

Navigating Urban Futures: Canal Istanbul and Contested Visions of Governance in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines struggles over urban governance in contemporary Turkey through the intertwined dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism and democratic contestation. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and recent debates on market-driven urbanism and state-led centralization, it situates Turkey within comparative scholarship on hybrid and electoral-authoritarian regimes. It argues that such regimes mobilize cities as strategic arenas of hegemonic struggle, where executive centralization confronts counter-hegemonic claims to participation, accountability, and urban citizenship. From this perspective, urban transformation projects and governance reforms are not merely policy interventions but sites where political choices are recoded as technical necessity and contestation is displaced into the language of expertise, inevitability, and development. Building on this framework, the article uses the Canal Istanbul mega-project as a lens through which these dynamics become visible. Through a discourse-theoretical analysis, it examines how governmental narratives of technocratic inevitability, moralized service, and performative visibility seek to naturalize centralized authority, while municipal and civic actors articulate alternative claims centered on public interest, participation, and social justice. The Canal Istanbul controversy thus reveals how urban politics under electoral authoritarianism is neither fully depoliticized nor fully emancipatory; rather, it unfolds as a structurally uneven terrain in which authoritarian consolidation and democratic rearticulation are continuously co-produced.

Keywords

authoritarian urbanism; Canal Istanbul; democratic contestation; local governance; neoliberal megaprojects; Turkey; urban future

1. Introduction

Amid the erosion of democratic institutions in Turkey, cities have become key sites where authoritarian-neoliberal consolidation and democratic contestation converge under conditions of ongoing disruption. Since the early 2000s, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), local governance has been reshaped by neoliberal-authoritarian imperatives that have subordinated local politics to central power, turning the city into a locus of regime maintenance that sustains clientelist networks and mobilizes resources for political survival. At the same time, urban space has remained an arena of alternative politics, as civil initiatives, municipal actors, and opposition movements articulate competing visions of urban governance. Electoral shifts in 2019 and 2024, alongside the 2013 Gezi protests and the 2016 coup attempt, introduced successive disruptions to the established relationship between central and local power, unsettling the AKP's claims to uncontested authority. These overlapping disruptions resonate with broader diagnoses of a "polycrisis" in which, as Hilbrandt and Ren argue, "global systemic risks permeate all realms of life in unprecedented ways" (2025, p. 23), demanding new frameworks for understanding how urban futures are contested and made. Canal Istanbul, a planned 45-kilometer artificial waterway linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, emerged as one of the most visible arenas where these disruptions became politically salient, symbolizing competing visions of development, governance, and the urban future. The 2024 elections further intensified these tensions, as the central government increased fiscal, legal, and symbolic pressures on opposition municipalities.

Situating the analysis within broader debates on urban future-making under conditions of disruption, this article examines the Canal Istanbul project as a paradigmatic case of authoritarian urbanism and contested urban governance in Turkey, as discussed in debates on authoritarian urbanism and mega-projects (Aslan & Balaban, 2023; Erensü, 2024; Kuyucu, 2020; Yılmaz & Andız, 2023). It approaches the project through a discourse-theoretical lens, analyzing how competing political actors construct and legitimize large-scale urban interventions through antagonistic discursive formations. From this perspective, large-scale urban projects are not only material interventions but also sites where hegemonic visions of the urban future are articulated and contested, as urban space becomes a strategic arena in which authoritarian consolidation and democratic counter-practices confront one another. The analysis draws on a discourse-analytical reading of political texts and public interventions related to the Canal Istanbul project.

The article first outlines the logics of authoritarian neoliberal urban governance before examining Canal Istanbul as a site where these dynamics materialize. It then analyzes how competing discursive formations contest urban futures through antagonistic articulations. The conclusion reflects on the relationship between authoritarian consolidation and democratic contestation in urban governance.

2. The Hybrid Logics of Urban Governance Under Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Cities have become key sites for authoritarian urbanism, where neoliberal policies and political control are mutually reinforced through clientelist networks and large-scale urban projects (Bayraktar, 2020; Begadze, 2022; Can & Fanton, 2022; Deets, 2024; Koch, 2022; Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2025; Woźniak & İnal-Çekiç, 2023). Such configurations are rooted in the broader trajectory of neoliberal urbanism, which since the 1970s has been advanced through a discourse of market efficiency, competitiveness, and growth-oriented planning. Policies of privatization, deregulation, and the commercialization of public services have reconfigured urban

governance as a technocratic and market-oriented field structured around public–private partnerships and large-scale redevelopment, naturalizing growth as the primary horizon of political legitimacy (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 77–78; Keleş et al., 2025, p. 306).

As Harvey notes, the neoliberal transformation of the 1980s and 1990s turned the state into a “prime agent of redistributive policies,” advancing fiscal reforms and privatization schemes that favored capital interests (2006, p. 155). Swyngedouw highlights the concomitant depoliticizing rationality of neoliberal managerialism, which reduces politics to technocratic consensus and expert-driven governance that suppresses conflict under the guise of neutrality (2009, pp. 602–604, 2022, pp. 64–66). Yet under authoritarian conditions, technocratic rationality shifts from depoliticization to political control: Neoliberal instruments are selectively mobilized alongside clientelism, rent redistribution, and political domination, illustrating how market-oriented rationalities are rearticulated to sustain illiberal rule. Through this hybrid formation, state–capital alliances and coercive mechanisms reconfigure the relationship between market and state, producing new hierarchies and deepening the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 81–92; Olt et al., 2024, pp. 14–15). As McLellan notes, decentralization reforms introduced in the name of accountability often generate recentralizing effects, allowing central governments to extend control over municipalities through budgetary regulation, planning oversight, and investment steering (2022, p. 6). Historically, such arrangements rarely produced genuine autonomy; instead, they reinforced technocratic governance and patronage under the guise of local empowerment (Bayraktar, 2007, 2020).

Taken together, the intertwining of neoliberal rationalities, recentralizing control, and patronage-based urban governance can be understood through Swyngedouw’s account of post-political urban arrangements, where technocratic management is combined with populist appeals that demand consent while delegitimizing dissent (2009, pp. 604–605, 2022, pp. 63–65). In this configuration, governance appears less as a site of democratic deliberation than as a domain of managerial performance and affective mobilization, reinforced through megaprojects and exclusionary policies that strengthen executive dominance over local resources and decision-making (Öktem, 2021; Woźniak & İnal-Çekiç, 2023, pp. 314–315). Appeals to efficiency, service, and progress thus normalize centralized authority and redefine legitimacy in terms of managerial capacity and delivery, embodied in the figure of the “project-oriented mayor” and in what Bayraktar calls the “myth of service” (2020, pp. 200–228).

At the same time, the urban realm remains deeply ambivalent. While it can facilitate centralized authority, it also generates forms of social and political plurality that enable contestation (Harvey, 2006; Koch, 2022; Pojani, 2018; Tansel, 2018). Large metropolitan regions, in particular, embody this tension: Their economic centrality and social heterogeneity make them key instruments of regime consolidation, yet also sites where participation and inclusion challenge authoritarian governance (İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024; Koch, 2022; Kohn, 2016; Le Galès, 2021; McLellan, 2022; Pojani, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2022; Zupan, 2023). In this sense, urban contestation does not emerge outside authoritarian-neoliberal governance but unfolds within it, as competing claims seek to define the meaning, limits, and legitimacy of urban rule. In Swyngedouw’s framework, such moments of contestation interrupt the post-political script by reasserting “the democratic” as a disruptive claim to equality against any fixed socio-spatial order (2022, pp. 67–68). Yet, as Zupan (2023) reminds us, these disruptions do not originate from an abstract outside of authoritarian-neoliberal governance but emerge from historically layered state–society relations in which coercion and consent are continuously reworked. This perspective cautions against reading authoritarian urbanism as a one-directional, top-down imposition and instead points

to the city as a terrain where hegemonic projects are stabilized, challenged, and occasionally rearticulated. Following Zupan, the articulation of neoliberal rationalities with authoritarian forms of urban governance can be understood as a historically evolved and contested configuration that leaves room for negotiation and limited openings (2023, pp. 32–33), even as it broadly corresponds to the post-political and post-democratic dynamics identified by Swyngedouw (2022).

Comparative cases across Europe (Warsaw, Prague), Latin America (São Paulo), and the Global South (Mozambique, South Africa) demonstrate that urban politics under authoritarian and illiberal conditions are shaped by ongoing struggles over legitimacy, authority, and the scope of democratic participation at the local level (Gervasoni, 2018; Gümrükçü, 2021; Panzano et al., 2025, pp. 2, 4). The struggle between the central government and the opposition-led Istanbul municipality around the Canal Istanbul project constitutes a contemporary instance of this broader pattern. The following discussion situates this confrontation within Turkey’s urban governance regime, tracing how neoliberal reforms and executive centralization reshaped local politics and structured the conflict over Canal Istanbul.

3. Canal Istanbul and the Remaking of Local Politics in Turkey

First announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the 2011 general election campaign as the “crazy project” (*çılgın proje*—a term used rhetorically to convey daring or audacious rather than “lunatic” in its literal English sense), Canal Istanbul has been presented as one of the largest infrastructure investments in the history of the Republic (Figure 1). The project has been promoted simultaneously as a solution to maritime congestion



Figure 1. Official map of the Canal Istanbul project area showing the canal axis (*Kanal Aksı*), study area (*Çalışma Alanı*), and social impact zone (*Sosyal Etki Değerlendirmesi [SED] Alanı*). Source: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (2020).

in the Bosphorus, a driver of economic growth, and a symbol of national ambition. From the outset, it has been framed in a technocratic language of necessity, expertise, and development, portraying the intervention as a matter of scientific planning rather than political choice (“Çılgın proje’: İstanbul’a ikinci boğaz,” 2011; Geniş, 2020).

Yet Canal Istanbul is more than a large-scale infrastructural enterprise. Its magnitude, mode of implementation, and the political contestation it has provoked render it a paradigmatic instance of how urban space becomes a strategic terrain where centralized executive authority, speculative capital accumulation, and local democratic claims intersect. This intersection is rooted in the neoliberal transformation of urban governance in Turkey that began in the 1980s, through which privatization and commercialization recast urban governance as a field of speculative investment and rent extraction, limiting meaningful local autonomy and reinforcing central oversight (Bayraktar, 2020, p. 213; Geniş, 2020, p. 7; İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024, p. 62). Harvey’s (2006) concept of “creative destruction” captures this dynamic: the continuous cycle of demolition and redevelopment enabling capital accumulation through urban restructuring.

The trajectory intensified after 2002, when the AKP embedded neoliberal urbanism within an increasingly centralized executive framework, aligned oversight institutions with party priorities, and positioned the state as a principal agent of capital accumulation (Tansel, 2018, pp. 200–205). Centralization was entrenched through legal reforms and political appointments, blurring municipal–state boundaries and rendering mayors structurally dependent on the executive (Alkan, 2015, pp. 866–869). Coercive interventions such as the appointment of trustees (*kayyum*) and the criminalization of elected representatives in Kurdish-majority municipalities under the 2016 state of emergency consolidated this system of executive tutelage (McLellan, 2022, p. 9; Tutkal, 2022, pp. 1169–1170). Within this framework, the AKP’s urban growth model has been driven by land speculation, real estate expansion, and construction, and has often been described as “bulldozer urbanism” (Loving & Türkmen, 2011, p. 73). It has been operationalized through central agencies such as the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ), originally established as a social housing institution but later repurposed for state-led redevelopment and rent generation, as well as through party-aligned conglomerates.

In this configuration, mega-projects became the paradigmatic sites where technocratic, expert-led interventions fused with affective, populist appeals, translating what Swyngedouw theorizes as “post-political” logics into concrete spatial strategies that reorganized access to land, resources, and decision-making (2009, pp. 603–605). Rather than merely accelerating growth, these projects institutionalized regime consolidation by restructuring the city along class and political lines and embedding patronage networks within large-scale redevelopment (Geniş, 2020, p. 7). Projects such as the Third Airport and the Third Bridge exemplify this fusion of developmental spectacle and clientelist redistribution (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 87–88; Demiralp, 2018, p. 93; Keleş et al., 2025, p. 310; Tutkal, 2022, p. 1168). Reading through Adaman and Akbulut’s (2021) Gramscian account, this post-political configuration is not merely technocratic but constitutive of Erdoğan’s “three-pillared neoliberalism,” in which authoritarianism, populism, and construction-led developmentalism are continually mobilized to secure support, legitimacy, and manage opposition (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021, p. 280). Canal Istanbul marks the most far-reaching instance of this dynamic, condensing executive dominance, neoliberal growth imperatives, and patronage-based redistribution in a single project.

Yet this configuration cannot be understood as a stable order secured by consent. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe (1985), it is more accurately grasped as a hegemonic formation structured by ongoing antagonisms. These antagonisms were politically crystallized in the 2019 local elections, when the Republican People's Party (CHP) captured Istanbul and Ankara, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) secured several municipalities—many of which were subsequently placed under state trusteeship. These results exposed the fragility of the AKP's urban hegemony, as Istanbul, long described as “the AKP's most important hub of clientelist distribution of funds” and “a central node in the networks of illicit capital flows” (Öktem, 2021, p. 504), shifted to opposition control. This rupture was consolidated in the 2024 local elections, with the CHP retaining Istanbul and expanding its control nationwide, prompting increased central government pressure on opposition municipalities. What began after the 2019 elections as administrative oversight and fiscal restrictions escalated following the 2024 local elections into judicial interventions, arrests, and criminal investigations targeting opposition mayors and municipal staff, culminating in the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March 2025.

Against growing central pressure, Canal Istanbul has become a key site where these tensions surface most visibly. Since its announcement, the project has provoked sustained opposition from municipal actors, civil society organizations, and professional chambers in Istanbul. Following the 2019 elections, the CHP-led municipality sought to halt its implementation through legal actions and public campaigns while advancing a discourse of “people-oriented local governance” (*halkçı belediyecilik*) that emphasized transparency, participation, and social justice (CHP, 2024; DEM Party, 2024; Doğanay & Özdemir Taştan, 2025). Initiatives such as open tenders, live-streamed council meetings, and digital participation tools like Istanbul is Yours aimed to reassert local government as a sphere of democratic accountability (İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024, p. 71; Szymański, 2025, pp. 12–13). Framed in these terms, opposition-led municipalities evoke Laclau's (2005) conception of left populism as the democratic articulation of dispersed social demands around inclusive notions of “the people” and “justice.” The struggle over Canal Istanbul thus becomes analytically salient as a confrontation between competing claims to legitimacy and divergent discourses of development, public interest, and urban governance.

4. Tracing Articulations: Analytical Approach and the Corpus

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, the analysis approaches Canal Istanbul not merely as infrastructure but as a political project that contingently fixes meaning by articulating elements such as development, public interest, and urban transformation into a coherent formation while excluding alternatives (pp. 96–127). Central to this framework are the concepts of articulation and antagonism, through which meaning is partially stabilized and contested by competing claims to legitimacy (Laclau, 2005, pp. 68–100; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 105–127). These antagonisms crystallize around nodal points—privileged signifiers such as technocratic necessity, service, national development, participation, and justice—through which competing visions of urban governance are advanced.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach based on a purposive corpus capturing moments when Canal Istanbul's political meaning became visible and contested. Five such moments guide the analysis: Erdoğan's 2011 project announcement; the 2019 local election campaigns; İmamoğlu's first mayoral term; the 2024 election campaign; and İmamoğlu's second term, including the period following his detention, when discursive struggles intensified across press statements and social media.

Across these periods, the analysis draws on publicly available materials, including rally speeches, press coverage, social media posts, and official presidential transcripts. The cited excerpts are illustrative, highlighting recurring patterns of articulation and contestation. The analysis traces how government actors stabilize an authoritarian-neoliberal vision of urban governance by articulating Canal Istanbul through nodal points as necessary and indisputable, and how the opposition unsettles these fixations through competing claims to participation, justice, and democratic accountability.

5. Articulating Authoritarian Urbanism: Developmentalism as a Hegemonic Project

For the government, Canal Istanbul is cast not merely as a large-scale infrastructure project but as a central element of a hegemonic narrative in which development operates as the primary political signifier of legitimacy, authority, and national destiny. Within this articulation, support for the canal becomes synonymous with commitment to Turkey's progress, while opposition is constructed as obstruction. As Adaman and Akbulut's (2021) Gramscian account of Erdoğan's "three-pillared neoliberalism" suggests, developmentalism operates as both an ideological and material vehicle of hegemonic rule, mobilizing a catch-up imaginary that obscures uneven socio-environmental burdens while consolidating political support around large-scale projects (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021, pp. 284–285). In Laclauian terms, this formation structures an antagonistic frontier dividing the political field between those portrayed as advancing national development and those accused of blocking it, making Canal Istanbul a privileged site through which this antagonism is articulated and stabilized.

This antagonistic logic is articulated in President Erdoğan's remarks at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Sazlıdere Bridge, presented as the first concrete step of Canal Istanbul. In this address, development is constructed as a moral and historical benchmark against which political actors are judged, exemplified by the claim that "Turkey's recent history is full of examples of projects being blocked at every stage—from aircraft to engines, from defense to energy" ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan," 2021). Within this framing, the CHP is positioned not as a legitimate alternative with a different understanding of development, but as the embodiment of an obstructive mentality. This antagonism is reinforced through a developmentalist narrative that situates the governing party as the heir to earlier center-right traditions, portraying large-scale infrastructure projects as symbols of national advancement repeatedly hindered by the same actor. Canal Istanbul thus appears as the latest episode in this trajectory, converting political disagreement into a moralized dichotomy between builders and blockers and organizing development as a nodal point around which a hegemonic frontier is drawn.

The following subsections trace how this hegemonic framing is reproduced through interrelated nodal points—technocratic necessity, service, and spectacle—each narrowing the scope of legitimate contestation by presenting a deeply political intervention as the natural continuation of Turkey's developmental trajectory.

5.1. *Technocratic Inevitability: Development as Necessity*

Once development is established as the primary antagonistic frontier separating those portrayed as advancing Turkey's progress from those accused of obstructing it, the government stabilizes this division through a technocratic framing that presents Canal Istanbul as an objectively necessary intervention grounded in expertise and engineering rationality. Within this discursive configuration, development is

detached from democratic deliberation and recoded as inevitability, as alternative futures and environmental risks are displaced by expert knowledge and opposition is reframed as interference rather than a legitimate competing claim to the public interest.

The turn to technocratic rationality reflects broader shifts in urban governance under authoritarian neoliberalism, marked by the concentration of decision-making power in the executive and the marginalization of participatory mechanisms (Geniş, 2020, p. 7). In this context, political disagreement is recast as irrational obstruction, legitimizing executive-led modernization through emblematic large-scale projects.

Since its introduction during the 2011 general election campaign onward, Erdoğan has repeatedly justified Canal Istanbul through technocratic arguments centered on maritime safety and the management of increasing traffic in the Bosphorus. References to tanker congestion, accident risk, and regulatory limits anchored the project in ostensibly objective assessments, reinforcing the claim that the intervention was unavoidable rather than politically chosen (“‘Çılgın proje’: İstanbul’a ikinci boğaz,” 2011). Invocations of scientific precision and engineering expertise positioned the canal as a natural solution to a technical problem, a claim further reinforced in later speeches emphasizing the role of “hundreds of experts” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan,” 2021) and in official infographics presenting it as a scientific necessity (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2020a; see Figure 2). Together, these discursive practices articulate security and expertise into a nodal configuration that fixes the canal as an objective engineering imperative rather than a politically contestable intervention.

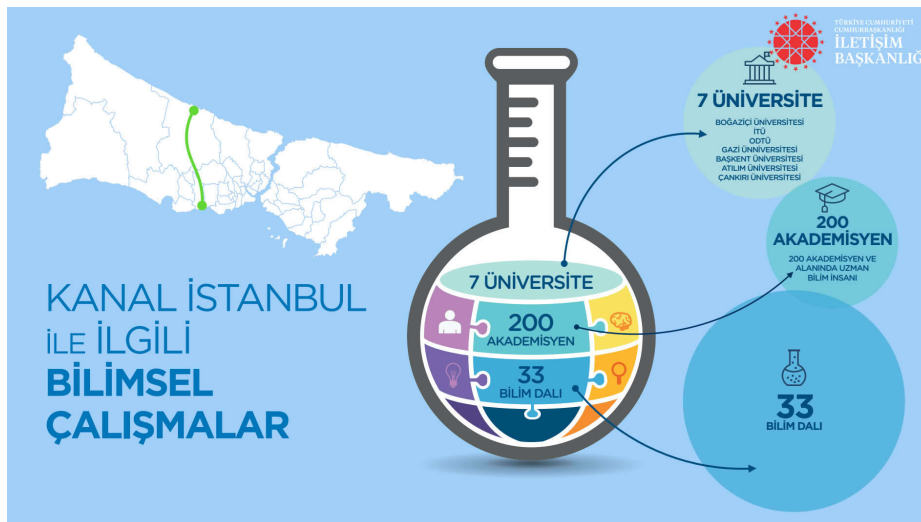


Figure 2. Official Canal Istanbul infographic highlighting research by 200 academics from seven universities across 33 disciplines. Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications (2020a).

This mode of depoliticization resonates with post-political governance, where expertise replaces democratic deliberation (Swyngedouw, 2009, pp. 609–613). This rearticulation of technocratic reason under authoritarian-neoliberal conditions reflects the hybrid logic discussed earlier, where neoliberal managerialism is fused with mechanisms of control and patronage. In this configuration, technocratic inevitability functions as a nodal point that binds development to necessity and expertise to authority, a connection explored in the following subsection through the moralized discourse of service and national pride.

5.2. Moralizing Development: Service, Pride, and the Emotional Economy

While technocratic necessity stabilizes Canal Istanbul as a development imperative, government discourse simultaneously mobilizes moral and affective registers articulated through the idiom of service. The project is aligned with other mega-projects within a broader politics of works, through which development is redefined as a moral obligation fulfilled through tangible outputs. Central to this articulation is the equation of service with *eser*—the enduring material work left behind. Erdoğan repeatedly presents Canal Istanbul as both development and service, contrasting those who “only talk” (the opposition) with those who “produce.” Visible construction thus operates as proof of commitment to national progress and as a metric of political legitimacy.

This logic is made explicit in Erdoğan’s frequent invocation of a proverb that defines humanity through the capacity to leave lasting works, drawing a moral boundary between builders and obstructors. In one such speech, he posits Canal Istanbul within this register:

Hey, CHP, your power and strength will not be enough to stop Canal Istanbul; we will build it anyway...We do not deal in empty talk; we get things done. As you know, a donkey dies leaving behind its saddle; a person dies leaving behind their works (*eser*)....As we take these steps, Turkey rises....The country and the nation need a politics of works and services (*eser ve hizmet siyaseti*) such as the one we pursue. (Mutlu, 2020)

Here, “*eser*” refers to the enduring material outputs of governance—concretely built infrastructures such as large-scale housing projects, highways, bridges, and tunnels. Through such formulations, Canal Istanbul is articulated as an *eser*: a visible and lasting output through which legitimacy is measured in terms of construction and inauguration rather than deliberation. In Erdoğan’s discourse, this literal meaning is further embedded within a broader right-wing developmentalist imaginary, where a politics of service recasts politics as a competition over projects and performance rather than as an ideological and conflictual field (Bora, 2021). Under this understanding of politics as service, the relationship between rulers and citizens becomes hierarchical rather than reciprocal, as completed works generate expectations of loyalty rather than participation—a logic resonant with Bayraktar’s notion of the “myth of service” (2020, pp. 211–213). As a result, the idiom of service complements technocratic necessity by anchoring legitimacy in material production and further narrowing the space of contestation. Opposition is thus reframed not merely as technical disagreement but as resistance to service itself.

5.3. Performing Development: Visibility, Spectacle, and Power

Building on technocratic necessity and moralized service, governance around Canal Istanbul shifts toward a politics of visibility in which material production becomes symbolic performance. In this configuration, infrastructure derives legitimacy less from its capacity to address everyday urban needs than from its ability to render power visible. Development is thus performed as spectacle, through which Canal Istanbul is articulated within broader processes of consent formation, as power is not only exercised but also staged as a condition of political belonging.

From its inception, Canal Istanbul has been accompanied by elaborate visual representations—animations and promotional materials—that foreground scale, speed, and monumentality (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2020a, 2020b). The project thus exemplifies how authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism transforms planning into a politics of visibility, diverting fiscal and symbolic capital away from citizens' everyday needs toward monumental projections of power. Opposition parties and professional chambers criticized these visualizations, arguing that official animations (Figure 3) depicted a city without people—an imagined future stripped of social and ecological realities where progress and inevitability are rendered visible while the conflicts of development are obscured.



Figure 3. Official Canal Istanbul promotional animation showing a ship navigating the planned canal route. Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications (2020b).

Erdoğan's response at an Istanbul rally on June 5, 2011, illustrates how representation substitutes for participation. Responding to objections to the animations, he stated:

Our mistake in the animation was that we had ships sailing through the canal. What we should have done was show people walking along it....Think about this: A canal will be built here, and tens of thousands of people will work on it....On both sides of the canal, we will create new settlements, shopping centers, and places where people will live. (Erdoğan, 2011)

By reframing criticism in terms of construction and settlement, the speech converts representational dispute into a reaffirmation of developmental authority. This politics of visibility articulates Canal Istanbul within a broader antagonistic frontier, positioning proponents of national development and service against obstructive forces resistant to progress. Through this division, nodal points such as development, service, productivity, and greatness are sutured together, while loyalty is naturalized as the appropriate response to monumental achievement. Emphasis on scale and global visibility reinforces this articulation, positioning citizens less as political subjects who deliberate and decide than as workers who build, consumers who inhabit, and bodies that populate the image of progress—thereby redefining participation as visibility.

By converting planning into performance and participation into representation, Canal Istanbul exemplifies how authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism fuses economic management with visual affect. The city becomes

both a stage and an object of power, where legitimacy is maintained through visibility, while everyday concerns such as housing precarity, environmental risk, mobility, and inequality are pushed out of the political arena. Yet this visual regime is not merely symbolic: Spectacular representations are inseparable from the material circuits of authoritarian-neoliberal governance, consolidating loyalty through clientelist networks and generating accumulation for regime-aligned capital (Demiralp, 2018; Tansel, 2019; Tuğal, 2023). Spectacle operates not as a façade but as a mechanism through which domination is materially and symbolically reproduced.

6. From “Crazy Project” to “People’s City”: The Counter-Discourse of Democratic Urbanism

This section examines the opposition’s discourse on Canal Istanbul not as a reactive inversion of the government’s discourse but as a distinct antagonistic frontier that reorganizes urban conflict. While the government naturalizes development as an unquestionable imperative, opposing “builders” to “obstructors,” the opposition does not invert this binary; rather, it dislocates it by redefining both the subject of harm and the locus of political legitimacy.

Following the 2019 local elections, Istanbul became the primary arena in which this alternative articulation took institutional and discursive form. Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu positioned himself as the representative of a political rationality grounded in participation, transparency, and social justice, contrasting with spectacle, technocratic authority, and centralized control. Canal Istanbul was cast not as a development imperative but as a project serving a narrow network of political and economic elites while imposing ecological, social, and economic costs on the city (“Kanal İstanbul bir cinayet projesidir,” 2019). After taking office, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) confronted the project through administrative, legal, and participatory measures, including withdrawing from protocols, detailing anticipated damages, organizing expert workshops, and filing legal challenges (İmamoğlu, 2021; “İmamoğlu: Kanal İstanbul’u tartışamayız,” 2022; IMM, 2020a). These practices presented opposition to the canal as a democratic and civic responsibility, recoding it as a rent-oriented project benefiting a small interest group at the expense of “sixteen million Istanbulites” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Kanal,” 2019). The antagonism is thus reconstituted not between builders and obstructors, but between concentrated economic-political power and the collective life of the city, replacing development, national grandeur, and political authority with an alternative chain organized around public interest, democratic sovereignty, and the right to life.

This counter-discourse stabilizes a single antagonistic boundary through multiple nodal points. As the following subsections show, Canal Istanbul is articulated as (a) an instrument of capital accumulation violating public interest, (b) an imposition bypassing democratic sovereignty, and (c) a form of authoritarian spectacle that displaces everyday social needs. Through these articulations, the canal becomes a symbol of dispossession, democratic erosion, and life-threatening urban governance, forming a counter-hegemonic project that repoliticizes urban space around the idea of the city as a shared space of life and democratic belonging.

6.1. Public Interest Versus Rent: “Either the Canal or Istanbul”

İmamoğlu's opposition to Canal Istanbul redefines who the project serves, establishing an antagonism between public interest and rent-oriented accumulation. Rather than contesting development per se, the canal is recoded as a rent-driven venture benefiting a narrow political and economic network. As İmamoğlu asks, “Who needs Canal Istanbul? Only a handful of people who seek to mortgage the future of our city and country...need this project” (İmamoğlu, 2020).

Within this counter-articulation, public interest operates as a central nodal point binding heterogeneous claims. Evidence of large-scale land transfers is mobilized to expose how nationalist rhetoric conceals capital accumulation: “Since 2011, 30 million square meters have changed hands, and the largest buyers are foreign companies” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Ya kanal, ya İstanbul,” 2019). Development is thus rearticulated as a device legitimizing the commodification of urban land and public resources. The slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” condenses this antagonism into a symbolic frontier. Beyond profit, it reframes the conflict around life, environment, citizenship, and sovereignty, presenting land transfers to foreign investors as a threat to collective belonging. As Figure 4 shows, the slogan appeared on posters commissioned by the IMM under İmamoğlu's leadership, materializing this counter-discourse in urban space. Rather than reproducing exclusionary nationalism, this articulation reclaims nationalist language in a left-populist register (Laclau, 2005, pp. 67–72, 93–100), positioning “the people” as guardians of shared life against rent-seeking elites. Canal Istanbul is thus portrayed not only as an environmental risk but also as a regime of injustice undermining democratic accountability. By describing the project as “a murder” and “a betrayal of Istanbul and the nation” (“Kanal İstanbul bir cinayet projesidir,” 2019), the opposition reconfigures urban development from a technical issue into a moral and political struggle over who has the right to shape and benefit from the city.



Figure 4. IMM poster (November 2020), signed by İmamoğlu. The slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” appears alongside the questions “Who needs Canal Istanbul?” and “Istanbul or those whose wasteful order is disrupted?” Source: Karaman (2020).

This antagonism is further reinforced at the level of naming: As Köksal (2024, pp. 61–62) notes, “Canal Istanbul” operates as ideological branding that turns the city into a marketable sign, while the counter-slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” subverts this move, reclaiming the city's name as a site of resistance, a shift

consolidated through its adoption by the Either the Canal or İstanbul Coordination, which brought together NGOs, opposition parties, and civic initiatives.

6.2. Popular Sovereignty Versus Imposed Megaproject: “İstanbul Is Greater Than One”

İmamoğlu’s opposition articulates a second antagonistic axis between popular sovereignty and authoritarian control. Rather than focusing on technical issues, he reframes the canal as a struggle over who has the legitimate authority to determine the city’s future. Recalling its announcement before the 2011 elections in what he described as “a poor animation film” and its subsequent dormancy without public debate, he presents the project as emblematic of governance defined by secrecy and centralized decision-making (“İmamoğlu’ndan Kanal İstanbul tepkisi,” 2020).

Against this model, legitimacy is anchored in democratic authorship—İstanbul residents’ collective right to shape their environment. Participation operates as a nodal point opposing neoliberal authoritarian rule with public deliberation: “İstanbul is not anyone’s private property; it belongs to sixteen million people” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Ya,” 2019). This claim is materially enacted through the IMM’s legal challenge to the Environmental Impact Assessment (ÇED) report, turning institutional channels into arenas of democratic resistance.

This antagonism is condensed in the slogan “İstanbul is greater than one,” formulated in response to claims that the project would proceed regardless of opposition (“İmamoğlu’ndan Erdoğan’a Kanal İstanbul yanıtı,” 2021). Grounded in electoral legitimacy after June 23, 2019, it redefines authority as emanating from collective participation rather than unilateral command, countering claims that the project would be built “whether you want it or not” (“Kanal İstanbul’a yazın başlıyoruz,” 2021). This framing is further reinforced as İmamoğlu reiterates a participatory vision by calling for a referendum and insisting that “the people of İstanbul should decide the fate of the city” (“İmamoğlu’ndan Erdoğan’a,” 2025). Opposition thus becomes a practice of reclaiming democratic sovereignty through legality, participation, and accountability.

6.3. From Mega Fantasies to Everyday Solidarity: Repoliticizing the Urban Agenda

İmamoğlu’s counter-discourse culminates in a confrontation between everyday life and authoritarian spectacle, repoliticizing urban politics around care, welfare, and material need. Against monumental development, he advances a rationality grounded in social provision, declaring, “This nation does not want canals, yachts, or palaces; it wants jobs, bread, and education” (İmamoğlu, 2019). Spectacle is thus replaced by livelihood as the measure of political legitimacy, presenting Canal İstanbul as a distortion of public priorities. İmamoğlu repeatedly contrasts the government’s prioritization of the canal over pressing social problems such as unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. He argues that while “so many young people suffer from unemployment” and “children cannot be adequately nourished,” Canal İstanbul “cannot be our priority” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Kanal,” 2019). Governance, in this discourse, is redefined as the obligation to safeguard social welfare rather than to stage symbols of power. This understanding was translated into practice through redistributive measures such as expanded metro and flood-control works, municipal nurseries and dormitories, and subsidized social support (IMM, 2020b, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024), centering everyday needs and redrawing the political frontier between the broader urban public and rent-seeking elites.

Within this frontier, the question “Who needs Canal Istanbul?” sharpens the antagonism between unmet social needs and actors aligned with speculative development, condensing welfare and democratic accountability into a shared political claim. This articulation resonates with Laclau’s conception of left populism (2005, pp. 96–100), organizing political conflict around material vulnerability and social justice rather than developmental abstraction. It also aligns with the CHP’s 2024 discourse of *halkçı belediyecilik* (people-oriented local governance), foregrounding participation, equality, and welfare against rentier development, thereby recasting the city as a collective space whose legitimacy rests on everyday needs rather than monumental display.

7. From Consent to Coercion: Canal Istanbul and the Limits of Counter-Discourse Under Authoritarian Urbanism

The 2024 local elections marked a critical moment in Turkey’s urban politics. Ekrem İmamoğlu not only retained Istanbul for a third time against candidates endorsed by President Erdoğan but also consolidated an alternative urban political project that had proven electorally resilient. During the campaign, the opposition’s counter-discourse organized around public interest, democratic sovereignty, and everyday life produced a notable effect: Canal Istanbul was largely withdrawn from the ruling party’s narrative. AKP’s Istanbul mayoral candidate Murat Kurum stated that “what is not on Istanbulites’ agenda cannot be on ours” (Gençdal, 2024), signaling a tacit recognition that the project lacked popular legitimacy. This discursive retreat did not indicate abandonment but rather exposed the limits of consent-building around the canal in the face of sustained opposition framing.

The post-electoral period, however, revealed the structural asymmetries limiting counter-discourse under authoritarian conditions. The AKP-led governing alliance increasingly relied on coercive instruments—fiscal restrictions, administrative interventions, and judicial proceedings—to reassert control over opposition-led municipalities, culminating in İmamoğlu’s arrest in March 2025 and intensified constraints on municipal autonomy. At the urban scale, coercion was coupled with administrative opportunism. Despite earlier disavowal, canal-related construction resumed around the Sazlıdere basin under the “Century’s Housing Project,” advancing the canal route without public consultation or environmental clearance. İmamoğlu called the move an abuse of executive power and a breach of democratic oversight (İmamoğlu, 2025a).

The opposition reframed this turn to coercion as a crisis of legitimacy. During his detention, İmamoğlu called for a citywide referendum: “If you have courage, put the ballot box before the people and let Istanbul decide its fate” (İmamoğlu, 2025b). The appeal exposed a paradox of authoritarian urbanism: Consent is instrumentalized during elections but abandoned when it constrains executive authority. In this sense, the turn to coercion signals not strength but hegemonic fragility—the moment when power substitutes force for persuasion to sustain control over contested urban futures.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined Canal Istanbul as a critical site through which authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism seeks to stabilize executive authority by recoding political decisions as technical necessity. Articulated through managerial rationality, moralized service discourse, and spectacle, the project attempted to reframe distributive and spatial conflicts as matters of expertise rather than political choice, thereby narrowing the

terrain of legitimate contestation. Yet this effort at post-political closure did not extinguish antagonism. Opposition actors redirected the debate toward public interest and everyday life, reactivating political divisions that the project sought to neutralize.

Viewed through a Laclauian lens, this dynamic reveals a hegemonic formation that is neither fully consolidated nor merely reactive. Its durability coexists with persistent contestation, as demonstrated by the electoral reconfigurations of 2019 and 2024. Urban contention therefore unfolds within authoritarian-neoliberal governance as an ongoing struggle over the meaning of development, authority, and public interest, rather than as a conflict that can be absorbed or resolved. Although oppositional articulation reshaped public debate and disrupted claims of inevitability, it did not eliminate structural asymmetries embedded in fiscal, legal, and administrative arrangements; when persuasive stabilization weakened, executive authority relied more overtly on coercive mechanisms, reflecting not the disappearance of dissent but the continuing instability of hegemonic closure under authoritarian conditions.

At the same time, the limits of repoliticization are not only institutional but also discursive. The opposition's reliance on scientific reports, environmental impact assessments, and expert workshops—while normatively significant—did not by itself dislocate the governing articulation. Appeals to expertise unfolded within a polarized political field structured by entrenched antagonisms, where claims to objectivity and technical authority could not operate as neutral arbiters of legitimacy. Rather than indicating an epistemic deficit, this dynamic reflects the uneven terrain on which competing projects seek to stabilize their visions of urban governance.

This instability is reflected in Istanbul's trajectory. Canal Istanbul has not been removed from the governing agenda, yet its advancement has been marked by political hesitation rather than unequivocal momentum. Rather than merely confirming the persistence of contestation, this ambivalence demonstrates that post-political closure remains structurally unstable. Attempts to recast urban transformation as a technical necessity encounter recurrent interruptions that prevent full hegemonic sedimentation. The politics of Istanbul thus illustrates not a completed authoritarian consolidation but an urban field in which executive centralization and democratic claims repeatedly collide, producing outcomes that remain contingent rather than predetermined. The Canal Istanbul controversy thus speaks directly to this thematic issue: It demonstrates that disruption under conditions of authoritarian consolidation is neither unidirectional nor singular, but a multilayered process in which authoritarian and emancipatory agency contest and partially fix the conditions under which urban futures are articulated.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

This study draws on publicly available materials, including political speeches, official documents, and media texts. No new datasets were generated or analyzed for this study.

LLMs Disclosure

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