenc & Yuksekkaya, 2024; Tansel, 2019), this partnership between the central agencies and developers characterized the authoritarian entrepreneurial governance model.

The master plan's approval in June 2016 represented a notable moment for Fikirtepe's regeneration. However, by July 2017, concerns about air pollution revealed the project's environmental and public health impacts, calling for enhanced collaboration among government entities. The 2018 Zoning Amnesty (*imar barışı*), a policy granting amnesty for unauthorized

28 https://www.emlakkonut.com.tr/_Assets/Upload/Images/file/Yatirimci/faaliyetraporlari/tr/Faaliyet%20Raporu%202018.pdf

constructions, thereby integrating them into the legal framework (Ark-Yıldırım, 2020) notably influenced Fikirtepe's transformation. Yet, as it applied only to existing structures and excluded future redevelopment rights under zoning plans, it caused tensions among property owners fearing the loss of rights for non-compliant properties. Prolonged delays further prompted the Ministry to take over control of delayed projects in 2020, followed by additional funding in 2021 to accelerate construction and infrastructure.

Fikirtepe's strategic location near the Bosphorus (a major waterway) and D-100 highway (a key transportation route) reconfigured the area as a target for financialization, as legal mechanisms were used to suppress opposition from residents to ensure the achievement of its financial goals (Eyidoğan, 2021). This financialization with entrepreneurial strategies adopted by residents in response to state policies, perpetuated tensions and highlighted the layered complexities of Fikirtepe's transformation. As most recent developments, by 2022, several residential and commercial units were completed, having new residents, while efforts in 2023 focused on infrastructural issues and public amenities. As of 2024, the focus has shifted to monitoring and evaluating the project's broader social, environmental, and economic impacts[29].

5.5. Redefining complexities of authoritarian entrepreneurialism and community politics in Fikirtepe's urban renewal

In Fikirtepe's urban renewal, developers' entrepreneurial pursuits are closely linked to the emerging entrepreneurial actions of residents. As developers pursue land value appreciation and profit maximization, community actors adapt by innovatively engaging in entrepreneurial activities. This creates a complex narrative where the state, developers, and residents navigate and adjust to the regeneration process. This section provides an overview of Fikirtepe's authoritarian and entrepreneurial turn in urban governance, analyze developers alongside entrepreneurial citizens and property owners, and synthesize authoritarianism, entrepreneurialism, and community politics.

29 https://gazeteoksijen.com/turkiye/kentsel-donusum-nasil-yapilmamali-iste-fikirtepe-229235

5.5.1. Overview: The state's authoritative hand in Fikirtepe

In Fikirtepe's urban transformation, the state's role, particularly through the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, is predominantly characterized by a top- down and authoritative approach. This centralized decision-making paradigm places significant power and control over the transformation process, often diminishing the role of district municipalities and reducing their influence in the planning and implementation phases. For example, a municipal official from Kadıköy Municipality expressed concerns over their limited involvement, noting, "*Our role has been largely procedural, with critical decisions dictated by the Ministry*." This sidelining of district municipality often leaves residents and property owners with little input in shaping the transformation process.

The state's regulatory framework in Fikirtepe exhibits a notable duality. On one hand, it is highly overregulated and stringent, imposing considerable constraints on property owners and residents through zoning regulations and transformation plans. On the other hand, it exhibits flexibility when catering to market demands, particularly in facilitating developer interests. A property owner shared their frustration, also referring to the Disaster Law: "*Room for maneuver and range of choices are extremely limited and inflexible for us, but developers somehow get their approvals faster, bending rules in their favor*." The Ministry, leveraging Article 6/A[30] of the Disaster Risks Urban Transformation Law[31], often pressures property owners into contractual agreements with developers. Two residents shared instances where they were compelled to signing contracts, with one adding, "*We were told that refusing would leave us worse off than if we agreed to the deal*."

This authoritative approach has fostered mistrust and conflict among stakeholders, as it limits meaningful dialogue and collaboration. A neighborhood representative described the atmosphere as "*tense and polarized*," with community members feeling excluded from decision-making processes. Parallel to the social fragmentation, power imbalance, and heightened tensions revealed in this context, a representative from the

30 Introduced in 2019, Article 6/A allows for ex officio decisions regarding the sequestration of private property for public interest, directly impacting property rights (https://medyanews.net/initial-applications-validate-concerns-raised-by-amendments-to-turkeys-controversial-urban-transformation-law/)

31 Law No. 6306 outlines regulations related to urban renewal and transformation projects in Turkey, addressing zoning, land use, building codes, infrastructure, and implementation procedures.

Fikirtepe Association emphasized increasing divisions between residents and developers, attributing this to the state's clear prioritization of developers' interests over resident concerns. In response to their exclusion and loss of influence, several property owners have taken legal action, which further complicates an already turbulent process.

While the government's centralized stance has streamlined decision-making and implementation in urban projects, it has come at the cost of equity and fairness, particularly for left-behind places and accordingly marginalized stakeholders (Özatağan, & Eraydın, 2023). A quote from one urban planner reads: "*Excluding communities from the processes expected to be inclusive risks urban development becoming a facilitator instrument for displacement.*" As this research evidence and relevant scholarship support, empowering collaborative platforms can reframe governance by addressing community priorities, thus reducing tensions, building trust, and promoting more just processes (Kurt-Özman & Taşan-Kok, 2024).

5.5.2. Navigating profit, politics, and entrepreneurial citizenship

In Fikirtepe's urban regeneration, property developers are not solely profit-seekers but trajectory-defining players within this governance framework. This model fosters a competitive landscape which encourages speculative practices to navigate the system. Consequently, the regeneration process promotes profit-oriented strategies that blur the roles of community actors and market stakeholders. This reflects the model's emphasis on **market gains over social welfare**.

As the scholarship suggests, entrepreneurial roles that urban actors take on, and the ways they navigate governance frameworks, may vary across contexts (Al Sader et al., 2019; Kurt-Özman & Taşan-Kok, 2024; Mitra et al., 2020; van der Gaast et al., 2022; Shi & Frenkiel, 2021). However, the manifestation of '**entrepreneurial citizenship**' in Fikirtepe is distinctive: the majority of its residents and property owners adopt a fully profit-oriented approach, identical to property developers, thereby paving the way for the emergence of a previously non-existent group of actors, as detailed subsequently. Highlighting the material gains aspect, one resident explained this shift: "*Our homes are no longer just places to live, not anymore; they have become investments to guarantee our future.*" In other terms, both residents and developers respond to the same system, though they reposition themselves using different scales and resources.

Developers in Fikirtepe prioritize **land value appreciation** as a key incentive to harness the area's economic potential. As Turk et al. (2020) highlight through their analysis, expectations of future land value and speculative activities play a significant role in these increases. A private sector stakeholder noted, "*This area, with its big potential for value growth, is really a great spot for people looking to invest*." The images below (Figure 18) illustrate Fikirtepe's dramatic transformation. The left image shows the dense high-rise developments in sharp contrast to the surrounding low-rise, older neighborhoods. The second one provides a closer look at both the completed and ongoing construction of high-rises. They strikingly emphasize the redevelopment's dimensions—far from the human scale—and the increasing land values fueled by its strategic location. In response to speculative dynamics, housing becomes less affordable and accessible for many, pushing residents to adopt entrepreneurial strategies to benefit from land profits. Fikirtepe's proximity to key infrastructure and better connectivity only contributes to the already rising land values. By employing individual or collective, economically driven entrepreneurial behaviors, residents align their strategies with speculative market dynamics to navigate this landscape.

Policies like the 2018 Zoning Amnesty (*İmar Barışı*) had a pivotal impact on entrepreneurial behaviors in Fikirtepe. It legalized informal buildings built before 2017 to integrate into the formal property market without mandatory zoning adherence. While the legalization was temporary (non-compliant sections lose legal status upon demolition), it created uncertainty for property owners regarding future rights and values. One resident likened it to a '*double- edged sword,*' because it provides short-term

Figure 18. Air views from Emlak Konut's Completed Project (Yeni Fikirtepe Parsel 19, July 2024). Source: https://www.emlakkonut.com.tr/en-US/yeni-fikirtepe-parsel-19

security but also ambiguity about development rights. This uncertainty fueled speculative behaviors among owners seeing informal constructions as economic assets. Although the Zoning Amnesty doesn't directly affect new projects, its perceived implications have escalated tensions. By encouraging profit-centered practices, the policy contributed to a market-prioritized governance approach dominating decision-making.

Fikirtepe's entrepreneurial landscape also led to the emergence of its very own actor group known as *çantacı* brokers. These opportunistic intermediaries exploit regulatory ambiguities in an environment where developers and residents are left to navigate challenges on their own. These manipulators negotiate contracts with property owners by making unrealistic promises but later resell them to larger firms at significantly higher prices. One property owner expressed frustration, stating: "*The çantacı promise quite favorable deals they can't keep, leaving us in worse financial also legal positions*." Consistent findings are also supported by the work of Köseoğlu (2020), who identified within their field of operation that these manipulators secured rents amounting to 8% of the total rent. They did this by leveraging the rents generated by the public sector and the fluctuating involvement of public authorities—ranging from passive moderation to dominant top-down intervention—while simultaneously acting as partners with developers, as elaborated in the preceding analysis. In doing so, they not only benefited short-term gain-seeking property owners but also sparked a lightbulb moment among rent-seekers about how to exploit crucial gaps in regulations. Relevantly, as one municipal official confirmed, "*The lack of robust sanctions limiting developers' inherent sole focus on profit and their full disregard for community needs only worsened the situation.*"

As analyzed in good order, operating such a governance model in Fikirtepe reveals many- folded realities in terms of navigating profit, politics, and solely economically driven entrepreneurial behavior of the residents: neglect of public interest, facilitation of speculative behaviors, and undermining community cohesion, all while highlighting power imbalances.

5.5.3. Post-populist adaptations in community politics: Property owners (community actors) in the crossfire?

This section examines the challenging role of long-standing residents as property owners by drawing mostly from first-hand interviews and insights

from on-site reporting. It analytically narrates how these actors navigate the so-called 'battleground' of competing interests through post-populist responses in the face of speculative markets, inadequate compensation, infrastructural failures, and the governance model's prioritization of market goals over community welfare.

The 2/3 rule positions residents in quite challenging situations due to its inherent nature forcing the remaining one-third to comply, even if they disagree. For instance, two property owners voiced frustration, noting how this 'fait accompli' undermines their autonomy, and puts consensus-building and accordingly neighborhood cohesion in serious difficulty. These internal divisions are often inevitable, especially between those who want to sell their property and oppose redevelopment. A municipal official noted that these conflicts, in turn, introduces delays and mistrust among stakeholders. As also supported by the Fikirtepe Association's report, this instrument forces property owners to make 'trade-offs'-in interviewees words- within a constrained framework.

Understanding property ownership in Fikirtepe, many residents, now formally recognized as property owners, initially occupied their homes as gecekondu settlers—individuals who built informally developed housing on state-owned land without legal ownership. Over time, legal reforms enabled these residents to formalize their ownership, which turned these informal occupiers into legally recognized property owners. This transition created a range of tenure arrangements shaped by the historical evolution of gecekondu settlements in Turkey. Two long-standing residents highlighted this disparity: "*some of us feel secure with our legal titles, while others remain uncertain, fearing potential losses in case of redevelopment fails*." These differences in tenure security and economic motivations influence the residents' approaches to redevelopment, either being open to negotiations with higher expectations or having defensive strategies due to the fear of losing what they own.

Community politics is critical in shaping the transformation's outcomes, as the project's political milieu impacts both negotiations and their consequences. Property owners take strategic actions to leverage their positions to navigate this political landscape and rent- seeking development practices. Their influence extends beyond individual land ownership to broader community dynamics, where personal interests conflict with

collective concerns. Findings indicate that property owners prioritize personal financial gains over communal benefits, which is consistent with similar works, and also with other Turkish urban renewal projects. This tendency also reflects the system's unmotivating attitude on this matter, and how little space systemic factors leave for collective community responses. So, prioritizing a self-preservation justifies itself in such a challenging governance environment, as one property owner reflected.

Fikirtepe's urban transformation has yielded varied outcomes for property owners as a consequence of protracted development timelines and challenges faced & strategic decisions made by property owners who chose to retain their properties or relocate. As one resident support, "*We were promised new housing years ago, but construction and delivery keeps getting delayed, and we're left in limbo.* The outcomes can essentially be compiled around two main approaches: tangible and intangible—material gains and quality of life. As confirmed by most of the interviewees, referring to their former neighbors, during the earlier phases, some property owners managed to benefit significant material gains and were able to use their compensation to acquire multiple properties in other parts of Istanbul, which is also consistent with Köseoğlu's (2020) findings. However, in the later stages, the value of compensation offered to property owners diminished drastically in real terms. Especially given the skyrocketing housing prices in Turkey over the past 1-2 years, many current property owners now find themselves unable to buy even a single equivalent property with the compensation they received. One property owner complained, "*The money we received was barely enough to cover our relocation costs, let alone start a new life.*" This signals a steep decline in financial well-being and the compensation's inadequacy to meet expectations.

As for the quality of life, the mismatch between increased urban density and inadequate robust planning has further degraded environmental quality. Stating the obvious, constructing significantly more building space on the same plot of land, due to a much higher permitted Floor Area Ratio (FAR), has led to overloaded infrastructure, insufficient green spaces, and limited public amenities. The compact building layouts have also resulted in narrow wind corridors and dimly lit residential units. Social cohesion has been similarly affected, as dense, high-rise developments and design flaws discourage interaction and promote isolation, with many former residents relocating.

Another adaptation residents adopt to navigate challenges and manage the transformation process, albeit with particular risks and vulnerabilities, is harnessing informal networks. According to one municipal official's observation "*These networks seem to provide support, especially where the formal system fails, but they often introduce new challenges, including exploitation, uncertainty and unfair outcomes*." Although informal networks have high potential to serve as a solution to systemic gaps and contribute to community self-empowerment (Kurt-Özman & Taşan-Kok 2024), within a post-populist authoritarian entrepreneurial environment as in Fikirtepe, they reconfigure sources of potential manipulation and harm. All these factors are also often strong determinants of the decisions to stay or relocate, findings indicate. From an insider and more engaging perspective, this decision also a reflection of being trapped between hope and fear. Each choice—retaining properties or moving—comes with its risks due to unclear regulations, market unpredictability, and, more significantly, the lack of state assurance. One of the most highlighted outcomes from the focus group discussions was the consistent finding that residents are hopeful the redevelopment will eventually pay off, but the high concern over potential setbacks is always there. Ultimately, this adaptation is shaped around the residents' survival strategies and their prefigurative response to already constrained choices, as they also attempt to bridge existing challenges with forward-looking alternatives.

5.6. Concluding remarks: Decoding the complex urban regeneration landscape

Synthesizing the nexus of authoritarian governance, entrepreneurial ambitions, and community politics, the Fikirtepe project offers a rich case for understanding urban regeneration in contested contexts, as in Turkey. By examining governance frameworks, policy mechanisms, and adaptive strategies, we revealed how urban transformation reshapes roles, interests, and interactions among key stakeholders in urban regeneration. Within entrepreneurial contexts, the shift from structured and long-term focused traditional urban planning to spatial governance prioritizes flexibility and adaptability to market demands (Kurt-Özman, 2024). Such a model creates tensions between economic imperatives and social equity by encouraging speculative behaviors, as observed among the Fikirtepe project' s intermediaries like '*çantacı*' (brokers). Contrasting with traditional

narratives—stereotypical views of squatters as merely vulnerable groups of urban transformation—this picture has now been replaced to recognize more complex realities of opportunism, entrepreneurialism, and political networking. This transition creates ambiguities and inequalities, such as unclearing roles, overlapping interests, and deepening socio-economic divides.

We observed several trends, such as the *puzzle of authoritarian entrepreneurialism,* where centralized governance prioritizes economic development, referred to as 'policy entrepreneurship' by Shi and Frenkiel (2021), over inclusive community engagement. In our case, the duality of stringent regulations complicated by selective flexibility has introduced significant uncertainty. Moreover, we also noticed that c*ommunity politics becomes a battleground* in which governance mechanisms ostensibly designed to streamline decision-making frequently led to conflicts, fostering tensions between property owners and developers. These dynamics mirror challenges in urban governance globally, as seen in Dutch urban regeneration projects, where entrepreneurial citizenship emerges both as a response to and critique of top-down governance structures (Al Sader et al., 2019; Mitra et al., 2020). Furthermore, we examined the increasingly *entrepreneurial urban citizenship* through which residents who are confronted with pressures from developers and government entities adopted entrepreneurial tactics to navigate the transformation process. These actions—such as negotiating with developers, leveraging legal tools, and forming collective alliances—align with patterns observed in global urban regeneration contexts. For instance, some urban regeneration studies in The Netherlands highlight how citizens employ entrepreneurial strategies to create societal value while navigating state-imposed constraints (van der Gaast et al., 2022; Piffero, 2009; Al Sader et al., 2019). However, while the dynamics observed in Fikirtepe illustrate the prefigurative nature of community responses—where residents, despite limited options, employ adaptive strategies—the entrepreneurial tactics used solely for self-serving purposes become survival strategies and fall short of aspirations for systemic change.

There are also some lessons to learn from these experiences as *transformative urban development practices.* Cases like Fikirtepe underscores the pressing need for transparent regulations, community

empowerment, and participatory governance in urban regeneration. While policy entrepreneurship, observed in decentralized governance models like those in the Netherlands, offers insights into fostering local adaptability and resilience, its application must consider the unique socio-political dynamics of contested contexts (Mitra et al., 2020; Al Sader et al., 2019). Ensuring equitable outcomes requires governance models that prioritize inclusivity, fairness, and long-term sustainability. This raises important questions for future research and policy innovation: How do residents' adaptive strategies contribute to mitigate or perpetuate socio-economic inequalities? What governance mechanisms can balance market-driven initiatives with inclusive community outcomes, and how can centralized frameworks prioritize social equity in market-dependent urban development frameworks? Understanding the dynamics of community politics and developing critical perspectives within market-dependent urban development is essential, as communities are often expected to create solutions through self-organization, frequently lacking sufficient formal authority to negotiate with public or private sector entities beyond conventional 'participatory' mechanisms. The prevailing market-dependent conditions require communities to be more vigilant, entrepreneurial, and connected around shared targets. From a policy perspective, institutionalizing community engagement through transparent regulatory frameworks is essential. Empowering residents as proactive stakeholders requires formalized participation channels and safeguards against speculative behaviors. Governance models must prioritize inclusivity to ensure economic growth aligns with community well- being. Ultimately, Fikirtepe's urban regeneration demonstrates the intricate interplay between state-driven initiatives, market dynamics, and community agency. The rise of entrepreneurial behaviors among residents, coupled with evolving governance frameworks, underscores the necessity of adaptive strategies that integrate inclusivity with market imperatives. Fikirtepe's trajectory resonates beyond Istanbul, serving as a critical reminder of the complexities and contradictions inherent in urban regeneration. By adopting governance practices that balance economic objectives with social equity, urban transformation can better align with principles of sustainability and fairness. These lessons underline the importance of integrating adaptive governance practices with inclusive planning principles, ensuring that economic growth supports community well-being and resilience.

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