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**From the Occupied Parks to the Gardens of the Nation:**

**Politics and Aesthetics of Urban Greenery in Post-Gezi Istanbul**

Sinan Erensü, Barış İne, Yaşar Adnan Adanalı

**Abstract:**

The Gezi uprising of 2013 was the quintessential urban-environment mobilization in which an Istanbul public park was both the stage and the cause of an unprecedented wave of protest. While the occupation of the Gezi Park was eventually suppressed and the political climate in the country has taken a downturn ever since, the so-called Gezi spirit has lived on in various small scale park protests and occupations. Ever since, defending and reclaiming the city parks, market gardens, public squares, and urban forests has become a mainstream act of defiance and a symbolic rejection of an intensifying authoritarianism, neoliberal urbanism and exclusionary planning practices. Growing interest in the mobilizing capacity of the emerging urban-environmental imaginary, however, has not remained exclusive to the opposition. Rather than dismissing the critique entirely, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has most recently embraced the politics of urban greenery and strived to mold it in its own image. This paper focuses on the contentious politics of urban greenery in Istanbul and examines how the city’s green public spaces have come to proxy a larger struggle over the future of Turkey. By discussing the possibilities, challenges and limits of the politics of urban greenery the paper examines how the government has attempted to absorb an emerging urban-environmental objection into its fold. To do so, the paper traces the genealogy of Istanbul’s park politics in the last decade and most specifically focuses on the latest iteration of the urban greenery frenzy: *the Gardens of the Nation*. By studying how this nation-wide urban greenery drive have been designed, promoted, discussed, inaugurated, and used the paper provides an account for critical role green aesthetics play conjuring up alternative environmental imaginaries and communities against the backdrop a populist authoritarian climate.

**Introduction**

On February 5-6, 2020 Istanbul Congress Hall hosted a first of its kind workshop on the future of the city's urban forests, registered trees, public parks and recreational grounds. Aptly titled as Istanbul Green Spaces Workshop, the event was organized by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and attracted some 1,200 participants across 14 parallel sessions on a variety of topics ranging from rooftop gardening to how to protect Istanbul’s ancient *bostans* (market gardens). The main venue was packed in the morning of the first day. Municipal officers, landscaping professionals, academics, college students, urban activists were all scrambling for seats to watch the opening address of the new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu. Only six months ago, his election campaign had ended the Justice and Development Party (AKP) cadres’ 25-year-long control over the city government, a long political reign began in 1994 by then a rookie politician, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Mayor Imamoğlu began his talk by hinting at the green record of the outgoing local leadership: “If we tell 50 random Istanbulites about this green spaces workshop”, the Mayor continued sarcastically, “most would react, ‘What green space? Have they left any of it?’ Sad, but true!”

Same day the new green spaces vision of the new municipal administration was made public as well. Accordingly, the immediate goals would be increasing participation in planning and design, bringing more green space to the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, replacing wet landscaping with less water-intensive solutions and saving 25 Million USD spent annually on the urban flowering drive and the lavish Istanbul Tulip Festival. “I promise you two things”, Mayor Imamoğlu asserted firmly and loudly, “we will take climate change seriously and under no circumstances open our limited green spaces to development”. This last remark fired up the crowd. As the mayor's talk was interrupted by cheers and a long round of applause, there was one burning question begging for an answer: What is it about urban greenery in Istanbul that so markedly energizes politics to the point where even a workshop dedicated to city parks and trees provides the perfect stage for a newly elected mayor to shine before the critical gaze of activists, academics and urban practitioners?

Urban greening has been a global phenomenon for a while now. Local governments and mayors around the world turn to green spaces to improve urban quality, address climate change, increase the profile of local real estate market or simply to boost popularity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite being high in demand, green spaces are not uncontroversial as where and how they are built (or not) may produce socially unequitable outcomes and raise environmental justice concerns. Green spaces do not take up much physical space in contemporary Istanbul[[2]](#footnote-2) yet they have an increasing weight in politics. Since the early 2010s, not only urban politics but also national fault lines have often pivoted around urban greenery, particularly in conjecture with Istanbul’s dwindling urban forests, public parks, community gardens and waterfront strips. At the heart of Turkey’s belated “urban green turn”[[3]](#footnote-3) lies the Gezi Park and the wave of protest it instigated in the summer of 2013. As the quintessential urban-environmental mobilization in which an Istanbul public park was both the stage and the cause of the protests, the Gezi uprising has had a lingering impact. The impromptu uprising not only proved the vulnerability of the AKP hegemony but also pointed to counter-hegemonic horizons[[4]](#footnote-4), including how the emergent urban environmental sensibility gets articulated in politics[[5]](#footnote-5). While the protests were eventually suppressed, the so-called Gezi spirit has lived on and proliferated across local mobilizations giving the country’s environmental justice activism its character: focused on environmental equity and access yet also motivated by anti-authoritarian sentiments.[[6]](#footnote-6). Since Gezi, occupying, reclaiming, or even caring for urban green spaces have come to signify an alternative socio-political horizon antithetical to the existing AKP order, reaching far beyond the social and environmental benefits conventionally attributed to them. New guerilla gardens have popped up in few remaining vacant plots while existing public parks came under close scrutiny in and beyond Istanbul often producing *ad hoc* activism, protests and occupation against unwanted redevelopment plans.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Growing interest in the mobilizing capacity of the emerging urban-environmental imaginary, however, has not remained exclusive to the opposition. Rather than ignoring the environmental challenge entirely, the governing AKP and its leader President Erdoğan chose to absorb it by utilizing a number of “green” strategies. Ranging from greenwashing to co-optation of nature-based solutions, from green gentrification to promoting alternative environmental ethics, the government strived to mold the emergent urban green turn in its own image. Curiously, the government’s growing interest in green spaces accompanied, not conflicted with, the party’s increasingly authoritarian rule, curtailment of civic rights and liberties, withholding signatures from the Paris Climate Agreement[[8]](#footnote-8) and a deepening economic crisis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Concerned with this unlikely authoritarian interest in green agenda, a surprising intersection of two globally salient phenomenon, this article examines Istanbul’s urban green spaces as contested sites at the age of authoritarian populism. We focus on *Millet Bahçeleri* (the Gardens of the Nation), the most ambitious iteration of AKP’s urban greenery frenzy in which the central government plans, subsidizes, finances and builds ornate city parks, bypassing local administrations. Conceived in 2018, the Gardens of the Nation have been used by President Erdoğan a domestic policy tool in various election campaigns and also promoted abroad as a smart green policy for climate change mitigation and adaptation.[[10]](#footnote-10) By examining how this new breed of gardens have been planned, promoted, discussed, inaugurated, and used the paper questions how and why urban greenery is instrumentalized and co-opted for socio-spatial control. By reading these new gardens not simply as green urban interventions but also as political aesthetic enterprises,[[11]](#footnote-11) we evaluate the limits and successes of the AKP authoritarianism in undermining an emerging urban-environmental objection and fostering alternative green imaginaries and communities.

In what follows, the paper first discusses space-based contentions leading up to the Gezi uprising and the rise of urban-environmental justice activism in and beyond İstanbul. Second, we introduce the Gardens of the Nation initiative as the AKP's major response to rising urban-environmental opposition. Next two sections further examine the initiative and illustrate how the gardens fit into the broader political economy and populist authoritarian rule of the central government respectively. We also elaborate on how the initiative speaks to, and potentially expands, major directions in critical urban greenery studies. We conclude the paper with a discussion on political aesthetics as a means to understand how urban green spaces are used not only to redesign cities but also divide and re-group the public and rally them behind social and political projects.

**The Gezi Moment and the Origins of the Politics of Urban Greenery**

Much has been written about the Gezi uprising and its radical openness.[[12]](#footnote-12) As an impromptu objection it was unexpected, non-hierarchical and without a core leadership to guide it. Gezi unprecedentedly mobilized a highly heterogeneous crowd composed of predominantly first-time activists from very diverse backgrounds. They were on the streets with different motivations and their expectations from the revolutionary momentum of the uprising did not necessarily converge. Resembling a fairground during the two-week-long occupation by the activists, Gezi park became a stage where myriad grievances including rising authoritarianism, the patriarchy, the Kurdish problem, police violence, rampant alcohol taxes, discrimination against the LGBTQ, as well as the urban and environmental crises were all voiced.

Despite being the heterotopia that it was, it is still critical to acknowledge what triggered the Gezi uprising to better understand its broad appeal and lingering impact. When a handful of activists rushed to the Gezi Park on May 27, 2013, they were desperately hoping to stop the construction vehicles driving into the park and unrooting ten to fifteen trees. This infiltration, according to the activists, was a first step towards clearing it for a redevelopment project that was on the table for months. Personally announced and promoted by the then Prime Minister Erdoğan himself, the project included pedestarization of the Taksim Square and rebuilding of the Ottoman era military barracks (*Topçu Kışlası*) which was demolished to clear space for the Gezi Park in 1940. Covering most of the park grounds the new structure was modeled after the barracks would be utilized as a shopping mall accompanied by luxury condominium units in the upper floors. Planned without any local input and participatory mechanism, the project targeted one of the last remaining green spaces in the European side of the city and contributing to the ongoing process of commercialization of the public spaces at the city center. Central government’s arrogant insistence on designing an urban square, activists’ relatable interest in saving a public park from certain demolition and the excessive police brutality found its echo within the larger public. The modest protest that started by a small group of urban activists in Istanbul drew thousands of supporters and grew into a mass anti-government protest and spread to other cities across the nation.

Despite its spontaneity the dissent at Gezi was not simply articulated out of thin air. It came into being against the backdrop of what some refer to as bulldozer neoliberalism[[13]](#footnote-13) to indicate the growing weight of construction and extraction sectors in the country’s political economy. From the late-2000s onwards, the governing AKP has increasingly relied on a growth model that is based on a scheme in which cheap available foreign finance is channeled into construction through public /private real estate development in cities along with energy and mining investments in the countryside.[[14]](#footnote-14) The government saw construction as the engine of the economy as the sector reached an annual growth rate of 9.4 percent between 2010 and 2018, three percentage points greater than the 6.4 percent annual GDP growth rate for the same period.[[15]](#footnote-15) In 2003, the year when AKP came to power, total building permits issued by the municipal authorities corresponded to a 36 Million square meter floor area. This number skyrocketed to 100 Million in 2009 and surpassed 2000 Million in 2016.[[16]](#footnote-16) This aggressive investment in (re)construction targeted first and foremost Istanbul, specifically its last remaining vacant lands, historic quarters and informally development neighborhoods with vulnerable title deeds. Green spaces were opened to development, the inner-city attracted high-end stores and residents as the well-established working-class neighborhoods uprooted. While some of this change was done through the hand of the market,[[17]](#footnote-17) urban renewal to a large degree was enabled, or undertaken by, central or local governments, a process scholars have labeled as planned or state-led gentrification.[[18]](#footnote-18)

While high-rises and shopping malls began to dominate the urban fabric in the 2010s, the following decade have witnessed the emergence of large-scale urban infrastructure projects as the next stage of construction frenzy. Announced proudly as “mad projects” in conjecture with Erdoğan’s 2011 General Election campaign, these projects had a heavy carbon footprint and put significant pressure on urban green spaces, wetlands and forests.[[19]](#footnote-19) Advertised as testaments of modernity, power and development, the most ambitious of these mega projects have disproportionally targeted Istanbul: a third bridge on the Bosphorus, a new airport that is supposed to be the largest in the world and the Istanbul Chanel, a massive waterway structure connecting the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, targeted Istanbul’s.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thanks to these large scale undertakings Turkey began to compete with Brazil and China in terms of total investment in infrastructures and single handedly absorbed half of the global private infrastructure in 2015.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Access to land and its development is key for effectively sustaining this model. Legal and institutional frameworks were restructured so that the spatial interventions targeting urban and rural areas can be eased.[[22]](#footnote-22) These measures include a variety of governmental technologies and regulations including cadastral services, liberalization of land use regulations, heavy reliance on imminent domain processes, deindustrialization, public-private partnerships, and land reclamation. In Istanbul the pending earthquake threat was used as a pretext for urban renewal schemes while in the countryside a populist resource independence discourse was used to promote energy, mining and transportation infrastructures. During the re-valuation, gentrification and commodification of land many working class households were pushed out of the city centers[[23]](#footnote-23), villagers were forced to migrate[[24]](#footnote-24) and green public spaces were lost. As the construction economy radically transformed the country’s urban and rural landscapes, AKP’s self-image as the able service-provider[[25]](#footnote-25), as the leader of state-led neoliberal developmentalism[[26]](#footnote-26) was met with a narrative that is more concerned with environmental ethics and aesthetics of bulldozer neoliberalism and its political ecology. In the late spring of 2013, Gezi Park at Istanbul’s Taksim Square became the unexpected stage where competition between these narratives finally became palpable over the destiny of an urban park.

End of the Gezi events also marks the emergence of two competing and mutually reinforcing environmental practices. As the protestors were expelled from the park by mid-June 2013 they spread across the city and began to hold public forums in different smaller scale parks of Istanbul. Known as park or neighborhood forums, these modest collectives enabled Gezi veterans to experiment direct democracy through park assemblies and engaged in practices of commoning and occupation at the local level.[[27]](#footnote-27) While some of these forums dissolved within a year, those managed to articulate with local urban-environmental causes established long-lasting networks. Those who were trained at Gezi now constitute a new breed of activism independent from the established oppositional forces often overlook urban and environmental conflicts. The radial openness of the Gezi uprising and park forum experience in its aftermath have contributed to emergence of new political practices and subjectivities in Turkey.[[28]](#footnote-28) Urban-environmental mobilization, which had remained relatively outside the conventional oppositional forces, have migrated to the center of contentious politics as first time activists and established political left, too, have gradually come to the movement. Reclaiming public parks, gardens and urban forests of Istanbul not only kept the Gezi spirit alive but also provided newcomers an easy access to environmental activism. As such, defending urban greenery of Istanbul has become a mainstream act of defiance, and simultaneously a symbol of rejection of an intensifying authoritarian urban rule.

In conjunction with the rising urban greenery activism, another environmental imaginary and aesthetics was also in the making, calling for alternative environmental aesthetics. In the immediate aftermath of Gezi Park’s two week long occupation, police barricades were placed around the park and all the exits and entrances were blocked. The park remained closed until it was ceremoniously reopened three weeks later by the state-appointed Governor of Istanbul and then AKP Mayor of the city accompanied by hundreds of police officers. The park was not run run it was originally announced . To the contrary it was renovated and manicured. As all the remnants and memories of the Gezi commune were cleared from the park, it was turned into an immaculate and lavish garden that it had never been. 100 new grown trees, 5,000 rose bushes and 200,000 seasonal flowers were planted, turf was laid for 26 square meter soil, benches were replaced, a water fountain was erected, playground was renewed and the park was expanded by 8,000 square meter towards the Taksim Square.[[29]](#footnote-29) As the governor walked along the park and introduced to the press the new park features under heavy police presence he also reminded that Gezi Park is for all Istanbulites and said: “Demonstrations hinder the public ability to enjoy it here... People would come to this park with their families. Gezi park is ready now to embrace all Istanbulites”.[[30]](#footnote-30) AKP machinery and Erdoğan were forced to put the *Topçu Kışlası* project on hold, yet they neither let Gezi be nor withdrew from the politics of urban greenery altogether. Renovation of the Gezi Park and its reopening to the public under police surveillance signaled that the green objection could not only be countered but also be harnessed to sustain alternative communities.

  **The Gardens of the Nation: The True Environmentalism**

The Gardens of the Nation initiative was first introduced by Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself as a part of his presidential bid leading up to the Presidential Election of June 24, 2018.[[31]](#footnote-31) In a late-night interview on the state broadcaster TRT, Erdoğan laid out his vision for the presidency and allocated a surprisingly large chunk of time to introduce the new public parks program. Heralded as “the most joyful news” of the night, Erdoğan revealed a re-zoning plan that would transform Istanbul’s soon-to-be-defunct Atatürk Airport into a massive twelve square kilometer public park to be named as *Millet Bahçesi* (the Garden of the Nation). “We want a centrally located garden in the city”, Erdoğan explained and compared the project to its global counterparts: “[they say] that England has great gardens, others do as well… Fine, behold, we will, too” (See Visual-1). Admitting the green spaces deficiency in Istanbul Erdoğan pitched the garden as a much needed place where “people can easily access with their families and kids, spend great time, eat, drink and roll-over on the grass as they wish”.[[32]](#footnote-32)

--- Visual 1 Goes Here ---

In the following days, it became clear that Erdoğan’s unprecedented monologue on public parks that night was not an accidental digression. The Gardens of the Nation initiative became a major component of Erdoğan’s stump speech along the campaign trail and made its mark all the way to the election manifesto of both the party and Erdoğan. It turned out that the project’s scope was not limited to a single public park either. There were several the Gardens of Nation projections for Istanbul and the intention was to spread the gardens to all 81 provinces. To accompany the Gardens of the Nation, Erdoğan even developed and promoted a parallel concept called *Millet Kırahathanesi* (the Coffeehouse of the Nation), a recreational space where citizens can enjoy government subsidized coffee, pastries and internet.[[33]](#footnote-33)

--- Visual 2 Goes Here ---

The initiative did not fall off the agenda even after Erdoğan and his party won the June elections. In fact, Erdoğan made the gardens an important component of the presidential agenda by pledging to complete five and initiating six gardens in Istanbul within the first 100 days in the office. The promise was kept. On December 14th, 2018 five new public parks totaling roughly 1.5 square kilometer, were concomitantly opened in five different neighborhoods of Istanbul in an impressive ceremony starring Erdoğan. In his address, Erdoğan clarified the political work he wants the new gardens to accomplish by stretching the wounds of the Gezi uprising. “Those who wreck and destroy in the name of environmentalism, the perpetrators of Gezi events and those who oppose every single good deed in this country”, Erdoğan said in contempt, “should check out these gardens of nation and you see what real environmentalism is”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

What counts as true environmentalism? This is a trope President Erdoğan often goes back to in the aftermath of the Gezi uprising.[[35]](#footnote-35) It is noteworthy that, unlike many contemporary authoritarian leaders, Erdoğan refrains from directly attacking or ridiculing the environmental cause. In a nuanced way, and true to the spirit of the post-truth era, he strives to reclaim environmentalism with his own definition. In his attempt to define what true environmentalism is, he regularly cites the number of trees his government has planted over the years, brags about the flamboyant roadside landscaping in Istanbul, sets new national tree planting day and initiates a zero-waste public program with the first lady and market it abroad as a climate change mitigation measure while refusing to sign the Paris Climate Accord.[[36]](#footnote-36) If all these efforts fail to provide him the credibility and recognition he seeks to have, Erdoğan discredits environmentalists but not environmentalism per se. The environmentalist Erdoğan hammers in his speeches is a sham environmentalist who is either a pawn (of foreign powers) or simply alien to local values, folding environmentalism into his culture wars. This culture war not only pits secular environmentalists against conservatives, but also delegitimizes the West as the cradle of environmental ethics since as he often reminds his followers the West does not follow the environmental standards that they themselves set.

The name of the gardens initiative fits neatly to this picture. The emphasis on “the nation” (*millet*) echoes “authentic and national” (*yerli ve milli*), the nativist motto that Erdoğan uses for a few years now to draw a sharp contrast between the true owners of the land (including his movement and allies) and the state’s external and internal enemies (predominantly political foes and dissidents).[[37]](#footnote-37) While national (*milli*)in this phrase more directly refers to a ethno-religious core, authentic (*yerli)* implies a borderline xenophobic communal exceptionalism with unique and inimitable cultural and attitudinal qualities.[[38]](#footnote-38) Accordingly not only parliamentarians, bureaucrats and policies but also newspapers, celebrities, private companies as well as tastes and habits are expected to be “authentic and national”. An urban greenery project as ambitious as the Gardens of the Nation, then, has to be squarely aligned with the “authentic and national” side of this Manichean worldview, forcing us to imagine green spaces that are not. At this juncture, whether Erdoğan reminds us or not, Gardens of the Nation are, by definition, stand in opposition, first and foremost, to Gezi. The gardens negate what Gezi stood for both in function and aesthetic appeal as we will further elaborate below. To borrow a dichotomy popularized by a pro-Erdoğan youth organization one could argue that the gardens are not to appeal to the *gezici*s (short for a Gezi protester, but also literally means literally a traveler, wanderer), but rather for create alternative spaces and environmental imaginaries for *kalıcı*s (permanents, settlers)[[39]](#footnote-39).

**Between Safe Greenery and Green Washing**

Advertised as new safe urban spaces for families, the gardens also played an important role in AKP's mayoral bid in Istanbul and beyond during the March 31th, 2019 local administration elections. All AKP candidates pledged to be part of the initiative and build a garden in the cities that they intend to run. Binali Yıldırım[[40]](#footnote-40), Erdoğan's pick for Istanbul, on the other hand, promised to increase the number of gardens in the city to 39, one corresponding to each district.[[41]](#footnote-41) While the March 2019 elections resulted in a major political upset costing AKP major cities including Istanbul, the Gardens of Nation initiative has continued to shape the urban fabric and politics. In early 2019, well after a number of gardens were already complete and opened to visitors, the initiative was given legal status and included in the Zoning Legal Framework. Defined as a “large green space that brings the public closer to nature and functions as a disaster evacuation space”, the Gardens of the Nation were officially recognized as a new urban green space category next to already existing three categories: the playground, the public park, and the picnic and recreational space. Since then the Gardens of the Nation have their unique sign and color and are included in the zoning plans as such.

Despite having a legal status, there are still a number of aspects of the Gardens of the Nation that make them an ambiguous urban category. It is unclear, for example, what distinguishes a Garden of the Nation from a public park other than its name. The legislation in fact stipulates a guidebook to be prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization to standardize details such as size, function, location selection, and tender conditions of these structures. The guideline was only published in May 2020, trailing way behind the initiative itself.[[42]](#footnote-42) Although the gardens have been promoted with delusions of grandeur, they come in different sizes and functions. While *Başakşehir Millet Bahçesi*, for example, stretches across 465 thousand square meters and feature an artificial lake, an amphitheater, bicycle lanes and a Coffee House of the Nation inside the premises, the 59 thousand square-meter *Baruthane Millet Bahçesi* is smaller than many regular public parks in the city.

--- Visual 3 Goes Here ---

A much more controversial ambiguity pertains to the choice of garden locations. There exists no criteria regarding the quality of urban land that can be transformed into a garden of the nation. In some occasions, gardens are developed on top of already existing recreational areas and simply mean a rebranding process undertaken by regulating the unregulated recreational fields. For example, located in the Asian part of the city, the recently opened *Ümraniye Millet Bahçesi* used to be a popular picnic ground and urban forest attracting Istanbulites and their charcoal grills (See Visual-3). In 2019, AKP-run District Municipality of Ümraniye decorated the 330 thousand square-meter land with recreational furniture, playgrounds, running and biking tracks. They also updated the restrooms, laid down turf underneath the woods, opened-up parking space serviceable to one thousand cars, built a sizable cafeteria, began to monitor the area with security personnel and called it a Garden of the Nation. In this carefully curated and highly regulated space it is now forbidden to barbecue on personal charcoal grills. Instead, the garden’s trademark is five large natural-gas powered barbecue stations, designed to offer the visitors “the privilege of barbecuing”, in the words of the mayor of Ümraniye, “without the usual hassle and smoke”.[[43]](#footnote-43) Boosted as “centralized” and “nature-friendly”, the stations are overseen by municipal personnel who assist visitors who prefer not to make their own barbecue.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Over-curation and hyper-regulation are not the only reasons why rebranding of green spaces in the form of gardens of the nation is problematic. Gardens of the Nation are also used to cover-up questionable zoning practices in contemporary Istanbul to greenwash projects that actually hinder public access to environmental goods. The waterfront *Baruthane Millet Bahçesi* located in Bakırköy District’s Ataköy neighborhood on the European side of the city is case in point. Spanning across eight kilometer squares and home to roughly fifty-thousand residents, Ataköy is one of the earliest and arguably the most successful middle-class public housing projects in Istanbul enjoying social amenities and green spaces. When the housing project was first planned in early 1950s, the 2 kilometer-long, 200 meter-wide waterfront strip in front of it was developed into a public beach which remained popular among the Istanbulites until 1980s when the pollution of the Marmara Sea made it unhealthy to swim in it. The waterfront was left under-invested and run-down for decades until it was divided into four parcels by the central government and auctioned out to private developers in early 2010s.

Despite previously being designated exclusively as a tourism zone, the developers were allowed to take advantage of loopholes. Their permit applications for hotel construction were approved only to be later amended to include upscale residential high rises. After lengthy court proceedings accompanied by Gezi-inspired street demonstrations, the local community, organized under the banner of Bakırköy Urban Defense (*Bakırköy Kent Savunması*) lost the struggle over the shoreline with the expectation of one relatively small parcel.[[45]](#footnote-45) Squeezed between fourteen ultraluxe condominiums, a Hyatt Regency, a new yacht harbor and a shopping mall, the smallest parcel’s contract was canceled by a court decision thanks to the remnants of a historic gunpowder factory (*baruthane*) and a registered tree found in the premises. In the post-Gezi climate the government refrained from seeking out a new contract, changed the status of the parcel into a public park. After a few weeks-long manicuring the parcel was inaugurated as *Baruthane Millet Bahçesi* and proudly promoted as an attempt towards increasing people’s access to the Marmara Sea (See Visual-4).[[46]](#footnote-46) Sealed-off by high-rises on both sides, *Baruthane Millet Bahçesi* is now one of the leading examples of the Gardens of the Nation initiative as well as an inadvertent reminder of AKP’s aggressive capital-friendly urban politics.

**Global Rise of Urban Greenery and Authority in the Garden**

Interest in urban greenery is not unique to Turkish politics. Urban green spaces, whether in the form of public parks, green belts or vertical gardens do have a positive reputation across the world. Many people see urban environments in a positive lens; enjoy living, working and commuting in and around them. In response, local governments in Global north and south alike embrace urban greening projects[[47]](#footnote-47) and other nature based solutions with the hope of reaping their economic,[[48]](#footnote-48) health care,[[49]](#footnote-49) ecological and climate change related benefits.[[50]](#footnote-50) Green interventions are not only undertaken at the level of city government, they are also discursively and financially supported as state-of-the-art polies by international institutions such as the World Bank, various United Nations (UN) agencies and the European Union.

The fact that they are among the most desired urban amenities, however, does not mean they are immune to politics or necessarily produce socially and ecologically equitable outcomes.[[51]](#footnote-51) In fact, despite being promoted as benign, common sense, smart and nature-based solutions to various ills of urbanization, urban greening projects are increasingly being contested by the local communities and scrutinized by scholars.[[52]](#footnote-52) Green investments are not equally distributed across cities and often disproportionately favor the already affluent parts of the cities or they are steered by urban growth alliances to benefit future real estate developments and/or commercial interest. Because far too often, green interventions are planned and implemented in a top-down fashion without much attention to neighborhood histories, demographic and social dynamics. Urban researchers and political ecologists have also been arguing that green planning orthodoxy cannot escape but be an extension of larger neoliberal forces sometimes despite the best intentions.[[53]](#footnote-53) Greening spaces and projects help local authorities to brand cities as green to attract capital. Another well-documented aspect of neoliberal urban greening is what scholars term as green gentrification (or eco-gentrification) in which expansion or improvement of green amenities inflate the nearby real estate market, harm lower income communities.[[54]](#footnote-54) Green gentrification is an exclusionary process and often means dispossession and displacement for the urban poor, ethnic and racial minorities.

The Gardens of the Nation, too, suffer from most the shortcoming of urban greening interventions highlighted in the literature. The new gardens are imposed, rather than collectively designed through local input. Although they are promoted for their disaster risk management capacities the central government refuses to take responsibility against earthquake and climate change threads loom large over the city.[[55]](#footnote-55) The processes behind where the new gardens are to be located are not transparent. They are promoted as increasing citizen access to urban environments, yet some of the gardens are simply being built over already existing, yet under-planned and designed recreational city grounds. Others, unabashedly, are built next to highly controversial high-end waterfront condominiums for greenwashing purposes, therefore approving, not challenging, neoliberal urbanism. While we lack detailed research on how the new gardens impact lower income neighborhoods, the government-affiliated press already proudly announce rent increases in neighborhoods expecting the new gardens nearby.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Despite all these characteristics that new city gardens of Turkey share in common with their urban greening counterparts across the globe, we believe that they also retain some unique aspects that would enhance our understanding how urban green is folded into politics. Most critically, unlike most urban greenery interventions, the Gardens of the Nation are not local initiatives; they are personally promoted and overseen by the president Erdoğan himself. By this token, the gardens symbolizes and contributes to the centralization of power in the country and helps Erdoğan undercut the reach of municipal governments

While, for example, the controversy surrounding the Baruthane Garden above speaks to the assumed–if not necessarily the actual– role of green spaces in obscuring the urban disputes, it also exemplifies how the central government expands its authority over local politics through the seemingly mundane politics of urban greenery. Thus far, we have illustrated that President Erdoğan is not only the originator and the patron of the Gardens of the Nation initiative, he also personally attends most inauguration ceremonies and skillfully turns every garden visit into a political rally. It is critical to note, however, that the authority performed over the local politics through the Gardens of the Nation is not just a discursive but also political economical.

The responsibility to run the gardens initiative is given by President Erdoğan to the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. Under the ministry, TOKI (Mass Housing Agency of Turkey), the infamous public developer best known for its heavy-handed urban renewal program resulting in evictions and gentrification, is tasked with the responsibility to design, finance and build the gardens.[[57]](#footnote-57) As of May 2020, there are eleven gardens completed by TOKI, while the agency has 19 projects under construction, 21 ready for tender request and 103 at early stage of planning.[[58]](#footnote-58) Planned behind closed doors with no local input, the gardens cause fluctuations in the local real estate market too, by creating advantage for those with prior knowledge.[[59]](#footnote-59) Another dimension of this secrecy and closeness pertains to the planning of the parks. One of the noticeable actors in the project development is *ON Tasarım*, an urban design/landscape architecture company based in Ankara and Istanbul, infamously known for the design of the Taksim Square that triggered the uprising in 2013. The company had been commissioned to design 13 gardens of the nation so far, including *Istanbul Millet Bahçesi*, the largest project of its kind that is planned to repurpose Atatürk Airport.

Gardens of the Nation are not cheap undertakings either. While the eventual costs depend on the size and location of the garden, *Pendik Millet Bahçesi*, located in Istanbul over 250,000 square meter land, for example, is expected cost as much as 66 Million Turkish Liras (roughly 8.8 Million USD).[[60]](#footnote-60) An ongoing garden project in Ankara, which is highly controversial as the contractor was hand-picked by TOKI instead of selected through a tender, is reported to have a colossal 398.5 Million Turkish Lira (roughly 52 Million USD) price tag on it.[[61]](#footnote-61) These are significant sums for the city and district municipalities as most of them are heavily indebted.[[62]](#footnote-62) Yet thankfully, all the costs of initiative are covered by Ankara, enabling the central government to be both politically and financially active in local politics. This is a much needed political reach given AKP’s diminishing electoral success in metropoles. The logos of TOKI as well as the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization are clearly marked at the gates giving the central administration the bragging rights and the publicity opportunity. Yet, many gardens fall under the jurisdiction of municipalities, triggering potential conflicts between the central and local governments especially if the latter is run by the opposition. To overcome such conflicts, Ankara either ignores the metropolitan municipality and finds a friendly district municipality to cooperate with or tries hard to change the status of the land in question in a top-down fashion.

**Closing Remarks: Green Aesthetics and Community**

Despite problems in their top-down planning and implementation, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the Gardens of the Nation are unwanted urban amenities. Particularly in Istanbul, where urban residents are desperate for recreational grounds to breathe and relax, there is little reason why the new gardens would not be as popular as any other green spaces. Therefore it is not surprising that the Gardens of the Nation in Istanbul, most of which used to be under-designed recreational grounds anyways, are frequented by Istanbulites. The purpose of this article is not to pass a value judgement against the new government gardens. To the contrary, what we aim to accomplish in this article is to illustrate the critical role that they have played for President Erdoğan to counter a formidable environmental challenge that became palpable with the Gezi protests.

Beyond being a simple policy maneuver, we contend that the case of the Gardens of the Nation also speaks to a growing concern regarding how populist authoritarianism relates to the environment. The success of populist authoritarianism that we encounter in different shapes and forms across the globe lies in their ability to speak “in the name of the people” while, at the same time, setting the standards for “who the people are” in a pretty racialized and nativist manner. Environmental matters are highly relevant to these definitions as they often bring about questions of land, culture and taste.[[63]](#footnote-63) Therefore, it is no coincidence that most contemporary populist authoritarian leaders take strong conservative positions in environmental disputes. What characterizes these positions is the belief that people’s sovereignty over the native land is at odds with, and superior to, universally recognized environmental principles and environmental justice concerns. Erdoğan’s interest in urban greenery, we argue, illustrates how populist leaders maintain authority and command not only by suppressing the environmental critiques, but also by fostering alternative environmental tastes, ethics, aesthetics.

Positioned in direct opposition to the urban-environmental challenge of Gezi, the gardens not only help the government to take the urban space back, but also exemplify what “true environmentalism” loyal to the blood and soil may look like. “True environmentalism” is not a textbook definition to be learnt, it is also aesthetically experienced.[[64]](#footnote-64) Senses play an important role in establishing the relationship between people and politics. What we experience with our senses (e.g. “the beautiful”) is a subjective judgement but at the same time, it seeks others’ recognition and acknowledgement. The moment of enunciation of an aesthetic term signifies the immediate transition from a subjective judgment to commonsensical, which is bound to fail because of the impossibility of consensus on sensory experiences. Hence, to name something “beautiful” as an aesthetic judgment necessarily leads to two different camps but always maintains the futile search for unity. The new government gardens, likewise, speak to our senses, they foster a certain environmental taste and build communities that appreciate that taste. Istanbul-based urban activists and landscape architects that we talked to find the gardens kitsch, ostentatious and overdesigned. For many others, including but not exclusively the staunch AKP supporters, they are perfect for family weekend outings and Instagram photoshoots.

In this respect, the Garden of the Nation Initiative that was presented by Erdoğan as an “authentic and national” (*yerli and milli*) project aiming to recreate the beauties of İstanbul and beyond for the use of the nation functions as a dividing force in the politics of urban greenery. The Gardens of the Nations Guidebook (*Millet Bahçeleri Rehberi*), which was released by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization as we conclude the second draft of this paper, provides an illuminating perspective into this political aesthetic project. The booklet describes its purpose as to “set a common language… around the Gardens of the Nation that would reflect the nation’s welfare and dynamism and symbolize national image and identity”.[[65]](#footnote-65) While listing some very non-specific and non-binding guidelines as to how to plan, design and built the new gardens, the booklet most remarkably traces a Muslim-Turkish tradition with regards to parks and gardens. Through this detailed historic account, the guidebook establishes the authenticity of the Gardens of the Nations initiative and categorize it as the latest iteration of a proud gardening lineage with deep roots in Seljuk, Ottoman, and early Republican eras.

Evident in the content and tone of the Green Spaces Workshop that we discussed in the introduction, the newly elected mayor of Istanbul, too, cannot escape but take part in the politics of urban greenery. The IMM administration under Mayor Imamoğlu, strives to distance and differentiate itself from Erdoğan government’s heavy-handed handling of urban environment matters. After all, one of the major criticisms of urban opposition in Turkey in the past decade has been the lack of participation in urban governance and the environmental legacy of the Gezi protests still motivates and inspires the opposition. The new municipal cadres now include Gezi veterans alongside experts, activists and academics who have been active in urban-environmental opposition in Istanbul for the last two decades. Around the time the central government has been introducing new gardens in a top-down fashion, Istanbul’s newly elected local government was holding consultative workshops on topics ranging from earthquake preparedness to water management, from urban farming to urban greenery. One of the boldest moves of the Major Imamoğlu has been its opposition to President Erdoğan’s latest environmentally controversial mega-project: a new waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea. Succinctly summarized with the slogan “it is either Istanbul or the channel”, the major has mobilized IMM against the project. To better document and protect Istanbul’s fragile ecosystem, a new directorate with the title Urban Ecological Services has been defined under IMM. Last but not least, two new two new municipal recreational areas have been inaugurated in last remaining urban forests of the city and promoted them as minimally-designed, in contrast with the Gardens of the Nation. While these developments are most welcomed from an environmental standpoint, the extent to which they will help overcome the authoritarian polarization over urban greenery is yet to be seen.

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1. Anguelovski et al., “New Scholarly Pathways; Gould and Lewis, *Green Gentrification*. Wolch et al., “Urban Green Space”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Having only 2.2% of its land allocated for parks or gardens, İstanbul ranks at the bottom of a 40-city list compiled by the World Cities Culture Forum. Similarly, Green Cities Index published by TravelBird, a Dutch travel agency, ranks Istanbul second to last in a 50-city list. Suliman, “Green City Getaways”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By urban green turn we refer to the proliferation of urban greening initiatives and the popularization of nature-based solutions to remedy social and environmental ills of the cities. Anguelovski et al., “New Scholarly Pathways”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bakıner, “Spirit of Gezi”; Konya, “Breaking Billboards”, Çınar, “Negotiating the Foundations”.. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Akbulut, “A Few Trees”, Arsel et al, “A Few Environmentalist?”, Erensü and Karaman, “Work of a few trees”, Mert, “The trees in Gezi”, Özdüzen, “Spaces of Hope”, Özkaynak et al., “The Gezi Park”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pellow, “Critical Environmental Justice”. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Urban green spaces that have witnessed major anti-redevelopment activism in the aftermath of Gezi include Validebağ Woods, Roma Bostan, İlya’s Bostan, Albatros Park and Kuruçeşme Park in İstanbul; ODTU Woods and 100. Yıl Park in Ankara; Diyarbakır City Forest, Karayolları Park and Hevsel Gardens in Diyarbakır, Bankalar Park in Amasya, Mehmet Bozgeyik Park in Gaziantep. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Turhan et al. “Beyond Special Circumstances”, Mazlum “Still Playing Alone”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Akçay and Gürgen, “The Making of”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yavuz, “İklim Zirvesinde Millet Bahçesi” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ranciere, The Politics of Aesthetics. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Açıksöz and Korkman, “Masculinized Power, Queered Resistance”, ; Ay and Miraftab, “Invented Spaces”; Diken, “The Emancipated City”; Erensü and Karaman, “Work of a few trees”; Evren, “On the Joy”, Ertür, “Barricades”, Gambetti, “Occupy Gezi”; Karakayalı and Yaka, “The Spirit of Gezi”;; Tuğal, “Resistance Everywhere”, Turhan, “”Democracy Happens”, Yıldız, “Cruising Politics”; Yörük, “The Long Summer”; Zengin, “What is Queer About Gezi”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lovering and Türkmen, “Bulldozer Neoliberalism”; also see Mine Eder, “Türk Usulü.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Adaman et al. “Hitting the Wall.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Compiled from the data of the State Statistical Institute of Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Yetişkul and Demirel, “Assembling Gentrification”, Özdemir and Selçuk, “From Pedestrianization” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. İslam, “Current Urban Discourse”, İslam and Sakızoğlu, “The Making of”, Kocabaş and Gibson, “Planned Gentrification” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The *Mega Istanbul* research team defines what counts as a mega project, lists and visualizes more than 120 ambitious real estate and infrastructure projects that Istanbul showcases. <https://en.megaprojeleristanbul.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The area reserved for the latter two corresponds to 6 percent of Istanbul’s surface area. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Hürriyet Daily News,* 14 Jun. 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-absorbs-almost-half-of-global-private-infrastructure-investment-in-2015-world-bank-100463> (accessed 31 May 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Atasoy, “Repossession, Re-informalization and Dispossession”; [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kuyucu and Ünsal, “Urban Transformation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Adaman et al. “Neoliberal Developmentalism”; Erensü, “Turkey’s Hydropower”; Evren, “The Rise and Decline”; Öztürk et al. “Commodification and the Social Commons.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Adanalı, “#Occupy Gezi.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Adaman and Akbulut, “Erdoğan’s Three-Pillared Neoliberalism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Akçalı, “Popular Assemblies”; İnceoğlu, “The Gezi Resistance”; Pehlivan, “Going Beyond”. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Karakayalı and Yaka, “The Spirit of Gezi” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Anadolu Ajansı,* 2 Jul. 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Hürriyet*, 8 Jul, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Peker, “The Politics of Serving”. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Hürriyet*, 23 May. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Euronews*, 7 Jun. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Diken*, 17 Nov. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Adaman and Akbulut, “Erdoğan’s Three-Pillared Neoliberalism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Turhan et al., “Beyond special circumstances” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Others draw parallel between the contemporary Gardens of the Nation and their namesake public parks of late Ottoman early Republican Era modernism. Duru, “Türkiye’ye Özgü bir Proje”; Memlük, “Osmanlı Modernleşmesi ile.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Bora, “Zamanın Kelimeleri” 192-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Küçük and Türkmen, “Remaking the Public” discuss at length the slogan *gezici değil, kalıcı gençlik* (permanent youth, not wanderers) in the context of new nationalist cosmology in Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Considered to be Erdogan's right hand, Binali Yıldırım proclaims to be the man behind the mega projects with his 14 year-long role as the Minister of Transport. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Although Yıldırım lost the race, the central government has been pursuing this project in as a means to compete with the new IMM administration. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, “Millet Bahçeleri Rehberi”, available at URL: https://webdosya.csb.gov.tr/db/mpgm/editordosya/milletbahcesirehber.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Aksu, “Millet Bahçesine Merkezi Mangal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. In one of several demonstrations, around a thousand demonstrators from the local community marched from Bakırköy Town Square to the Ataköy coast chanting “we will take back the Ataköy shore”. Demonstrators demanded the suspension of construction along until the legal process is finalized. Habertürk, 20 Sep. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Levent, “Ataköy Sahili Halka Teslim.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. In fact, IMM’s interest in urban greenery precedes the gardens initiative. Founded in 1997, during Erdoğan’s first mayoral term, Istanbul Tree and Landscape Corporation (Ağaç AŞ) is one of the oldest municipal enterprises running on a hefty 0.8 Billion TL budget. BBC Turkish, “İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Heckert and Mennis, “The Economic Impact”. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Lee et al., “Value of Urban”. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Wolsch et al. “Urban Green Space” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Anguelovski et al., “New Scholarly Pathways” [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Pearsall and Anguelovski, “Contesting and Resisting”; Kotsila, “Nature Based-Solutions”, Anguelovski et al., “New Scholarly Pathways” [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Anguelovski et al., “From Landscapes”; Anguelovski et al., “New Scholarly Pathways”; Kotsila, “Nature Based-Solutions”; Brand, “Green Subjection” [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Gould and Lewis, *Green Gentrification*; Dooling, “Ecological Gentrification”; Quastel, “Political Ecologies” [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Turkey remains one the few countries that has not ratified the Paris Climate Agreement. Istanbul has long been expecting a major earthquake around 7.5 magnitude yet the number of buildings that are not expected to withhold it is around 50,000 by conservative estimates. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Yeni Şafak, “Erdoğan’ın açıklamasıyla” [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Çavuşoğlu and Julia Strutz, “Producing Force and Consent”; Karaman, “Urban Renewal in Istanbul.” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Anadolu Ajansı*, 22 May, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Tabak, “Millet Bahçesi’nin Adı Fiyatları Uçurdu.” [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Güvemli, “Türkiye’nin Milyonluk Bahçeleri.” [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Toker, “AKM Millet Bahçesinde Neler Oluyor?” [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Sözcü*, “AKP’li Belediyeler Borç Dağı Bıraktı.” [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. McCarthy, “Authoritarianism, Populism”. 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Here, we follow a Rancierian approach to the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Rancière, “The Politics of Aesthetics” Exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics of spatial aesthetics can be found in other urban conflicts. In his work on Park 51 in New York, for example, Ruez underlines the ways in which the debate over the location of an Islamic community center and a mosque demonstrates the limits of public discussion around the existing distribution of the sensible with regard to Islamophobia, citizenship and community. Ruez, “Partitioning the Sensible’. Ghertner, on the other hand, applies a similar framework to the city of Delhi to explain how the whole city has been transformed into an aesthetic project pursuing world-class standards. Ghertner, “Rule by Aesthetics”. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, “Millet Bahçeleri Rehberi”, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)