

QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU READ IT

The European Union and Turkey: Who Defines Environmental Progress?

FIKRET ADAMAN

Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey; e-mail: adaman@boun.edu.tr

MURAT ARSEL

Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands; e-mail: arsel@iss.nl

doi:10.1017/S0020743808081427

[European Union] EU environment policy aims to promote sustainable development and to protect the environment for present and future generations. It is based on preventive action, the polluter pays principle, fighting environmental damage at source, shared responsibility and the integration of environmental protection into other EU policies. The *acquis* comprises over 200 major legal acts covering horizontal legislation, water and air quality, waste management, nature protection, industrial pollution control and risk management, chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), noise, and forestry. Compliance with the *acquis* requires significant investment. A strong and well-equipped administration at the national and local level is imperative for the application and enforcement of the environment *acquis*. . . .

Turkey needs to take steps to integrate environmental protection requirements into the definition and implementation of all other policies, and to promote sustainable development. Particular attention is also needed as regards strengthening administrative capacity and coordination mechanisms between the authorities involved in the implementation of environment policy. Considerable investments need to be secured to ensure implementation of the environment *acquis*. In this context, it needs to be stressed that all new investment projects should comply with the EU environment *acquis*.¹

After decades of neglect, the increasing burden of economic development on Turkey's environment is now widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, despite serious attempts to transition toward sustainable development, Turkey's

environmental problems are worsening in scope, intensity, and impact. This puzzling failure has been central to our research on the political ecology of state–society relationships in the Middle East. We have been seeking answers to two linked questions. Can a nation like Turkey, with its “strong-state” tradition and ambitious plans for socioeconomic development, find a healthy balance between the needs of economy and ecology? How would “sustainable development” look within the particular historical, cultural, geographical, and political context of Turkey?

The relationship between Turkey and the European Union (EU) is critical to our research. On the one hand, the aim of EU membership is often the central plank of Turkish arguments for unbridled economic growth. On the other hand, the EU is closely involved in shaping the politics and policies of development in Turkey. The annual “progress report” prepared by the European Commission on all aspiring members of the EU therefore makes for a significant document that could shed light on our puzzle.

Our reading of “Turkey: 2005 Progress Report” (excerpted at the outset) is shaped by insights drawn from the rapidly growing area of political ecology scholarship. Namely, we pay particular attention to relationships of power and struggles for autonomy, control, and self-determination at various political and geographical scales. This, in turn, reflects our conviction that concepts such as “environment” and “sustainable development” cannot be taken as universal. Instead, they are constituted within and through political processes.

It is therefore important to problematize the legitimacy of the EU in leading future member states toward sustainable development. With an average GDP per capita of €24,800, the EU might indeed be expected to help Turkey, which has a GDP of around €6,400, achieve economic development. Yet, taking a global view, we note that although not necessarily the worst in terms of their share of global environmental impact, European economies are directly implicated in a host of significant environmental changes, including global warming, deforestation of rainforests, and depletion of world fisheries. To the extent that such principles as “preventive action” and “polluter pays” have helped stabilize the *local* dimensions of environmental change in Europe, the EU is far from being a paragon of sustainability.

In a similar manner, the technical approach in the excerpt contradicts our reading of sustainability as a political concept and politicized process. Although the EU does have some of the world’s most stringent environmental regulations, Turkey is not lagging far behind. A remnant of the nation’s dirigiste political system and a reflection of elites’ desire to “catch up” with the West, Turkey’s environmental legislation is surprisingly well developed. Nor is the sustainability problem in Turkey simply one of underdeveloped administrative capacity. Given the often oppressive power of the state and the vast bureaucracy in which it is encased, the sustainability question in Turkey does not arise because it lacks a “strong and well-equipped administration.”

Many EU nations had reached “development” long before the true magnitude of the environmental crisis became evident, whereas Turkey currently faces the task of creating rapid economic growth while maintaining ecological integrity. Turkey is struggling with difficult choices in its developmental aspirations, and these choices are now increasingly being contested by small but vociferous environmental social movements. Our reading of the EU document in light of our empirical work, which anticipates an increase in environmentally motivated social conflicts, suggests the need for alternative models for conceptualizing development. Even though we do see the merits of harmonizing Turkey’s laws with the *acquis*, what we particularly note in this document is the absence of critical discussion on the unsustainability of modern industrial lifestyles epitomized by EU members.

NOTE

¹European Commission, “Turkey: 2005 Progress Report,” Brussels: SEC 1426 (9 November 2005), 118, 121.