

2026, Vol. 7(1), 63-84  
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<https://dergi.bilgi.edu.tr/index.php/reflektif>  
DOI: 10.47613/reflektif.2026.263  
Article type: Research Article

Received: 01.11.2025  
Accepted: 20.02.2026  
Published Online: 18.03.2026

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## Green Grabbing, Law and Resistance: Renewable Energy Projects in İzmir Yeşil Gasp, Hukuk ve Direniş: İzmir’de Yenilenebilir Enerji Projeleri

### Abstract

The global “Decarbonization Consensus” is speeding up the energy transition, but the large land requirements for renewable energy sources are increasing conflicts over environmental justice. This situation has led to significant criticism of “green grabbing” and “green extractivism.” This paper investigates the dispossession of communities in Western Turkey’s İzmir province. It focuses on conflicts related to wind, solar, and geothermal energy projects that limit community access to agricultural and grazing lands. Using sociolegal studies, the research draws on archival and content analysis of laws and media. It examines how legal frameworks allow land appropriation for renewable energy in the name of “public interest.” It also explores how affected communities organize legally to oppose these changes. The paper argues that Turkey’s renewable energy growth reproduces extractive patterns through legal methods that facilitate dispossession. Nevertheless, it concludes that the legal system also provides important chances for local communities and their allies to resist and challenge these actions.

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### Öz

Küresel “Karbonsuzlaşma Uzlaşısı” enerji dönüşümünü hızlandırmaktadır; ancak yenilenebilir enerji kaynaklarının büyük arazi gereksinimleri çevre adaleti kapsamındaki ihtilafları artırmaktadır. Bu durum, “yeşil gasp” ve “yeşil ekstraktivizm” eleştirilerinin artmasına yol açmıştır. Bu makale, Batı Türkiye’deki İzmir ilinde toplulukların mülksüzleştirilmesini incelemektedir. Tarım ve otlatma alanlarına erişimi sınırlayan rüzgar, güneş ve jeotermal enerji projelerine ilişkin ihtilaflara odaklanmaktadır. Sosyo-hukuki çalışmalar yaklaşımıyla yürütülen araştırma, mevzuat ve medya arşivlerinin içerik analizine dayanmaktadır. Hukuki çerçevelerin, “kamu yararı” adına yenilenebilir enerji için arazi tahsisini nasıl mümkün kıldığını incelemektedir. Aynı zamanda etkilenen toplulukların bu değişikliklere karşı hukuki yollarla nasıl örgütlendiğini araştırmaktadır. Makale, Türkiye’nin yenilenebilir enerjideki büyümesinin, mülksüzleştirmeyi kolaylaştıran hukuki yöntemler aracılığıyla ekstraktivist örüntüleri yeniden ürettiğini savunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, hukuki sistemin yerel topluluklar ve müttefikleri için bu uygulamalara karşı direnme ve meydan okuma konusunda önemli olanaklar sunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

### Keywords

Renewable energy, dispossession, environmental justice, green grabbing, sociolegal studies

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Yenilenebilir enerji, mülksüzleştirme, çevre adaleti, yeşil gasp, sosyo-hukuki çalışmalar

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## Introduction

Energy transition is on the agenda of many policymakers across the globe, with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) regime offering market-based mechanisms to incentivize renewable energy projects, multilateral development banks (MDBs) providing financing for their realization, and both states and supranational entities such as the European Union announcing roadmaps on greening their economies (Bringel & Svampa, 2023). Thus, it is possible to speak of a ‘Decarbonization Consensus’, which is “a new global agreement that advocates a shift from a fossil fuel-based energy system to a carbon-free (or low-carbon) one based on ‘renewable’ energies” (Bringel & Svampa, 2023: 29). However, unlike most of the subterranean fossil fuel sources that require relatively little land for extraction and energy production, renewable energy sources require much larger amounts of space and territory to generate equivalent amounts of energy (Huber & McCarthy, 2017). This increased demand for land has political consequences.

Recently, works in political ecology have called for closer and critical scrutiny of cases where projects labelled as ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ reproduce patterns of unjust territorial distribution or non-participatory decision-making (Knuth et al., 2022). Many energy transition projects provoke environmental justice conflicts due to changes in land use and land ownership. Criticism of ‘green grabbing’ (Fairhead et al., 2012), ‘green extractivism’ (Dunlap et al., 2024), ‘climate/green colonialism’ (Hamouchene & Sandwell, 2023), and green ‘sacrifice zones’ (Zografos & Robbins, 2020) are now widespread.

This paper examines the dispossession of communities resulting from rural land use changes associated with wind, solar, and geothermal power plant projects in Western Turkey’s İzmir province, and the role of law as both an enabler and a means of resisting green grabs. For the purposes of my research, I will use Fairhead et al.’s (2012: 238) definition of green grabbing as “the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends”, where appropriation refers to the “transfer of ownership, use rights and control over resources that were once publicly or privately owned – or not even the subject of ownership – from the poor (or everyone including the poor) into the hands of the powerful”. In the context of Turkey’s broader extractive regime (Adaman et al., 2019) and land-based accumulation (Yeşilbağ, 2022) strategy, which spans from mining to large-scale construction, green grabbing emerges as a specific modality of dispossession. It is distinguished not merely by the renewable classification of the energy projects, but by the discursive mobilization of sustainability and decarbonization as moral and technical justifications (Özen, 2024a, 2026).

In this research, I specifically focus on Karaburun and Seferihisar townships in Western Turkey’s İzmir province, which are impacted by existing and proposed wind energy, geothermal energy, and solar energy projects that undermine community access to lands for agriculture or grazing (Bianet, 2023; Ekoloji Birliği, 2020) as a consequence of decisions regarding expropriation of titled lands based on “public interest” grounds, enclosure of

previously accessible public lands, land zoning amendments, environmental impact assessment (EIA) permits, and energy generation licenses (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021; Hazar Kalonya & Özçam, 2021; Özçam, 2019; Özcan Cive & Arslan Avar, 2019). Karaburun exemplifies the spatial density of energy projects, whereas Seferihisar, particularly Orhanlı village, provides insight into how geothermal energy expansion encroaches upon olive groves and traditional agricultural practices. The communities impacted by these projects, often in alliance with lawyers, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), challenge them through lawsuits and protests. Hence, my central research questions: How do legal discursive frameworks enable green grabbing in renewable energy projects in Western Turkey's İzmir province? How do affected communities and their allies in İzmir legally mobilize and articulate counterarguments to resist green grabbing and challenge the socio-ecological impacts of renewable energy projects?

In this study, I argue that the role of law in Turkey's energy transition extends beyond a simple regulatory framework. I theorize the ambivalent nature of law within a state-led, authoritarian neoliberal context. This approach demonstrates how legal mechanisms, such as 'public interest' declarations, serve both as instruments for orchestrating dispossession and as structured, though limited, avenues for local communities to express resistance and reclaim their life spaces. This paper draws upon sociolegal studies, which, through its interdisciplinary focus on the interrelations between the law and socioeconomic dynamics, is well-suited to investigate climate change governance, a policy field that also features complex interlinkages between multiple fields of knowledge. It marks the first stage of my broader doctoral research. At this juncture, my aim is to map the legal and discursive infrastructure of green grabbing through desk research, drawing on archival research and content analysis of legislative texts, policy documents, and media coverage from local and national outlets. While this provides a necessary view of the institutional framework, the subsequent phase of my research will deepen these findings through in-depth interviews with various actors, including members of grassroots environmental groups, NGO members, and lawyers who publicly oppose these projects.

### **Sociolegal Studies, Energy Transition Policies, and Green Grabbing**

Sociolegal studies emerged in the mid-20th century in reaction to the limitations of traditional doctrinal legal analysis and sought to understand law as a social phenomenon fundamentally situated within its social, cultural, political, and economic settings (Creutzfeldt, 2020). Early studies in the discipline built upon legal realism and critical theory, placing an emphasis on empirical and interdisciplinary approaches critiquing the claim of law to autonomy and neutrality (Menkel-Meadow, 2020). Researchers sought to identify a significant disparity between "law in the books" and "law in action." This fundamentally challenged formalist accounts of law, which viewed it as a distinct, self-contained system (Creutzfeldt, 2020).

The field benefitted from theoretical contributions from critical legal studies, feminism and postcolonial theory which introduced new and critical perspectives to bear on law's role in the reproduction of social hierarchies and power relations (Valverde et al., 2021).

### ***Legal Geography and Energy Transitions***

As a field of sociolegal studies, legal geography investigates the interlinkages between law, space, and society (Braverman, et al., 2014). Energy transition policies create new rationales for commodifying land by reframing natural spaces as sources of profit for large corporations, often to the detriment of communities who rely on those lands for their livelihoods (Yenneti et al., 2016). In addition to providing financing, international development institutions like the World Bank promote renewable energy by producing and circulating technical assessments, such as global maps of renewable energy potential, to identify and legitimize new areas for investment (McCarthy & Thatcher, 2019). Many states have amended legislation in fields such as land use and environmental law to ease restrictions and streamline permit procedures for renewable energy projects considered to be environmentally friendly. Analyzing South Africa's creation of Renewable Energy Development Zones containing legal and economic exemptions in favour of private-sector investors and developers, akin to free trade zones, geographer Cheryl McEwan (2017: 6) argues that:

Spatial planning for renewable energy development claims to be based on objective research, but the process by which specific areas are classified as acceptable locations for development is profoundly political, shaped by power imbalances in the political-economy and often resulting in environmental injustices.

### ***Law and Social Movements and Energy Transitions***

Law and social movements scholarship analyzes the relationship between law and social movements by investigating the efforts by social movements to use or influence the law to advance their agendas and the opportunities and limitations associated with these strategies (Mayo-Adam, 2024). In this context, the law and social movements scholarship focuses on 'cause lawyering' which is "the set of social, professional, political, and cultural practices engaged in by lawyers and other social actors to mobilize the law to promote or resist social change" (Marshall & Hale, 2014: 303).

A growing body of scholarship now focuses specifically on the legal strategies used to challenge the inequitable outcomes of the energy transition. Maria Antonia Tigre and their colleagues from Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, for example, analyze legal disputes on the environmental justice implications of energy transition under

the term ‘just transition litigation’, which “questions the distribution of the benefits and burdens of transition policies and activities towards net zero-emission and climate-resilient societies amongst local communities and affected stakeholders” (Tigre et al., 2023, p. v). They investigate legal actions related to the energy transition across Latin America, which include legal mobilizations against renewable energy projects, through applications to national courts, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the Independent Consultation and Investigation Mechanism of the Inter-American Development Bank.

Furthermore, a recent trend in sociolegal studies is the examination of infrastructure not just as simple material assets but as a form of rationality. This approach, grounded in a framework of neoliberal governmentality, draws on recent sociolegal scholarship that defines infrastructure as a specific assemblage of actors, mechanisms, and knowledge (Valverde, 2022). Thus, various forms of knowledge and expertise are involved in the legitimation and regulation of infrastructure, a key site of contestation where communities challenge developers’ knowledge claims by presenting their own ‘counter-assessments’ grounded in traditional and local knowledge (Arifi & Winkel, 2021; Espinosa, 2022). The concept of “infrastructural citizenship” refers to how individuals and communities engage with the state and make claims for rights and inclusion through their daily interactions with, and political struggles over, essential infrastructure (Lemanski, 2019). It views people not as passive recipients of policy, but as active agents who use these conflicts over infrastructure to resist exclusion and demand recognition, often employing rights-based legal and political strategies (Sotomayor et al., 2023).

### ***Green Criminology and Energy Transitions***

Green criminology contributes to sociolegal studies by broadening the traditional understanding of crime by the term “green crimes” (Lynch & Long, 2022). Thus, not only those environmental harms that are included in the definitions of existing administrative or criminal law but also the acts that are not criminalized yet scientifically proven to cause significant ecological destruction constitute green crimes (Stretesky et al., 2013). Green criminology also analyzes the level of ambition in the content and enforcement of environmental law to identify interlinkages between power relations, economic interests, and non-sanctioning of environmental harms (Lynch & Long, 2022). The green criminology scholarship argues that the states mobilize criminal law on the one hand, by allowing unchecked violence against nature and environmental defenders by public or corporate actors, and on the other hand, by criminalizing environmental defenders, thus forming a formal control over ecological activists (Gelderloos, 2022; Szalai, 2021).

Green criminology and political ecology scholars examine green grabbing through carbon offsetting mechanisms and environmental degradation for the extraction of critical minerals towards the energy transition as forms of “ecoviolence” (Stoett & Omrow, 2021). Goyes

(2019: 80) describes the grabbing of land through the use of environmental discourses and legal frameworks as an “invisible crime” as it is not as easily identified as other development-induced forced displacements involving explicit uses of coercion. Dunlap (2019) reports on the use of violence and counterinsurgency strategies to suppress the resistance against wind energy development in Mexico’s Oaxaca region.

## **Turkey’s Renewable Energy Expansion from a Sociolegal Perspective**

While Turkey invested in hydropower plants in earlier decades in order to reduce dependency on fossil fuel imports, global climate change policies and the availability of multilateral development bank financing for greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation efforts gave renewable energy projects in the country a new impetus (Bayulgen, 2022; Ozkaynak et al., 2022). Following the enactment of *Law no. 5346 on the Utilization of Renewable Energy Sources for the Purpose of Generating Electricity Energy (Renewable Energy Law)* in 2005, there has been a significant increase in hydropower, wind power, geothermal power, and solar power plant projects across Turkey, built and operated mainly by private energy firms (Artantas, 2023).<sup>1</sup> Turkey’s renewable energy development is likely to continue, given the country’s official target of achieving net-zero emissions by 2053 (“Republic of Türkiye”, 2023). However, many scholars of political ecology criticize Turkey’s energy policies, arguing that the Turkish state and private firms prioritize economic interests in the planning and implementation of energy projects while overlooking their negative socio-ecological impacts (Ozkaynak et al., 2022). Studies demonstrate that a plethora of environmental justice conflicts are emerging from hydropower projects (Aslan, 2019; Erensu, 2017; Islar, 2012), windfarms (Hazar-Kalonya & Ozcam, 2021; Ozcam, 2016; 2019; Ozcan Cive, 2019; Ozcan Cive & Arslan Avar, 2019), and geothermal power plants (Doğu & Pasin, 2025; Özen, 2024b, 2025; Öztürk & Aydın, 2025; Spijkerboer & Turhan, 2025) in Turkey.

### **Land and Energy Transition in Turkey**

In parallel to the overall trend of land commodification and privatization, the content of legislation on the siting and planning of renewable energy projects also contains many elements that facilitate the use of land by private energy companies. The Renewable Energy Law (No. 5346) does not include criteria on the area’s natural, ecological, biological or socioeconomic characteristics under its provisions on the siting of renewable energy projects. The mere suitability of the area for energy generation is sufficient for its allocation to investors (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). Article 8 of the Renewable Energy Law (2005) includes a provision stating that an 85 % discount will apply to the permission, lease, easement, and usage permit fees of state lands allocated to private energy companies for renewable energy projects

and associated energy transmission infrastructure. When introduced with an amendment in 2007, this discount was intended to apply to projects constructed until the end of 2011 and for a duration of ten years following the granting of the project license to the company. However, subsequent amendments in 2010, 2020, and 2025, extended the validity period of the discount to the end of 2015, 2025, and 2030, respectively. In addition, there are provisions in other legislation on land use that facilitate the allotment of land for the construction of renewable energy projects. For instance, while the Law on Pastures (no. 4342) forbids pastures from being subject to private property and used for purposes other than grazing in principle, amendments in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2014, 2017, and 2018 introduced exceptions allowing the allocation of pastures for the construction of industry or energy plants (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). Works on hydropower projects in Turkey stress that these entail land and water grabbing through the expropriation of land, privatization of water use rights, and allocation of previously protected areas to energy projects (Erensü, 2017; Islar, 2012). Islar (2012: 386) argues that the expansion of hydropower development to protected areas constitutes a form of accumulation by dispossession since “*common resources are enclosed and transformed into exclusive places*”.

Different from the context of struggles over land across geographies such as Latin America (Hope, 2022; Wittman 2009), it is not common for communities in Turkey to identify as indigenous peoples and claim territorial land rights. Nonetheless, in many environmental struggles, the communities use narratives stressing their attachment to the places where they live and/or meet their livelihoods, linking this to rights-based discourses, with some of the narratives also going beyond an anthropocentric understanding by demanding the preservation of nature. This also applies to environmental movements opposing renewable energy projects. In the struggles against hydropower plants in Turkey’s Eastern Black Sea region, communities coined the term “life space” and articulated their resistance as protection of their “life space”, connecting their attachment to the place with the right to life (Aslan, 2019; Oğuz, 2017). The demands for the protection of life space stress the “value of (rural) place and its protection as an ecological, social, and political site” by resisting “top-down development projects and privatization” (Aslan, 2019: 207). Thus, the protection of living space involves the protection of not only human beings and their interests but also the non-human living beings residing in those spaces (Aslan, 2019).

### **Legal Mobilizations in Turkey’s Environmental Conflicts**

Most studies on law and social movements in Turkey in the context of environmental movements focus on litigation. For instance, Erensü (2016) emphasizes litigation’s role in halting or delaying hydropower projects in Turkey’s Eastern Black Sea region. Göneç’s (2022) study of anti-mining environmental litigation in Turkey’s Bergama and Cerattepe ecological movements finds that the non-implementation of national and international court rulings

constitutes a limitation on the potential of legal struggles. Eren's (2017) work on court cases about involving a hydropower plant project in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region also highlights the limitations of litigation in terms of the length of proceedings and the incommensurability of some community demands with the existing legislation.

In addition to the works focusing on environmental litigation, some studies on environmental movements in Turkey also highlight the use of legal discourses both before the courts and in protests in Turkey. For instance, Kılıncım's (2017) research demonstrates how the grassroots movements in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region articulate the right to water in a counterhegemonic way to raise their claims against hydropower projects that are restraining their access to water.

There are interviews scholars conducted with lawyers involved in environmental litigation in Turkey regarding the opportunities and limitations of legal mobilization and the nature of the relationship between lawyers and environmental movements. Lawyer Yakup Okumuşoğlu, who represents communities in Turkey's Black Sea region in environmental lawsuits against hydropower plants, states that he always reminds communities that environmental litigation should go hand in hand with social activism to obtain better results since being confined to formal legal practices will allow the powerful to define the boundaries of the law. He argues that "the NGOs should compel the law by demanding things not yet recognized or said under the law, and have these included into law" (Erensü, 2016: 448-449).

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### **Green Crimes and Enforcement Gaps in Turkey**

Green criminology literature is relevant regarding weak content or enforcement of environmental legislation in Turkey, facilitating the operations of private firms without any major hurdles. In its annual progress reports evaluating Turkey's level of compliance and harmonization with the European Union *acquis* as a candidate country, the European Commission (2021: 105-106; 2022: 115; 2023: 114) repeatedly points to problems regarding the implementation of environmental legislation in Turkey and enforcement of court rulings on environmental cases. In its 2024 report, the European Commission (2024: 76) indicates that Turkey has not harmonized its national legislation in accordance with the European Union's Environmental Liability Directive and Environmental Crime Directive. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) (2019) Environmental Performance Review report on Turkey stresses that the country needs to make further progress in efforts to monitor compliance with environmental legislation. The report also underlines that the gravity of administrative fines for environmental law violations does not correspond to investors' financial gains from non-compliance with the environmental legislation (OECD, 2019).

In a similar vein, works on Turkey demonstrate that the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) government uses an incriminating discourse against environmental

movements, constituting them as foreign to the national values and hostile to the nation's development (Kurtiç, 2022; Özen, 2014; 2022). This incrimination then translates into police violence and intimidation against environmental protests (Arslanalp & Deniz Erkmen, 2020; Özen, 2022) and the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) by state and corporate actors against environmental movements in Turkey (Mekanda Adalet Derneği, 2023).

## Renewable Energy Projects and Legal Mobilizations in İzmir

İzmir's Karaburun township, located on the Karaburun Peninsula, suffers the impacts of aggressive wind power plant (WPP) development, with 89 % of the Peninsula's surface area being allocated to existing and proposed WPPs (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). The EIA approvals for WPPs in Karaburun were issued in 2005, and construction activities began in 2011. Due to the hilly terrain of the Peninsula, lands suitable for agriculture or grazing are rare, hence being more indispensable for communities. These already scarce lands are affected by wind power plants (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). The WPPs impact both state lands and pastures that used to be open to villagers' access and private properties of villagers, which are expropriated and leased to private energy firms.

Loss of access to pastures results in diminishing the traditional goat herding activities in the area. The lands surrounding the ones leased to energy companies are also affected negatively, since the construction of WPPs, roads, and energy transmission structures pollutes the surrounding vegetation, resulting in malnutrition and illnesses in goats, leading to declining milk and wool production (Aksüyek, 2022; Ekoloji Birliği, 2020). More recently, firms operating WPPs also initiated plans to build solar power plants (SPP) on the surrounding lands, some of which are home to olive groves (Akdemir, 2023; Bianet, 2023).

In İzmir's Seferihisar township, a relatively more recent conflict is ongoing regarding a proposed geothermal power plant (GPP) that threatens Orhanlı and Yeniköy villages, both known for olive oil production as well as farms practicing certified organic agriculture (Akdemir, 2020; Bianet, 2023; Soysal, 2020; Yeşil Gazete 2020a; 2020b). In 2020, a private firm started operations for the drilling of 14 geothermal wells for prospective geothermal power plants to be built in Orhanlı and Yeniköy, citing an "EIA is not required" decision delivered in 2016. The local people opposed the project, stating that the area where the firm started drilling did not match the lands indicated in the decision to waive the EIA procedure (Yeşil Gazete, 2020a; Soysal, 2020). Orhanlı inhabitants also stress that the olive groves that will be affected by these projects are their main means of subsistence (Yeşil Gazete, 2020a). These fears are partly due to the allegations about the negative impacts of gas emissions and thermal fluid release from a GPP in Kavaklıdere, the village neighbouring Orhanlı, on the fertility of surrounding olive groves (Pişkin, 2020; Yıldırım, 2024). In the meantime, the

energy firms started activities on the site, uprooting some olive trees and damaging the flora, drawing reactions from the local communities (Soysal, 2020).

## Land Dispossession and Territorial Claims in İzmir

In İzmir, the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure is advanced through legal instruments such as urgent expropriation and zoning plan amendments, which are frequently justified as serving the ‘public interest.’ As part of the ‘public interest’ narrative, the government also appeals to discourses of environmental sustainability. For instance, in the inauguration ceremony of a WPP in Karaburun, Taner Yıldız, then-Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, argued that *‘while any intervention in geography inevitably entails changes’, ‘all these are done not at the expense of, but in harmony with the environment’* (T.C. Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanlığı, 2015). Yıldız also underlined their commitment to utilizing wind, solar, and water resources *‘to leave a more beautiful Turkey for our children and our future’* (T.C. Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanlığı, 2015). By deriving legitimacy from these narratives, the use of legal mechanisms facilitates the transfer of control over rural territories from local communities to private energy firms, thereby transforming agrarian lands into sites designated for industrial energy production.

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A central legal instrument in this process is ‘urgent expropriation’ under Article 27 of the *Expropriation Law*. Originally introduced primarily for exceptional national defense needs, this mechanism has been systematically expanded since the early 2000s and now functions as a foundational element of Turkey’s authoritarian neoliberal developmentalist regime (Kutlu, 2021). The mechanism enables the state to seize land rapidly before judicial review can operate effectively (Kutlu, 2021). The eventual judicial review also falls short of adequately addressing the communities’ environmental and social concerns, as it focuses primarily on a materialist analysis of property rights (Kutlu, 2021). Sociolegal research in other countries on expropriation emphasizes that the use of this power disproportionately affects racialized and/or economically vulnerable communities, raising environmental and social justice concerns that contradict the alleged ‘public interest’ goals (Been, 1992-1993; Fraley, 2022; Smit, 2015). Drawing on empirical research about urgent expropriations for the İstanbul-İzmir Highway Project, Akyıldız (2024) documents that this mechanism contributes to the creation of spatial inequalities by favouring industrial land over agricultural land in price assessments. Thus, the mechanism generates spatial segregation, whereby agricultural landowners become further impoverished while industrial landowners accumulate more wealth (Akyıldız, 2024).

In Karaburun, the frequent use of urgent expropriation has enabled the swift transfer of lands in areas such as Yaylaköy and Sarpıncık to wind energy companies (Cumhuriyet, 2018; Ege Postası, 2015). By allowing companies to begin construction while legal challenges remain unresolved, this practice imposes a *fait accompli* on local communities, as the physical

transformation of the landscape often occurs before the final judicial decision on the project's legality. As a result, similar to Akyıldız's (2024) findings, the Turkish state's emphasis on infrastructure projects over agrarian livelihoods once again perpetuates a structural power imbalance that disadvantages smallholder farmers in favour of industrial energy interests.

In addition to targeting titled lands, the WPP projects in Karaburun also impact the access of villagers to state-owned lands that were previously open to activities such as goat herding (Özçam, 2019). Communities also allege that the noise pollution stemming from wind turbines impacts their health and quality of life, since some of the turbines are located close to villages (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021).

A review of news reports on environmental movements against renewable energy projects in Turkey's İzmir province also reveals narratives about attachment to place and preservation of a way of life and nature. One of the Yaylaköy village inhabitants opposing WPP projects surrounding the village states that "*we inherited this village from our ancestors*" (Karadağ, 2019). In its statement regarding a proposed SPP project that will affect pastures, Karaburun Urban Council argues that "*As Karaburun Peninsula inhabitants, we are defending our life space and preserving our land*" (Kızık, 2024). In an interview with the press, an Orhanlı inhabitant opposing GPP projects says, "*We do not want them to destroy our nature, pine trees, and forests*" (Yıldırım, 2024). Orhanlı Village Culture, Youth and Sports Club Association chair Hasan Tahsin Akçıl states that "*For the future of our children, we will keep on struggling against all geothermal power plant projects in this valley, which is our living space*" (Bianet, 2021).

In 2020, the then-chair of the Orhanlı Village Culture, Youth and Sports Club Association, Yaşar Buyruk stated that:

*Our village have been pursuing a life through [agrarian] production. We are producing food here, which is more valuable than the electricity that will be generated by the geothermal power plant (Magma Dergisi, 2020).*

Buyruk also said that "*not only our but also the right to life of wolves, birds, all living beings depend on our struggle*" (Magma Dergisi, 2020). Thus, the villagers' narratives contain elements regarding the preservation of a way of life and the rights of nature.

In addition to the narratives on the right to life, preservation of living spaces, and rights of nature, the communities also use the right to property in their attempts to halt the energy companies' activities modifying the landscapes. For instance, villagers of Orhanlı enclosed their privately owned lands with fences when the energy company attempted to build roads across these to access geothermal drilling sites (Yeşil Gazete, 2020b). The villagers also planted trees in response to the uprooting of trees in their lands by the energy company (K2 Haber, 2020).

### ***Legal Mobilizations in İzmir: Counter-Arguments and Strategies***

Legal mobilizations in İzmir constitute a significant form of resistance to the state-driven ‘green’ developmentalist agenda. Although the legal framework enables dispossession through centralized decision-making, it simultaneously provides an **ambivalent arena in which** affected communities and their allies contest the technical and discursive legitimacy of renewable energy projects. Through environmental litigation and engagement with national and international regulatory standards, these actors turn legal procedures into platforms to defend their ‘life spaces’ and challenge the state’s restrictive interpretation of ‘public interest’.

According to the Rights and Research Association’s report on legal struggles against wind power plants, most lawsuits against wind power plants in Karaburun consist of those demanding the annulment of EIA approvals (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). The text of the By-law on EIA prior to the 2022 amendments listed wind farms over the capacity of 50 MW under Annex I, while listing those with 10-50 MW capacity under Annex II<sup>2</sup>. Thus, wind turbine installations or expansions below 10 MW were not required to undergo an EIA process. In contrast, those with a scale between 10 and 50 MW would only undergo one at the discretion of authorities. In the absence of an EIA procedure, impacted communities could not become aware of the proposed projects until the construction stage, as no public participation and information meeting was not held. This meant that the communities and lawyers needed to appeal against “EIA not required” decisions by arguing that the authorities should consider the cumulative impact of the project along with other existing or proposed projects instead of focusing on an individual project, when assessing the thresholds in the By-Law on EIA (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). In 2022, a new By-Law was issued, requiring EIA for all HPPs, WPPs, and GPPs by listing them under Annex I. The 2022 By-Law listed SPPs covering a 20-hectare or larger area or having an installed capacity over 10 MW under Annex I. SPPs covering an area greater than 2 hectares or having an installed capacity over 1 MW were listed under Annex II, while solar installations on rooftops and facades were exempted from both Annexes. However, in 2025, the By-Law was amended to relax the EIA requirements on small-scale onshore WPPs and SPPs. Accordingly, HPPs, offshore WPPs, onshore WPPs with 15 or more turbines, GPPs, and SPPs covering a 25-hectare or larger area were listed under Annex I. Onshore WPPs having 1-15 turbines and SPPs covering a 7,5-hectare or larger area were listed under Annex II.

There are news reports on communities in Karaburun pursuing a strategy of blocking public participation and information meetings (Kizik, 2024). These attempts unfold in the form of protests and press statements held in front of the proposed meeting venues. Thus, while the communities prevent the meeting from taking place, they also use it as an opportunity to communicate their concerns and demands. In environmental lawsuits on EIA approvals or zoning plan amendments, it is common for the judges to conduct an on-site inspection before

delivering the ruling to better identify the facts of the case. Communities and environmental activists use this as an opportunity to be more visible and to voice their concerns.

Another mobilization strategy against the WPPs is Karaburun Urban Council's challenge against the emission reduction certification of a WPP project near Karaburun's Yaylakoy village. According to Rights and Research Association's report, the energy company had applied to the carbon certification entity Gold Standard Foundation<sup>3</sup> to obtain a carbon certificate for its WPP project and trade the carbon credits in voluntary carbon markets (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). The application relied on an environmental and social impact report prepared by a private consultancy firm in 2009, which included pledges to address the project's potential impacts. Subsequently, the Karaburun Urban Council sent written communications to both the Gold Standard Foundation's headquarters in Geneva and its office in Turkey about the non-fulfillment of pledges on the environmental and social impacts of the project. After investigating how the project was implemented, the Foundation found that the company's conduct involved potential violations of Gold Standard Principles and declared that it removed the project from Gold Standard records in 2015. Upon the appeal of the energy firm, the Foundation made an on-site inquiry, accompanied by an independent external expert and identified that the firm had provided inaccurate information about the proximity of turbines to settlements, which are, in fact, closer to Yaylaköy village than previously declared (Haklar ve Araştırmalar Derneği, 2021). The whole process is an interesting demonstration of how the Gold Standard Foundation, a non-state entity, assumes state-like functions in regulating the conduct of a private energy company, receiving community complaints and reaching verdicts over them, and even deploying a fact-finding mission to further investigate the issue upon the company's objection.

Legal mobilization in Seferihisar's Orhanlı village adds a further dimension to the role of law as a site for negotiating expert knowledge. In the litigation regarding Seferihisar's Orhanlı village, legal arguments have moved beyond individual land disputes to challenge the overall ecological impact of integrated energy projects and geothermal drilling wells. The İzmir 3rd Administrative Court's annulment of 'EIA not required' decisions was based on expert reports indicating that geothermal drilling activities would risk polluting groundwater, soil, and crops (Bianet, 2021; Yıldırım, 2024). These legal victories demonstrate that environmental litigation serves as a forum in which local communities, supported by NGOs such as Nature Association (*Doğa Derneği*), compel the judiciary to adopt a more comprehensive ecosystem approach rather than the state's narrow, project-specific definition of public interest. However, the persistent failure to enforce these judicial decisions and the continued construction despite stay-of- execution orders, highlight the significant limitations of environmental litigation in contexts where administrative compliance is not guaranteed.

## **Non-Enforcement of Environmental Regulations and Suppression of Ecological Dissent in İzmir**

The news reports on environmental struggles in Orhanlı and Karaburun contain allegations of weak enforcement of environmental regulations. While local communities demand the implementation of environmental regulations and court rulings, law enforcement frequently intervenes to ensure the continuity of projects, effectively criminalizing ecological dissent and shielding corporate interests from local resistance. For instance, a villager opposing a proposed GPP in Orhanlı states that the gendarmerie officers acts ‘act like the representatives of the energy firm’, rejecting to intervene with the construction activities regardless of complaints of villagers arguing that the firm lacks a permit to carry on operations (Akdemir, 2020). Another news report indicates that villagers of Orhanlı filed a criminal complaint against the company undertaking the geothermal power plant project for uprooting olive trees, despite İzmir 3rd Administrative Court’s stay of execution order regarding the project (Bianet, 2021) and attempting to open a road through privately owned lands to access the project site (Bianet, 2022). The Karaburun Urban Council filed a criminal complaint about a SPP project, alleging that the construction started without an EIA approval from the Ministry of Environment and citing the ecological damages due to the clearing of trees and vegetation for installing the solar panels (Yeşil Gazete, 2020c).

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News reports on environmental conflicts in Orhanlı and Karaburun also reveal instances of law enforcement intervention against environmental activists. For instance, in Orhanlı village, the gendarmerie prevented a protest march of villagers against the proposed GPP (SolHaber, 2020). In Karaburun, government bureaucrats and energy firm representatives arrived at a public participation and information meeting along with the gendarmerie in anticipation of the protests against a proposed wind power plant (Kızık, 2024). At another public participation and information meeting, gendarmerie forces intervened in a protest held by the villagers and activists, during which a member of parliament from the main opposition party barely avoided being assaulted by an officer (Sözcü, 2015). Thus, while courts and EIA processes provide spaces for legal challenge, the project sites themselves are managed through a logic of security that favours energy generation over local opposition.

## **Discussion**

The findings from İzmir indicate that Turkey’s green growth model challenges the conventional neoliberal narrative of state withdrawal or the simple delegation of authority to private actors. Rather than retreating, the Turkish state remains actively engaged, utilizing its centralized legal power through zoning amendments and urgent expropriations to orchestrate energy initiatives under the guise of ‘public interest.’ This state-led approach transforms law into a strategic instrument for a developmentalist agenda, positioning renewable energy projects within a

broader authoritarian-neoliberal extractive regime. By prioritizing electricity generation over centuries-old agrarian livelihoods, the Turkish state enables dispossession under the guise of legality.

Nevertheless, the cases of Karaburun and Seferihisar demonstrate that this ‘legal enclosure’ is never absolute. While the state employs discursive frameworks to legitimize land appropriation, affected communities and their allies in İzmir have re-politicized these legal arenas. By challenging EIA processes and engaging with international non-state regulatory bodies such as the Gold Standard Foundation, these actors reclaim their life spaces and contest the state’s monopoly over the definition of ‘public interest’ and ‘environmental sustainability.’ In this context, law remains a site of ongoing negotiation and an ambivalent tool. The İzmir cases demonstrate that law serves not only as a passive framework for these conflicts but also as the infrastructure through which dispossession is formalized under claims of ‘public interest.’ However, the legal victories and collective actions in Karaburun and Orhanlı indicate that affected communities can also appropriate this legal framework as a strategic, though limited, means of defence.

The İzmir case exemplifies the emergence of ‘green sacrifice zones,’ where the ‘Decarbonization Consensus’ is implemented through the intensive occupation of rural territories. In Karaburun, the high concentration of wind power projects significantly restricts traditional grazing practices, while in Orhanlı, geothermal development poses a substantial threat to the continuity of olive-based agrarian livelihoods. These patterns demonstrate that green grabbing in Turkey constitutes a fundamental transformation of rural space and legal frameworks, rather than a secondary effect of energy transition. By examining the institutional and discursive foundations of this transition, this study lays the basis for future fieldwork to document the lived experiences and long-term consequences of these socio-legal conflicts.

## Conclusion

The imperative to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions has accelerated the transition to renewable energy. Turkey has also joined this global trend over the last two decades. However, this rapid expansion has often led to environmental justice conflicts due to the extensive rural land required for renewable projects. Local communities often feel unfairly displaced or believe their resources are being harmed to support urban energy use. This has sparked protests against hydropower, wind, solar, and geothermal projects, driven by issues such as green grabbing and the destruction of farmland.

As an interdisciplinary field that looks at the connections between law and social changes, sociolegal studies provide useful insights into the ecological conflicts linked to green grabs. Through a sociolegal perspective, this paper demonstrates how the Turkish state strategically employs legal instruments, including zoning amendments, “public interest” declarations, and financial incentives to facilitate rural land appropriation for private energy companies. In

contrast to neoliberal models that emphasize state withdrawal, the Turkish context reveals an authoritarian neoliberalism in which the state actively intervenes to support the market by orchestrating land-use changes and suppressing dissent.

A sociolegal lens also demonstrates the potential and limitations of law as a tool of resistance in ecological struggles in İzmir. The EIA process and environmental litigation offer platforms to communities and their allies to articulate their concerns in rights-based language. These processes also allow their demands to reach the wider public. The forms of expert knowledge involved in the legitimization of renewable energy projects also constitute avenues for counterarguments. The communications of the environmental initiatives in Karaburun with the Gold Standard Foundation constitute a novel form of mobilization, where regulations of non-state entities become a medium of contestation over environmental justice concerns. However, the struggles in İzmir also demonstrate the limitations of legal mobilization due to the non-enforcement of court judgments and the use of law enforcement to suppress ecological dissent.

Ultimately, İzmir's experience as a "green sacrifice zone" demonstrates that the energy transition involves not only a technological shift, but also the redistribution of power and territory. The conflict in İzmir reveals a profound discursive struggle over the meaning of 'the future' and 'environmental sustainability.' While the state utilizes the language of sustainability and global climate urgency to legitimize the enclosure of rural commons, local communities reclaim these very same tropes to defend their 'life spaces.' Although this article maps the legal and discursive infrastructure of these conflicts through desk research, additional research is required to document the long-term lived experiences of affected communities. Beyond litigation, future studies should examine how legal mobilizations influence the broader politics of energy transition in Turkey and in other contexts.

- 1 *The Renewable Energy Law* introduced a feed-in-tariff mechanism called the Renewable Energy Sources Promotion Mechanism (YEKDEM, *Yenilenebilir Enerji Kaynakları Destekleme Mekanizması*). YEKDEM involves the payment of a fixed fee for electricity generated from renewable energy plants to the private energy firms that operate those. Following the introduction of this mechanism, the share of renewable sources in Turkey's energy mix doubled in the 2005-2020 period (Artantas, 2023, pp. 181-183).
- 2 According to Turkey's By-Law on EIA, project developers must submit a project summary document to the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change or a local directorate of the Ministry operating under a provincial governorship. Upon receipt of the document, the Ministry or the Governorship identifies if the project requires an EIA process based on the classifications under the annexes of the By-Law on EIA. Annex I of the By-Law consists of projects requiring an EIA procedure. In contrast, projects listed under Annex II only require an EIA in case of a determination of the Governorship to that point. If the project does not fall under either of the Annexes, the Governorship could directly deliver an "EIA not required" decision (Güneş, 2020).
- 3 Gold Standard Foundation is a Swiss-based foundation established in 2003 by the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) and a group of other international environmental and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Foundation indicates its goal as addressing the concerns about the reliability of carbon markets by building credible standards and offering certifications regarding carbon emission reduction projects (Gold Standard, 2024a; 2024b). According to the Foundation's own data, they have certified 3,464 projects in over 100 countries, which they claim cumulatively reduced or removed 371 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (Gold Standard, 2024c).

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