

TESEV BRIEFS

Muddling Through Environmental Politics: The City, the Climate Crisis, and Democracy

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Istanbul was one of the nominees for The European Green Capital Award in 2017. The competition, being held since 2010, serves as an honorary rank given to cities by the European Commission. Measures in place against the climate crisis along with environmental indicators such as urban green areas, irrigation, and air quality are evaluated to choose the winner each year.

At the time, Istanbul's candidacy had sparked debates at home and abroad. The Guardian, for example, suggested that the city's bid in the competition "[must be a joke](#)". This is a city that practically became a giant construction site, its water is non-drinkable, its air contains asbestos, it has a serious traffic problem, has very limited green space, and shopping malls constitute the only "public space" that one can think of in this city where even the beaches and shores are parceled off. But, what could the authorities have thought of when they were making the bid?

At the time, Gezi Park protests had just ended and environmental movements were on the rise in Turkey. New areas of contestation were emerging around mines, hydro-electric and nuclear power plants, and genetically modified foods. Environmental policies were subject to serious criticism. It was in this context that Istanbul announced its candidacy in 2014. It seems the nomination process itself was intended to be presented as an evidence of "environmentalism". Istanbul was eliminated at the first stage of the competition. But, the story did not end there; and I will tell the rest of it below.

By using this case as an example, I aim to open to discussion one of the critical barriers to potentially transformative environmental policies. In response to challenging problems there are moves being carried out to save the day, to make it seem like the issue is already solved. These moves end up postponing the real solutions. This is a trap that not only municipalities, public institutions and companies, but even civil society falls into. During these moves, organised events are often lead to spending of more money and energy. For example, the climate crisis is discussed at holiday-like conferences, in five-star hotels after long flights. Procedurally, this is no different from other business meetings, academic conferences and sectoral fairs. Participants are being served non-seasonal food, while talking about climate apocalypse in air-conditioned rooms. Instead of addressing the social needs and demands of cities and the environment, we see large sums of money and effort being spent on a competition as the proof of environmentalism: “We entered The European Green Capital candidate list.” Amitav Ghosh (2017) names this period that we are living through: The Great Derangement.

It is possible to explain some of these with a “lack of awareness” or the “hypocrisy” of individuals/institutions involved. However, in this piece, I will argue that the problem lies deeper; that there is a malfunction at the very heart of the administrative tools, democratic regimes, and bureaucratic minds. The scientific data we have does not match the life we live, our institutional functioning, and our decision-making mechanisms. In fact, there is a serious lack of harmony between them. Even those activities that can be easily prevented in a reasonable world (such as drinking water from single use plastic bottles) are increasing, let alone decreasing.

This is because a significant portion of decision-making processes do not take place at the scale of the neighborhood, the city, or even the scale of the nation-state. The use of oil, heavy dependence on the use of plastic, the encouragement of carbon-based mobility in businesses, industrialization of agriculture, and the emergence of 10+ million

cities around the world are not processes that we can change by attending demonstrations. Consequently, the political participation offered to societies is confined to a very limited framework, and certain aspects are closed off from the very beginning. For example, as the recent Greek crisis shows, we cannot have an impact on the debt market and debt collection processes through familiar political means. Societies who are directly affected by these large-scale problems, yet whose power has been taken away, are left with one choice to make between remaining completely idle and “pretending to do something”. Generally, the second path is followed, because it is this performance that counts in elections. Rather than long-term transformations that break free from the traditional patterns, they prefer projects with predictable outcomes that are reportable, and results that can be used in further funding applications or election campaigns.

Environmental Policies of Istanbul

From this point of view, perhaps the first thing to be said about Istanbul’s environmental policies is this: A city of 15 million cannot have a reasonable environmental policy! I am aware that this is an evaluation that must be clarified; however, mega-cities running on tremendous mobility based on fossil fuels, disposable object production, human concentration and excessive accumulation are actually symptoms of the current climate crisis and ecological destruction. No education, no certification, no recycling facility, no transport plan, no environmental commission can solve the fundamental problems posed by mega-cities.

By fundamental problems I mean a wide range of topics, from the quality of the air we breathe to the food we consume, from the amount of waste to the cost of living. For example, Istanbul ranks [second in the world](#) after Moscow, in traffic congestion. [The average driver spends 1 week out of 52 weeks of the year in traffic.](#)

The traffic problem can surely be reduced: Public transport can be improved, restrictions can be imposed on cars, and taxes can be raised. However,



still, traffic congestion is inevitable for a city of this size. The same goes for Paris, London, New York and Bangkok.

More importantly, no matter what is done to prevent it, living in the city increases average energy consumption. 27 mega-cities in the world consume 9% of total electricity and 10% of gasoline-diesel (Kennedy et al. 2015). Living in the city increases carbon emissions per capita (even if a “conscious” life is sustained), because in cities cycles go further, more movements and more objects get involved. Cities use about 80% of the total energy in the world (World Bank Report 2010 p.15), while harboring 55% of the world’s population. Given that there are large inequalities in many cities, with masses who cannot meet their most basic needs, it can be argued that the share of urban middle- and upper-classes in energy consumption is even greater.

Mega-cities not only affect those who live there, but they “swallow” other places. For example, more than half of Istanbul’s water comes from the Melen Creek, hundreds of kilometers away. Moreover, this process is taking place in a geography rapidly advancing towards becoming water poor. [Lakes are drying out, rivers are turning into streams and creeks, and groundwater is getting depleted.](#) Precipitation regime in Turkey is changing. Severe droughts hit parts of Central and Southeastern

Anatolia. [Episodes of sudden and intense rainfall that lead to flash-floods are expected](#) in-between long-lasting droughts. The recent hailstorms we witnessed in the middle of the summer, and the fact that winters are no longer resembling the winters we remember, suggests that all this change has taken place within a generation’s lifetime. This data alone requires a re-questioning of all that we know. There is not much time left to design living spaces suitable for changing climatic zones and to switch to agricultural products with the ability to adapt. There is need for resilient accommodation units that operate with less energy, rely on less movement, and have lower carbon emissions.

Istanbul was not designed accordingly and continues to grow disproportionately. Nearly one out of every five people in Turkey lives in İstanbul. Although the population density seems to be less than that of Berlin whose population is 3.5 million (3,500 people per km² in Berlin, approximately 2,900 in Istanbul), the reason for this is Istanbul’s large acreage. The real picture is revealed when we evaluate the districts one by one. [There are 18 thousand people per km² in Kadıköy, 20 thousand in Küçükçekmece, 42 thousand in Gaziosmanpaşa and 43 thousand in Esenler.](#) Even though Kocaeli ranked the country’s second most densely populated province, its density is less than one fifth of Istanbul’s (Kocaeli 528 people/km², izmir 360,

Ankara 224; Turkish Statistical Institute population data 2018). Consequently, Istanbul has turned into a giant organism that devours its peripheries by using large energy inputs for doing so; and sends its wastes to other places, again with high energy costs, in order to accommodate millions of people on top of each other. Such an organism could not emerge in a world where fossil fuels were not used in high volumes.

It is not possible to solve a problem of this size by raising turnpike rates or by increasing green spaces such as gardens and parks. Grassed urban areas are causing a huge waste of water, especially in water-scarce countries, such as Turkey. [Landscape gardening](#) with flowers that last only for 15 days and the concomitant [corruption has become quite popular in the media](#) lately. Nevertheless, “green areas” in cities may still be discussed as a sign of environmentalism in different political camps. Although many experts distinguish between self-maintaining forested areas, and roadside gardens or lawns; the city expands towards the former, while “green spaces”, in need of constant maintenance, are increasing. The aim is not to let the urban land breathe, to revitalize the soil, increase fertility, or to increase resilience; but to design a showcase, embellished with numbers, for convincing the public that environmental measures are being implemented. In summary, the aim is to pretend.

Solving the Problem in the Showcase

The amount of green areas in Istanbul is very low compared to European cities. According to the Department of Parks, Gardens and Green Areas’ statement, as of 2018, green area per capita in Istanbul is [5.98 square meters](#). This includes intersections and road sides. This figure is 45 square meters in Amsterdam and 60 square meters in Vienna. Another municipal unit claims that [this number is 12 square meters for Istanbul](#), a figure above the world average, but they do not provide information on what criteria are used in determining and measuring green space. Perhaps what matters is that such a claim is in circulation. After all, alternative facts have become one of the most important tools of politics today.

Assoc. Prof. Tali Sharot who specializes in cognitive neurology suggests that people tend to believe information that are in line with their existing opinions, and that they are more likely to reject information running contrary to their opinions (Sharot 2017). He emphasizes that everyone can have access to the set of information conforming their opinions, especially on the Internet, and each political view, in return, could produce alternative facts accordingly. This is the case, even about the simplest issues. Therefore, perhaps we should see the uncertainty, inconsistency and diversity in criteria as one of the main processes shaping politics rather than calculation errors. After all, we live in a world where democratic discussion processes are handed over to professional public relation experts, and there are people who “manage” the crises even when they are unsolvable. Thus problems can be transformed into activities that would bring votes/funds through the right kind of “framing”.

At this point, I would like to refer back to the bidding process for the European Green Capital Award, which I mentioned at the very beginning. As I had mentioned before, even if Istanbul was never ever close to receiving the award, making statements on environmentalism in newspapers, publishing news as if the city had been nominated by other authorities rather than an application being filed by its own administration, circulating an alternative set of information through this occasion, and thus marketing the city must have been considered as achievements in themselves. That period was also when Turkey claimed itself to be a “game setter” country. When it was evident that Istanbul (and other candidates Bursa and Kütahya) could not be the European Green Capital, Turkey decided to organize its own competition.



Istanbul Environment Friendly City Award (IEFCA) – 2017 pilot edition

The Istanbul Environment Friendly City Award is a Flagship initiative under the Objective 3 "Planning and managing Mediterranean sustainable cities" of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) 2016-2025. Funded by the Government of Turkey, the Istanbul Award is managed by the MAP Coordinating Unit with the assistance of Plan Bleu Regional Activity Centre and the support of the other MAP Components.

This [competition](#), organized through a foreign non-governmental organization (Plan Bleu) with the support of United Nations Environment Program, was actually funded by the Government of Turkey, but this detail was not mentioned in the newspapers. The three finalist cities were taken to a public vote to decide the winner. İzmir, with a significant population advantage, surpassed the other two finalist cities from Israel and Croatia, and [won the \[Istanbul\] Environmental Friendly City Award](#). The reason why I write "Istanbul" in parenthesis is because it was only referred to as "Environmental Friendly City Award" in the newspapers. This way, the award sounded [as if it was an international one](#). The competition did not continue afterwards, not even for another year. However, environmentalism was allegedly proved.

Conclusion

This piece was written as the climate crisis takes place before our eyes. The conditions that emerged twelve thousand years ago and created the world as we know it are radically changing. Human societies need to be able to respond to this change, and I believe we have the creativity, capacity, and organizational skills that this task requires. Moreover, it is quite possible that we build fairer, slower, more peaceful societies during this process. In fact, this is absolutely necessary. However, we need to distinguish the real transformations that are actually needed from the fake solutions aimed at creating distractions. We need new principles, new administration models, and new institutions. From the reality we live in today, we can say that, no solution that increases fossil fuel consumption is a solution. Disposable products, foods that contain chemicals to extend their shelf lives, giant

cities should come to an end as soon as possible; distraction tactics need to be exposed. We can also name projects and initiatives that exacerbate inequalities, that increase indebtedness and dependence on the global financial system among other obstacles before us.

This is the language of radical politics. I am not talking about a revolution; I'm talking about transformative, rigorous steps in every aspect of life. How could we foster the sovereignty of land, water, farmers, and the living spaces? How could new imaginations for diversity flourish? Unfortunately, the tools we have may not lend themselves to these changes. We are surrendered to lobbyists, to administrators with visions of no more than four or five years. The masses who are excluded from almost all major decision-making processes are surrendered to algorithms and to public relations campaigns. Here I conveyed a tragicomic example of this. I must note, however, that the situation is not very promising in other institutions and countries either. After all, we are talking about countries that export their own garbage to other places and [pretend as if they have solved the issue](#).

The scene is dark, yet the footsteps of a new world are being heard. It is time to get ready.

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