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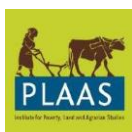


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# Neoliberal developmentalism, authoritarian populism, and extractivism in the countryside: The soma mining disaster in Turkey

Fikret Adaman, Murat Arsel and Bengi Akbulut

## Abstract

*While state-society relations in Turkey have historically been top-down and coups d'état periodically interrupted the functioning of electoral politics, the recent authoritarian turn under President Erdogan is remarkable. Two political economic dynamics are especially salient. First, Erdogan and his Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) have been particularly effective in continuing with and deepening the neoliberalisation of economy and society, a process that had been ongoing falteringly since 1980. Their policies have created a new form of neoliberal developmentalism, where solutions to all social ills have come to be seen as possible through rapid economic growth. As existing social protection mechanisms are dismantled and the poor (as well as ethnic and religious minorities) are further marginalized, proponents of this model point to the massive construction and infrastructure projects transforming the landscape of the country. The execution of these projects – both physically and financially – are dependent on the rapid transformation of the countryside, where new forms of dispossession and deagrarianisation open the way to an unprecedented extractivist drive, which is the second important dynamic in question. Together, neoliberal developmentalism and extractivism have resulted in growing socio-economic and ecological costs both in the rural and urban spheres, leading to various forms of social dissent. The eruption of anger after the Soma coal mining disaster that killed 301 miners is one such case. The paper demonstrates how authoritarian populism, neoliberal developmentalism and extractivism buttressed each other in the case of Soma, leading to the disaster that could have easily been prevented. The paper also shows how Erdogan and the AKP use populist tactics (ranging from an uptic in nationalist discourse to the provision of 'coal aid' in winter) to assuage their critics. Where these prove inadequate, an increasingly violent crackdown on social is being deployed in the name of peace and order as the country remains in a state of emergency since the attempted coup of July 2016.*

## Acknowledgements

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## 1 Introduction

301 men perished in the worst mining disaster in Turkish history at the Soma underground coal mine on 13 May 2014. Rushing to the area to supervise the rescue efforts and to comfort the devastated community, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan adopted a tone that was marked by its combination of defiance and fatalism. In response to a question regarding which authorities should be seen as responsible for such a tragic loss of life, he began by reading from a list of mining disasters around the world, quoting death tolls recorded mainly in mid-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century England as well as a few major episodes from the 1950s and 1960s in China and Japan. He then employed the relatively obscure Islamic term *fitrat*<sup>1</sup>, which has since become a colloquialism to ridicule his haplessness in the face of this tragedy, to chide the journalists for not recognizing that large scale deaths are an inherent and inevitable aspect of coal mining.

Failed to be assuaged by these words, the residents of the town of Soma fiercely protested Erdoğan and his large entourage (as others coming to join the protests from the region were blocked by security from entering the town) and the Prime Minister was forced to take refuge in a shop in order to escape the angry townspeople. Adding to the state's tone-deaf reaction, one of Erdoğan's aides was photographed literally kicking a man that was knocked down by security forces who were charging the demonstrators with their batons. Even though the people of Soma had voted for Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (the AKP in its Turkish acronym) at a rate that exceeded the national average, the town then turned against Erdoğan and his government as the disaster was not seen as a mere accident, let alone one that was inherent to the business of coal mining. Wasn't it true that a local MP (from the main opposition party) had called for an investigation into safety concerns at the Soma mining site just two weeks prior the tragedy—only to be rejected by the AKP? Wasn't it true that the heat in the galleries had increased to alarming levels before the accident, yet activities were allowed to continue? Wasn't it true that the rescue operation was poorly executed due to lack of preparation? Wasn't it true that the private company running the site had been one of the *enfants bien-aimés* of the AKP?<sup>2</sup> Finally, although not explicitly mentioned, wasn't it also true that the locals were forced to switch from an agrarian lifestyle to mining after a series of policies that had all but destroyed the viability of peasant agriculture in the area?

Taken together, these rhetorical questions point towards the inconvenient truth that the Soma disaster was a long time coming. Ersoy (2017) is therefore correct when he describes the tragedy with reference to Gabriel García Márquez's famous 1981 novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, where a homicide that will take place in a small town is already known by all residents but no one dares to do anything to prevent it.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, while living with the knowledge that a major disaster was in the making, thousands of men every day went down to the mines and most of the ones that survived continue to do so today. The first goal of this paper is therefore to provide an explanation for this choice within the context of Erdoğan's authoritarian populism, one that builds on structural dynamics of the political economy of development in Turkey.

Another inconvenient truth is that the fury of the Soma community in the days following the disaster did not translate into a lasting political movement or even a sustained electoral "punishment" of Erdoğan. In fact, the protests gradually faded and the people of Soma supported Erdoğan and his AKP anew in numbers that once again outstripped the national average in the 2017 referendum on constitutional changes to strengthen the powers of the presidency. The results are particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Originally an Arabic word that does not have an exact equivalent in English, *fitrat* denotes the inherent nature of a person or a thing.

<sup>2</sup> This line of accusations has led many to coin the term "murder" for the incident (see, e.g., Williams 2014; Bracke 2016), as opposed to the term "accident" that the government and the pro-government media have opted for. In this article the terms "disaster" and "tragedy" have been used interchangeably to secure an unloaded usage.

<sup>3</sup> This vision is shared by many reports written on the disaster: Türkiye Barolar Birliği (2014); Türk Sosyal Bilimler Derneği Çalışma Grubu (2016); Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Soma Araştırma Grubu (2017).

significant since the referendum was widely interpreted as a test of Erdoğan's popularity in a particularly turbulent moment in Turkey, marked not simply by an attempted *coup d'état* in July 2016 but also the oppressive crackdown against all forms of political dissent that tarnished his authoritarian credentials. The second goal of the paper is therefore to account for the acquiescence of the Soma community with Erdoğan's rule in the aftermath of the mining disaster or, in other words, to demonstrate how authoritarian populism can continue to generate a semblance of societal legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> While our analysis is focused exclusively on Soma, the lessons it provides hold clues for understanding the overall tenor of state-society relations in contemporary Turkey as the grip of the state over society continues to get stronger, the resilience of progressive forces is depleted, and acts of political dissent come to be seen as quixotic.

In tackling these two questions, our goal is "to understand, but not judge" (Scoones et al. 2017, 3) the decisions and actions of the Soma community as part of a structural framework. Our proceeding analysis locates the genesis of the Soma disaster and its surprising denouement within three interrelated dynamics that have become ascendant in diverse settings around the world: the rise of authoritarian populism, neoliberal developmentalism, and extractivism. In response to its first question regarding why workers sought jobs and continued to work in a highly risky mine, the paper explores the impacts of neoliberal developmentalism on the agricultural sector in Turkey to argue that peasants from the Soma region were pushed out of their agrarian livelihoods. The specific manifestation of neoliberal development in its overwhelming focus on extraction and construction, both of which are linked to the energy sector, formed the pull factors that drew (semi)proletarianized workers into the Soma mine. The paper also argues that the lax standards regarding workplace safety and the informalization of the labour force which further coerced them into working in unsafe conditions were structural features of the coal mining sector which prioritized increased production over all other concerns. All in all, peasants-turned-miners in the Soma region did not have much to rely on to counter neoliberal policies that have been transforming their rural lives and offering them jobs in the extractives sector. Put simply, despite appearing to choose to work in an evidently dangerous workplace, it is more appropriate to argue that long-term economic policies compelled them to become miners. It is this absence of a real alternative that also partly explains why the post-disaster scenario failed to exact a price on Erdoğan or his AKP. To the extent that there was an initial burst of political possibility, this was squelched by a combination of authoritarian actions (e.g. tear gassing of demonstrators) and populist moves (e.g. paying out exceptionally large compensation to the families of the victims of this specific disaster even when thousands of others go unnoticed). Our understanding of these dynamics in the context of Soma are relevant for contemporary Turkish politics not because Soma was an exception but because its experience is increasingly normalized in various ways across the country.

In the next section, we characterize the broad contours of the contemporary global moment that led to the emergence of authoritarian populism, also discussing some of their specificities in the Turkish

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<sup>4</sup> We draw a distinction between societal legitimacy and authoritarian populism, largely drawing on the Gramscian literature. In articulating the concept of hegemony, this literature emphasizes the role of active consent and legitimacy for the state's claim to rule, which the ruling groups seek to acquire through a combination of material and ideological practices of intellectual, moral, and political leadership and persuasion (Gramsci 1971). Hegemony is thus differentiated from domination, yet it is never absolute and always prone to crises. Gramscian scholars discuss this within the context of transition to exceptional state forms. Most notably Poulantzas (1978) elaborates on state forms that emerge when societal consent cannot be established via organic links between the state and the society, and a repressive state apparatus, increased bureaucratization, and a heavier reliance on material concessions to subordinate classes are substituted in their place. Following this literature, we use the concept of authoritarian populism also to demarcate its difference from an effective hegemonic project based on the acquisition of active consent, and to highlight that it signifies the break down of a claim to rule backed by societal legitimacy.

context. This is followed by a narrative of “push” and “pull” factors that resulted in peasants from the region becoming miners and the ways in which a lax safety system was allowed to persist even when disaster was clearly in the making. The penultimate section discusses the underlying reasons as to how Erdoğan’s authoritarian populism “works”. The concluding section argues that, within the context of Turkey, authoritarian developmentalism is itself animated and sustained by the country’s long-established economic growth fetish, which has its roots deep into Turkey’s post-Ottoman transition process and which the AKP has been particularly adept at weaponizing to sustain its rule.

## **2 Authoritarianism, neoliberal developmentalism, and extractivism**

The tragedy of Soma was shaped at the confluence of three related dynamics, namely the rise of authoritarian populism, neoliberal developmentalism, and extractivism. Their emergence and rise to dominance are by no means limited to Turkey, though all three might not always be found in all contexts. Similarly, they do not always emerge simultaneously or in the same order. Nor is it always possible to distinguish analytically between them at this current conjuncture, since there are signs not just from Turkey but from other comparable cases that contemporary neoliberalism is intimately linked to and propped up by authoritarianism and extractivism. Finally, all three are dynamic processes shaping and being shaped by the social forces and material realities with which they interact.

The global (re)emergence of authoritarian populism is surprising because the post-1989 world was meant to be showcasing the triumph of neoliberal ideology not just in economics but also through the spread of electoral democracy. While elections as a mechanism have proven durable, they have recently delivered a surprising cast of charismatic but authoritarian leaders that include Erdoğan, Modi, and Trump. Coming to the power on similarly demagogic platforms that made reference to past national glories and the promise to return to greatness, most of these leaders have made a rejuvenated state a key ambition. The resulting political reality however is far from a “democratic” state as these leaders have been equating any criticism of their political performance to the subversion of state power, enacting heavy-handed policies aimed to stifle political dissent and press freedom.

This has not meant, however, that neoliberalism has been side-lined. In fact, the second dynamic in question is the emergence of neoliberal developmentalism—a concept whose purchase is global, as evinced by Trump’s allusions to the US becoming a “Third World” country. Neoliberal developmentalism makes use of state power in its various guises—from planning to cronyism to outright corruption—to achieve and sustain continued economic growth at all costs, including the sacrifice of ecological integrity, erosion of democratic norms, and oppression of societal resistance (Harvey 2005; Klein 2008).<sup>5</sup>

If neoliberal developmentalism is the overarching ideological framework and authoritarianism is the political manifestation, one of the most pronounced shifts in the economic sphere in practice has been the intensification of extractivism as a path to economic development, which marks the third main dynamic. The resources in question are different in various contexts. From oil to minerals to the “agro-extractivism”, a new regime of accumulation where novel alliances between state and corporate actors (some of which are state-owned themselves) have intensified the speed and expanded the reach of commodity extraction. Portrayed as an “obvious” path to rapid economic growth—as seen, for instance, in Rafael Correa’s comparing anti-extraction activists to beggars sitting on a bag of gold—extractivism has been justified as being in the national interest since it is via rapid economic growth

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<sup>5</sup> We define neoliberalism as the drive towards *depoliticization* of the social and political realm through its *economization* (Madra and Adaman 2014). By assuming that human beings comprehend and affirmatively respond to economic incentives, neoliberalism is understood as aiming to solve all social and political problems by creating appropriate economic incentives. Once human behavior is conceptualized as a form of cost-benefit calculus, neoliberalism can accommodate a range of theoretical and political positions with diverse policy implications, including those that can be identified as state interventionism. Within this general framework, neoliberalism has historically always promoted growth as an essential element to “all our social and political ends” (Rodrik 2017).

that a strong state can be institutionalized. Being against extraction has, therefore, put activists from various stripes—especially but not limited to indigenous communities and minorities—at the crosshairs, and not just metaphorically, of the authoritarian regimes. The increases in the incarceration and assassination of activists in recent years is a clear manifestation of how authoritarianism, neoliberal developmentalism, and extractivism have come together (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016).

The rise of authoritarian populism around the world defies easy classification across the left-right spectrum, demonstrated by the rise of Rafael Correa and Evo Morales in Latin America as part of the “left turn” that promised to construct the “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” as well as the rise of Narendra Modi in India who effectively used demagogic nostalgia to sell a vision of a resurgent Indian superpower (Ravindran and Hale 2017). The examples of countries experiencing a combination of authoritarianism and populism in different guises go beyond these and certainly include the Philippines (Thompson 2016), Hungary (Buzogány 2017), and the United States (Koch 2017), among others. It is important in this context not to use the term authoritarian populism mechanically, without paying due attention to historic processes setting the stage for these leaders to emerge. For instance, Rafael Correa’s rise to authoritarianism came after a particularly pronounced period of political instability where a decade saw seven different presidents. Evo Morales’ election was a watershed in Bolivian history as he became the first indigenous president in a country whose majority indigenous population had been governed by those who were not only not indigenous themselves but often showed active disdain towards them (Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler 2017). Thus, it is necessary to take a more historicized approach that recognizes how unique circumstances contributed to the emergence of these leaders so as to avoid both the analytical pitfall of using the concept of populism simplistically as a pejorative and the political trap of resigning to the continued abuses of power by these leaders because they position themselves as a defence against an *ancien régime* that lacked legitimacy for other reasons.

Erdoğan’s ascent and persistent hold on power were similarly ground-breaking developments. The rise of his AKP (in 2002) was rightly celebrated as part of the normalization of the country, which had not only suffered periodic *coups d’état* but also witnessed the forceful suppression of public piety in the name of secularism. The latter was indeed one of the founding principles of the state, whose founders—chiefly among them Mustafa Kemal who later took the surname of Atatürk, the father of Turks—had diagnosed the slow decline and demise of the Ottoman Empire as a function of Islam’s purported resistance to science and technology in particular and Western modernity in general. Secularism was therefore not only a political posture; it was also seen as a prerequisite to national economic development, which would only be possible if the model of the advanced industrial west could be emulated without interference from (putatively backward) Islamic values. That the AKP, formed mainly by political outsiders coming from “traditional” quarters of the other country who had been at the receiving end of “civilizational” policies of the modernization drive of the state, overcame various attempts of the country’s twin centres of power, the civilian bureaucracy and military chiefs, to win elections repeatedly and comfortably did therefore signal a sea change in Turkish politics (Özden 2014; Özden, Akça, Berkmen 2014; Özselçuk 2015; Özden, Bekmen, and Akça 2018).

The AKP did also bring with it a series of political liberalization measures. Most symbolically, in a context where there remained a constitutional ban on “traditional” headgear, which prevented women from the wearing of the *turban* (headscarf), pious women had been kept out of university education and right of public sector employment as teachers, doctors or lawyers. The repeal of such restrictions were therefore signs of much needed progress in terms of civil rights. Not all such instances of liberalization under Erdoğan’s rule have been maintained, and there has been dramatic reversals in political and civil liberties especially since the attempted *coup d’état* of July 2016. For instance, the steps taken towards recognizing the rights of the Kurdish community have unfortunately proven to be short-lived and have since been replaced with a new and even more draconian regime of oppression. In a related vein, hundreds of thousands of public sector employees including academics have been sacked without due process, thousands have been locked up with spurious charges in a crackdown on dissent that put journalists, intellectuals, and non-governmental organization activists behind bars

without recourse to meaningful judicial remedies. Nevertheless, the AKP and Erdoğan were able to secure surprisingly persistent credibility with certain segments of the society, tempering their authoritarianism with populism.

While the populism—economic as well as otherwise—of the AKP was always part of its appeal, its authoritarianism was neither predestined nor inevitable. The main mechanism for the AKP to garner and maintain legitimacy has been through its economic policies which, as the story of the Soma mine will demonstrate in more detail, simultaneously created precarity and offered its (temporary) solution. The AKP had come to power at the height of a political crisis that bankrupted the credibility of the existing political parties that had failed to chart a stable path from the country's long-standing patrimonial state tradition (where social ills would ultimately be the responsibility of the *devlet baba* [father state]) towards the laissez-faire system of neoliberalism. The main rupture that came with the AKP was its ability to “successfully” implement the neoliberalizing policies Turkey had for twenty years attempted to implement.

These policies not only further marginalized a wide array of communities—the peasants, the elderly, the unemployed, etc.—by undermining their ability to gain a foothold in the new economy, they also punched holes through the already meagre safety nets that had existed. Instead, the AKP was able to offer a booming economy<sup>6</sup> in which jobs in construction, extraction and the informal sector were widely available. These jobs—and the infrastructural improvements they brought—combined with the overturning of decades old restrictions on religious practices formed the basis of the AKP's populism. This was buttressed with a strategy of redistributing the benefits of the economic boom whose long term sustainability is very much questioned (Adaman et al. 2014) mainly through social assistance, which, together with the promise of employment, made up the material backbone of the AKP's populism (Sayarı 2011; Bozkurt 2013).

However, the 2008 financial crisis and related disillusionment with the country's prospects of EU membership made it much harder to keep this precarious system going. Not only the global economy was no longer favourable to the type of investment boom required for the continuation of extraction and construction, societal dissent in the face of environmental and social costs of the AKP's economic model<sup>7</sup> also began to mount. The authoritarian and centralizing turn of the AKP emerged in response. Ironically, the primary target of the AKP's authoritarianism and populism often overlapped in those segments that had been suffering the negative impacts of neoliberal policies all along.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Chronicle of a tragedy foretold

The fatal tragedy at Soma occurred when a fire spread in the galleries after a wall collapsed and exposed self-burning coal, producing a lot of heat and fumes that trapped hundreds of miners inside the mine. Almost all the miners and engineers working in the mine were aware of the presence of self-burning coal. The temperature in the galleries had already increased drastically, warning systems indicated carbon monoxide (CO) and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) levels above the standard levels in the days before the tragedy, but no serious measures were taken to mitigate the situation. “A month or so before the accident the temperature in the tunnels started to rise steadily. We were sweating like hell. Then, a continuous headache and an upset stomach... When I went to the doctor, he gave me a painkiller... and

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<sup>6</sup> Akbulut and Adaman (2013) provides an account of the consent-building trajectory of Erdoğan through growth; see also Arsel (2005) for a similar perspective.

<sup>7</sup> The title of Yeşilyurt-Gündüz's (2015) article in *Monthly Review* speaks for itself: “The ‘New Turkey’: Fetishizing Growth with Fatal Results”; see also Adaman and Arsel (2005, 2010, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See *Neoliberal Turkey and its Discontents: Economic Policy and the Environment under Erdoğan* (Adaman, Akbulut, and Arsel 2017), which discusses how the AKP's policies have had a detrimental impact on the environment, sustainability and the long-term health of the Turkish economy, arguing that environmental conflicts in Turkey are not merely about the environment but intersect with contemporary politics of religion, ethnicity, gender, and class within the context of top-down, modernising economic development.



no further inquiry. At the end, the coal we extracted turned out to be warm, even hot, indicating that there must be a fire somewhere...But they said ‘keep extracting’, and that is what we did” (32-year old miner with an experience of 9 years; interviewed 11 July 2014). When the fire and the fumes began to spread, and thus the gravity of the situation was realised, an immense rescue operation was organised. However, a number of factors made these efforts ineffective:<sup>9</sup> a lack of proper air circulation, an increased number of miners working in each shift beyond the mine’s capacity, a lack of safe rooms for miners to take refuge in during emergencies, and a lack of proper guidelines for mine evacuation in case of an emergency. It was in such a setting that the disaster unfolded, made all the more tragic by the fact that the mining site had passed all government inspections.

This section chronicles the steps towards the tragedy, explaining the decision of mining workers through factors that pushed them out of their fields and pulled them into the mines. These push and pull factors were a direct result of the AKP’s economic policies that were built around extraction, construction and populism. They were also directly responsible for the unsafe work environment that prevailed in the Soma mine.

### *3.1 The push factor*

When the Turkish Republic was formed in 1923 over the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, it was mainly an agrarian country with more than three quarters of the population residing in rural areas (and the share of the agricultural sector in the total employment was even higher). Despite the late-blooming of Turkish industrialisation and the accompanying urbanisation circa the 1950s that started to reduce the importance of the countryside, the development of agriculture continued to be seen as the main precondition of the country’s overall development until 1980. The function of the rural sector was seen instrumentally as a supplier of ingredients to mainly the food-processing industry as well as a food provider to urban centres. Thus, the agricultural sector continued to be heavily subsidised during this time (through *inter alia* cheap credits for mechanisation, support price policies, subsidies for agricultural inputs, and above all a protectionist trade regime), enabling farmers to enjoy considerable immunity to fluctuations in the market. Consequently, erosion of peasant practices and the hegemony of market rationality in agriculture were not so significant in this era (Keyder and Yenal 2011). However, with Turkey’s shift to neoliberal policies (the starting date is usually taken as 24 January 1980—see, e.g., Öniş and Şenses 2009), the role of rural players started to weaken, the influence of international players such as the IMF and the World Bank began to grow stronger, and a market ideology (whose main manifestation was in the removal of agricultural subsidies) was promoted as the only path to enhancing efficiency.

Although liberalisation policies in the agricultural sector began to be implemented initially back in 1994, they truly kicked off with the so-called “Agricultural Reform Implementation Project (ARIP)” in 2001. ARIP, a World Bank initiative, aimed at “reducing subsidies, substituting a support system for agricultural producers, and agro-industries, with incentives to increase productivity, responsive to real comparative advantages”.<sup>10</sup> Its main component targeted the subsidised crop pricing mechanism (together with a set of institutions that were charged with specific functions, e.g. state-owned purchasing cooperatives) which were seen as a severe deviation from the logic of the market mechanism and whose elimination would more or less automatically result in enhanced efficiency. ARIP in their stead suggested implementing a direct income support system to financially help the countryside (for an eight-year period).<sup>11</sup> Although the subsidised pricing system was open to a patron-

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<sup>9</sup> For a thorough analysis of the emergency and disaster management for the Soma case, see Demiroz and Kapucu (2016).

<sup>10</sup> <http://projects.worldbank.org/P070286/agricultural-reform-implementation-project-arip?lang=en&tab=overview>, accessed 15 September 2017.

<sup>11</sup> The ARIP project has been subject to inquiry in the academic circles. Çakmak (2004) provides an early assessment; Akder (2010) focuses on its overall evaluation; Keyman (2010) contextualises the Project within a larger state-society relationship; Çakmak and Dudu (2010) discusses the sectoral and micro implications; İlkcaracan and Tunalı (2010) considers the rural labour market in the post-ARIP

client type of relationship<sup>12</sup>, the suggested system opened the way for big corporations, domestic and international, to enter the sector and establish a near monopsony in some crops and localities. With regard to direct income support, the system was based to compute the level of the support exclusively as a function of land size, which by and large ended up in making the poor poorer and the rich richer (see, e.g., Akder 2010).

Thus, with the ending of the national developmentalist era that heavily supported the agricultural sector and farmers, through successive waves of “structural” reforms and measures, with ARIP having given the *coup de grace*, the social and economic transformation of the rural sector became visible. With diminished price support system, repealed subsidies and lessened credit opportunities, farmers by and large were left to confront the market forces (national as well as international—see Aydın 2010), which brought about important implications for not only farmers’ living and production conditions but population dynamics as well (Keyder and Yenal 2010, 2011, 2013; see also Aydın 2010; İkkaracan and Tunali 2010).

The villages of Soma (and those of Akhisar, a neighbouring town) were historically known as agricultural sites and the dynamics described above played out much the same way there as well. The main crop of the region had been tobacco; its production began to decrease quite drastically, first with the liberalisation policies, and then with ARIP. Production levels in Soma were above 2,500 tons in 1994 and dropped down to around 500 tons in 2013. In the neighbouring town of Akhisar, production levels fell from 12,000 to around 3,500 tons in the same time period. These sharp declines also reflected the situation across the country: a decrease from 290,000 to 62,000 tons.

Former tobacco producers in the villages around Soma mostly shifted to olive production, as the area and the infrastructure did not provide many options. But olive production was not sufficient to lift their income to satisfactory levels; and since olive production is much less labour-intensive than tobacco production, many people—especially the young men from around Soma—had little choice but to look for jobs at the town or city centres, totally or partially disengaged from agricultural production. In short, the policies implemented after 1994 resulted in de-peasantisation in Soma, which accounts for the push of the peasants into wage labour.

### ***3.b The pull factor***

With the advent of the Erdoğan era, energy was declared as one of the main industries the country should target. One of the critical objectives set out in *The Tenth Development Plan* that covers the 2014-2018 period is to increase the installed capacity of electricity power plants by 35 percent from 58,000 MW to 78,000 MW in five years—a rather challenging task.<sup>13</sup> Despite the country’s vast potential for sustainable energy (e.g. wind, solar) and energy gains through efficiency enhancement, Erdoğan has a continued appetite for coal-fuelled thermal plants due to vast domestic coal reserves and thermal plants’ relatively cheap technology—if externalities created mainly in the form of green-gas emissions are not taken into account. Approximately one-third of the electricity generated has

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era; Çalışkan and Adaman (2010) deciphers the logic of neoliberal agricultural reform initiatives in general.

<sup>12</sup> Such relations did lead to some perverse outcomes, such as the cases in which purchase of low quality tobacco and nuts that could only be disposed of by burning. These occasions were covered by the media as signs of corruption in the state sector.

<sup>13</sup> *The Tenth Development Plan*, by the Ministry of Development, 2014, Ankara: [http://www.mod.gov.tr/Lists/DevelopmentPlans/Attachments/4/Brochure%20of%20Tenth%20Development%20Plan%20\(2014-2018\).pdf](http://www.mod.gov.tr/Lists/DevelopmentPlans/Attachments/4/Brochure%20of%20Tenth%20Development%20Plan%20(2014-2018).pdf). Erdoğan’s words, said almost four years before the disaster, are to be noted: “The more a country consumes electricity the stronger it is, the faster it advances in the path of development. It means that the wheels in the factories are turning, that production in our enterprises is on the rise, that household consumption is increasing, that technology use is spreading in the entire country”.

[http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2010/08/11/erdogan\\_akarsular\\_satilmiyor](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2010/08/11/erdogan_akarsular_satilmiyor). See also Akbulut and Adaman (2013).

lately been produced at coal-fuelled thermal power plants in the country, and the AKP has been determined to rely on this trajectory. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that roughly one year after the Soma tragedy, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources “proudly” announced that Turkey would quadruple its coal-fuelled power plants by 2020 (Adaman and Arsel 2017).

In addition to thermal power plants, coal has also been used by the industry and by households where alternative energy sources (e.g. natural gas) are rather unaffordable. At this junction it is equally important to note that between 2003 and 2015, some 19.2 million tons of coal were distributed for free to “families in need”. All combined, the total annual coal production has been fluctuating around 60 million tons in the past several years, the bulk of which was excavated from only a few coal mining sites (Soma being one of them). However, domestic production has been falling short in satisfying the total demand. Thus, an additional amount of coal, of around 30 million tons per year, has been imported—almost all of it being used in electricity production (imported coal in the last years corresponding to more than half of the coal used to this end). It requires simple mathematics to realise that this planned increase in coal-fuelled thermic plants will, *ceteris paribus*, further raise the already high levels of imported coal (not to mention the additional demand increase arising from the growing population and economy). And this is indeed where the problem is feared to occur. Increased import figures for coal are destined to jeopardise the already shaky position of the current account deficit.<sup>14</sup> It is worth remembering that *The Tenth Development Plan* also included another critical objective: “To reduce the current account deficit to a reasonable permanent level”. The logical conclusion, therefore, was that domestic production should be increased, and this was certainly on the Erdoğan government’s to-do list.

As in other areas (e.g. the construction sector, most notably housing and inter-city roads), the government invited the private sector to take on greater responsibility in coal production. There were already privately-owned mining sites, but these were rather small in size. The new vision was to keep state ownership intact and subcontract its operation to the private sector. This was based on the *redevance* mechanism, where the state would lease the mine to a private company with the guarantee to purchase the produced coal. Given this incentive scheme, private companies, including *Soma Kömür AŞ* that was operating the site where the tragedy occurred, opted for the obvious path of increasing production levels, mainly relying on labour-intensive techniques<sup>15</sup>, without paying much attention to prevention, mitigation and preparedness in case of a major mine incident.<sup>16</sup> This was possible because the law entrusted the companies operating the mines the task of ensuring the implementation of appropriate safety measures, a task that was conveniently left unfilled in this case. That the company could get away with this choice was because the state by and large failed to duly perform its supervisory role. The rest is history; or, as was the case in Gabriel García Márquez’s murder, the tragedy was already predestined.

Thousands of men were no longer able to make a living in the countryside and were thus looking for jobs that did not require much human capital, preferably in the formal sector and somewhere near their homes. For such opportunities, they were ready to shoulder considerable safety risks. The words of a 55-year old farmer-turned into-a miner are representative of many more in the region: “Before the 2000s, even though I already got a family with two kids, I was able to make my living through agriculture and animal husbandry. But then the state dropped its support, and that is when we found ourselves in hunger. I looked for jobs other than the mining one, as I knew it was risky. But I could not, as—at the age of forty—I had no knowledge other than agriculture and no degree other than the

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<sup>14</sup> Turkey’s high current account deficit, largely attributed to structural factors, has been at the core of macroeconomic policy discussions in recent years. See Kara and Sarıkaya (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Take note that the employment figure in the mining sector in the Soma region had quadrupled from 2000 till the date of the disaster, reaching the figure of 15 thousand miners (see, e.g., Çelik 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Those interviewed miners in the region by and large stated that, some variances notwithstanding, the supervisory role of the state has rather been poor in the mining area at large, hence not backing the claim that the regulation was softened solely in the *Soma Kömür AŞ* due to alleged strong ties between Ankara and the company.

primary school one. I was hopeless. At the end I had to go to mining as it was offering job security” (interviewed 12 July 2014). The mining sites in the Soma region were mainly operated by established private firms that offered formal contracts. Given the high prevalence of informality in the country (close to one out of three workers [see, e.g., Başlevent and Acar 2014]), that would be an important asset—for it meant job and income security, retirement rights, better health service, and possibility of credit and mortgage borrowing. True, the job involved high risk and adverse working conditions; but given that the only other options were either unemployment (which does *not* come with unemployment salary/basic income) or working without security and insurance in the informal sector most likely far away from home, many chose to be miners. Some even opted to remain in their countryside houses, commuting to and from the mining site, but others preferred to move to the Soma town (which would of course increase the cost of living [e.g. rents] but came with additional benefits [e.g. schooling opportunities for children]).

In other words, the choice was more than simply an economic one. Most young miners interviewed revealed that if a young man from the region did not have a formal job (and the mining industry was offering the bulk of these formal positions), he could not get the approval from the family of the woman he wants to marry (given the existence of strong, hierarchical and patriarchal relations in the rural areas). The following quotation can be heard with slightly varied ways from many miners in the region: “Till I went to [serve the compulsory] military service at the age of 18, I was living with my parents in the village, earning our living through agriculture—we were poor but self-sufficient. When I got back [from military service], I wanted to get married, at which point I realised that with insufficient and volatile income flows coming from the village, I would have no chance to get my wish realised. And the mining sector was—and still is—the only option in the region. Thus that is what I did. It is vital for a family to have job security, pension scheme, health insurance, and the likes. You can also get loans easily” (27-years old miner with an experience of 6 years in mining; interviewed 11 July 2014).

### *3.c Work environment and social policies*

The above two sections have argued that the de-peasantisation of Soma due to neoliberal economic policies created a workforce willing to take on the difficult job of working in coal mines and the drive to increase coal production made sure that there was an ample supply of jobs. The pressure to produce ever more coal – from the intertwining needs of the state and the private sector – and the availability of cheap labour alone did not alone create the tragedy. For that an additional spark was needed, which came from Turkey’s weak attention to working conditions and work safety, characterised by the preventable death of four workers on a daily basis.<sup>17</sup> Within these grim conditions, the mining sector is considered to be one of the worst ones in that regard (Buğra 2017).

The mining sector, especially the Soma mining site, corresponds to a specific market form (oligopsony), where labour demand is small while the labour supply large, giving the few mining companies the power to adopt a hiring mechanism. That mechanism emerged as the so-called *dayıbaşı*<sup>18</sup> system, a kind of multi-layered subcontracting formation (Ercan and Oğuz 2015; Çelik 2016, 2017). *Dayıbaşı*, viz. the team leader, is a man trusted by the company, and experienced in mining. These men are well paid, with additional incentives connected to quantity produced. They are given the power to choose their own teams; and in most cases, they rely on their acquaintances, mostly locality-related. This mechanism created a kind of feudal relationship between them and young newcomers, who had not much of a say and could not voice their complaints. *Dayıbaşı* is given the incentive to push production and workload beyond safety limits, which would leave the team with little to question, let alone resist. A 25-year old young miner’s words resonate the fate of many other new starters into the sector: “I managed to get the job [in the mining site] through a close friend of my uncle, with whom I also happen to be somehow familiar. He was acting as the team leader, and was like an older brother, even a father, for me. He taught me mining, what I should do and what I should

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.sivilsayfalar.org/rakamlarla-turkiyede-is-kazalari-ve-isci-olumleri/>

<sup>18</sup> Literally, “head uncle”.

not do. If he said ‘keep working’, even if I felt something hazardous, I would—with no question...When it [the tragedy] happened, I was on my leave; he and many colleagues of mine perished...Well, thinking retrospectively, I think he was taking too much of a risk” (interviewed 12 July 2014). Most young workers, while they felt the increasing danger, could not do much about it because their team leaders—whose authority was built on more than employment relationships—were asking them to ignore the signs.

It is worth recording that the very existence of an informal sector that pays little attention to work safety has been an important factor for the formal sector in relaxing their own safety standards. As in the case of “bad money drives out good”, low safety standards would become the norm, and the formal sector would resist demands to increase safety measures by threatening to switch to informality if pushed further. Meanwhile, state organs whose responsibility is to check and control working conditions would find themselves trapped as well: on the one hand, they have not much to say to the formal side as they are aware that there is little they can do concerning the standards in the informal; on the other hand, the hegemony to attain high growth figures at any cost have engulfed them as well.

The workers’ union too had not much power and even less interest in raising safety concerns related to the mining site (Ercan and Oğuz 2015). At any rate, when the overall picture is considered, the power of labour unions had already been curtailed across most of the country following the shift to neoliberalism, which was initially implemented during the three years under a military regime following the 1980 *coup d’état* (Adaman, Buğra, and İnsel 2009; Çelik 2013). The final parameter that led to the tragedy was the position of mining engineers who were responsible for safety in the galleries. Mostly new graduates, these young people found themselves trapped in the system as well. Because they also had not much outside options (and were well paid, most with incentives related to the production level), they by and large accepted the terms of the company, viz. keeping silent on the likely consequences of the overload and lack of preventive measures. Be that as it may, those engineers who were near the collapsed wall seem to have rushed to the area so as to contain the fire rather than try to escape, but alas the fire proved to be uncontrollable.

#### 4 Explaining the AKP’s continued hegemony in Soma

The death of so many miners made Soma an especially visible manifestation of the conditions of contemporary Turkey, demonstrating the destructiveness of the confluence of extractivism, authoritarian populism, and neoliberal developmentalism. The aftermath of the tragedy itself is instructive since the AKP, after having been heavily criticised by the people of Soma, has managed to regain its hegemony in the town. This is not to suggest that the disaster did not take at least a momentary toll on the popularity of the party. As Table 1 below shows, there was indeed a dip in the AKP’s share of votes in both Soma and across the country in the general election of June 2015. While the underlying causes of this decline are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, it would not be far fetched to assume that the Soma disaster contributed to the AKP’s national decline at that moment. However, the more significant outcome here is found in the fact that this is the only election out of five in the past 10 years when the AKP’s performance in Soma is worse than its national percentage. Yet this relative decline is fairly meagre, staying within a few percentage points. More importantly, by November of the same year, the AKP was able to regroup not just nationally but in Soma as well.

Table 1 – AKP’s share of votes in Soma and nationally

	SOMA %	TURKEY %
2007 General election	51.2	46.7
2011 General election	52.8	49.8
2015 June general election	39.9	40.8
2015 November general election	49.7	49.5
2017 Referendum	53.1	51.4

The first relevant factor is the growing authoritarianism of the state under Erdoğan’s presidency. Critical voices about the Soma disaster have been “successfully” quashed at the national as well as

local levels. Tellingly, many political rallies organized to protest the AKP's record relating to the Soma disaster ended up with the protestors getting tear gassed and dozens of them being arrested. For instance, 36 individuals were detained pre-emptively in the days following the disaster by the town police. Eight of these were lawyers who were suspected of having travelled to Soma to protest the situation. They were all treated harshly, receiving physical and verbal abuse, leading them to complain that they were detained in a sports complex like "Victor Jara", who was imprisoned and murdered in a stadium during the Chilean *coup d'état* of 1973. Using the "state of emergency" declared in the area as a legal cover, the police chief declared that "provocative acts" would not be tolerated in such an "anguished and sensitive period".<sup>19</sup> This heavy-handed treatment of all dissent is of course not unique to the Soma case and has been on the increase since the AKP's rule took a turn towards authoritarianism. The state of emergency declared after the attempted *coup d'état* of 2016 has not only given the state even more powers to silence dissent but has also opened up the possibility of overriding existing legal mechanisms (e.g. environmental impact assessments) that can be used to stop the implementation of new extraction or construction projects. The ongoing crackdown on civil and political rights has all but destroyed oppositional dynamics in contemporary Turkish politics, with countless cases of activists, campaigners and "ordinary citizens" feeling the brunt of unjustified and excessive state power.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the populism and the authoritarianism of the AKP often converge on the same segments of the society. To this end, a huge support campaign has been organised shortly after the mining disaster was led by the government and affiliated media and NGOs. Apart from the standard compensations given within the legislative structure to the families of those miners who lost their lives, the organised help amounted to two flats and 156,566 TL (approximately € 50,000) per family as well as scholarships for their children; following the tragedy and the call for support, in-kind goods (from food items to toys to clothes) were also sent to affected families. Furthermore, the Cabinet decreed that all debts of small businesspeople from the region to state-owned financial enterprises (such as *Halk Bank*) would be postponed without interest for a year.<sup>21</sup> Many other banks followed suit, cancelling the debts of families who lost members to the accident and offering other measures to ease the debt burden of their customers from the region.<sup>22</sup> These efforts have certainly consolidated the AKP's populist countenance. And only a few dared to question why thousands of other families who have lost their loved-ones to work-related accidents were not offered similar support.

Despite Erdoğan's protests that such deaths are inherent to the business of mining, there have also been improvements made in the regulatory framework. Although criticised by many as too little and too late, the government made some improvements in the mining sector concerning the labour processes of miners and the safety standards in mining activities. It was only after the Soma mining

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/84442/ohal-ilan-edilen-somada-36-kisi-gozaltina-alindi>

<sup>20</sup> According to *World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index* (which measures countries' rule of law performance across eight factors: constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice) of 2017-2018, Turkey ranks as 101<sup>st</sup> out of 113 countries (<https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/wjp-rule-law-index/wjp-rule-law-index-2017-2018>). A special mention has to be made, nevertheless, of the assault on the free press. Since the attempted *coup d'état* of July 2016, several newspapers and TV channels have been shut down with "decrees with the power of law" that are essentially dictates issued by Erdoğan and his inner circle (KHK in its Turkish acronym). Hundreds of journalists have been arrested and many have been sacked from their positions by newspaper owners worried about incurring Erdoğan's wrath. As many of Turkey's major news outlets are owned by industrialists do business either directly with the state or with Erdoğan's cronies in the economy, most have chosen the path of self-censoring and the others have been overtly or covertly threatened with tax audits and other possible means of retaliation and forced to moderate their criticisms. It is not surprising, therefore, that media coverage of the tragedy, Soma (especially the ongoing court against the responsible personnel of the mining company) in particular and the mining sector in general, as well as on other work-related losses, has been marginalised through time. Although in few places commemorations are being held at the anniversary days, the Soma tragedy is as of today by and large a *passé* event.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.yenisafak.com/amhtml/politika/soma-esnafina-kredi-ertelemesi-673788>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bankakredileri.com/bankalar-kredi-borclarini-siliyorlar/>

tragedy (as well as another major one in November 2014 just six months after Soma, at the Ermenek mining site, where 18 miners lost their lives) that the AKP finally decided to sign the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) convention concerning safety and health in mines (which had entered into force in 1998). Given the high prevalence of informality in the country, including the mining sector, and given the continued pressure to increase domestic coal extraction, to what extent these improvements will be sustained remains to be seen. But at any rate, the government has succeeded to give the signal that the mining sector has been rectified.

Another dimension of the failure of the initial anger to coalesce into a more established political posture can be seen in the inability of opposition political parties and other local forces to exercise effective leadership in the area. For instance, attempts to form an alternative workers' union failed, mainly because of internal fights. Opposition political parties were not able to articulate an alternative strategy to prevailing neoliberal climate. The lack of alternatives is not merely in terms of actual employment possibilities, though this is certainly the case. For instance, after six months of suspended activities during when the miners' salaries were paid by the state, the mining company had decided on the grounds of safety concerns to close down some sites, thus terminating the employment of 2,853 miners. Those affected by these proposed cuts fiercely opposed this decision, most of them indicating that irrespective of the level of risks they were ready to go back to the galleries. This desperate reaction prompted a member of parliament from the main opposition party, CHP, to remark that the workers were given a choice between dying in the mine or dying from hunger.<sup>23</sup>

At a broader level, there remains a lack of alternative to the dominant discourse of the state that Turkey is destined to renew its lost national greatness, last experienced at the height of the powers of the Ottoman Empire. This nationalist posture brings with it a certain economic logic, lending credence to calls to such goals as "energy independence". Absent a critical discussion of why increases in energy consumption are seen as a sign of national progress and why such increases have to be enabled by the cheapest and dirtiest technologies available at home, oppositional forces in Turkey have failed to challenge the twin forces of extraction and construction. In the absence of an alternative narrative, the AKP and Erdoğan have been able to contain societal dissent through a combination of populism and authoritarianism.

## 5 Conclusion

Neither the Soma disaster nor the authoritarian populism that created the conditions for its genesis and its surprisingly calm aftermath can be seen as inevitable. This paper has argued that they have all been underwritten by an economic development imperative, which Erdoğan and the AKP have used even more successfully than past administrations. Both authoritarianism and populism (as well as their combined manifestation) have been deployed particularly boldly in times when economic development failed to materialize at a sufficiently fast pace or failed to create sufficient buy-in from poor and marginalized segments of society. It is therefore ironic that both the beneficiaries and the victims of authoritarian populism are those who continue to legitimize a system that is structurally geared to impoverish them. This was the case of the Soma miners who were first forced off their agrarian lifestyles and then into certain death in a coal mine that was run without concern for health and safety so as to maximize production. While the death of the 301 miners is of course lamentable, the real tragedy is the fact that the "accident" was a structural feature of the Turkish economy.

While the tragic spectacle of Soma has resulted in an at least temporary societal pushback and certain improvements in worker safety, demonstrating once again that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" (Orta Martinez, Pellegrini, and Arsel 2018), it is important to reflect more broadly on the argument that these deaths are a structural feature of the economic model. As mentioned earlier, Turkey experiences four preventable deaths of workers daily. Just as the death of 301 miners cannot be explained away with the concept of *fitrat*, this predictable death toll cannot be explained away as examples of "industrial accidents". They represent a particularly lethal form of "slow violence"

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/somada-2-bin-800-iscinin-isine-son-verildi-27686653>

(Nixon 2011) that has not galvanized even a temporary backlash or a questioning of their underlying dynamics.

It is this absence of societal pushback that allows the normalization of the “drip, drip, drip” of individual tragedies that characterise the fundamental threat of authoritarian populism. As the consent of certain segments of society are secured via the promise of jobs, the delivery of “free” coal, or the unrolling of ever faster and more glamorous transport networks, the sustenance of alternative visions and associated forms of dissent that cannot be contained by authoritarian forces becomes increasingly crucial. The ultimate question posed by the tragedy of Soma is, therefore, how to cultivate the emancipatory potential of radical forces who will need to organize—intellectually, programmatically as well as physically—to break out of the vice-like grip of authoritarian populism. Within the context of Turkey, this preparatory work necessarily implies rethinking the country’s fetishism of economic growth.

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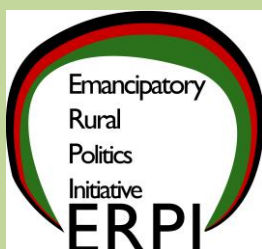
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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