

The impact of the Southeastern Anatolia Project on the political and ecological landscape in the region

Can you tell us something about your research on the Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP project) in Turkey?

I am investigating what kind of discourses and practices the elites (politicians, bureaucrats, experts, and intellectuals) have shaped for the formulation and implementation of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). GAP is a huge modernization and development project in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey. I am also analyzing how the approach of the above-mentioned actors has contributed to a 'de-politicization' of issues, people, and institutions.



The dam project GAP has had enormous side-effects.

What are the main critical issues regarding GAP?

Opponents of the project criticize the privatization of rivers, the limitation of the right to use water, expropriation of private lands, eviction of villages, depopulation, desertification, clearance of forests, and the submerging of historic homes and cultural sites. GAP has also been harshly criticized in the past for flooding villages and displacing the inhabitants. From the perspective of Kurdish inhabitants in particular, there have been occasions where GAP had brought more instability to the region and its citizens than peace and happiness. In addition, GAP has an international dimension. It has been criticized for being a project that enables Turkey to control the flow of water to downstream states, and thus to build dominance over Iraq and Syria.

Was it difficult to get access to the people you wanted to interview?

The people I wanted to talk with were predominantly politicians, bureaucrats, experts and intellectuals and so I knew it was going to be difficult to get access to them.

Arranging interviews with bureaucrats and experts at various ministries and governmental institutions was relatively easy. The hardest thing was to arrange interviews with the Members of Parliament at the Turkish Grand National Assembly. It was impossible to plan ahead and I had to cancel many other appointments for this reason, which was embarrassing and frustrating. I had to wait in the corridors of the parliament for hours, go from door to door, and drink infinite amounts of tea with strangers in parliamentarians' offices every day to catch a Member of Parliament for a quick interview, if I was lucky. Still, despite difficulties, I managed to interview 64 people, 28 of them Members of Parliament, in a short period of time.

What were the challenges you faced while conducting your field research?

Some bureaucrats and even politicians were reluctant to give their consent to be voice-recorded "just to be on the safe side" or "to leave no trace behind". Though I can understand their concerns given the tense political climate in Turkey, hearing such words from high-level bureaucrats and politicians was both surprising and challenging. Another related challenge I had to deal with was that some of my interviewees were very suspicious of my work because of its political content. On one occasion, a prominent professor, who had previously been a high-level bureaucrat, accused me of working for the German intelligence service at the end of our conversation.

Can you tell us something about the results of your research so far?

I came to the conclusion that by depicting Southeastern Anatolia as a "backward" region in need of special treatment, the elites were able to maintain the hierarchical relationship between them and non-elites and to legitimize their top-down interventions. Also, the characterization of GAP as a 'civilization' or 'salvation' project indicated that despite the changes within the project and a changing understanding of development over time, the project still embodies elements of social-evolutionist paradigms. These paradigms conceive development as a positive and irreversible process through which all societies eventually pass in a similar unilinear fashion.



Read the full interview on ZEF's Website www.zef.de.

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