

RELOCATION WITHOUT RIGHTS IN TURKEY: THE IMPACT OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION ON BAĞLARBAŞI'S ROMANI RESIDENTS



CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

Copyright: ©European Roma Rights Centre, Romani Godi, December 2025

Please see www.errc.org/permissions for more information about using, sharing, and citing this and other ERRC materials

Author: **Sergen Gül**

Editor: **Bernard Rorke**

Field Visits: **Fatoş Kaytan, Gökten Yıldırım, Sergen Gül, Serkan Baysak, Sevinç Koçak, Zozan Vargün**

Graphic Design: **Sophio Datishvili**

Layout: **Hannah Crane**

Cover image: ©ERRC 2025

This report is published in English as an adapted translation of the Romani Godi report for the ERRC: *‘Bağlarbaşı mahallesinde kentsel dönüşümün ilk aşamaları: Yıkım, Değişim ve Sosyal Kaygılar’*.

The ERRC would like to acknowledge Romani Godi for the time and effort they have generously given to both the Turkish language version of this report and this English version.

Address: Avenue de Cortenbergh 71, 4th floor, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

E-mail: office@errc.org

SUPPORT THE ERRC

The European Roma Rights Centre is dependent upon the generosity of individual donors for its continued existence. Please join in enabling its future with a contribution. Gifts of all sizes are welcome and can be made via PAYPAL on the ERRC website (www.errc.org, click on the Donate button at the top right of the home page) or bank transfer to the ERRC account:

Bank account holder: **EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE**

Bank name: **KBC BRUSSELS**

IBAN: **BE70 7360 5272 5325**

SWIFT code: **KREDBEBB**

CONTENTS

PREFACE	4
INTRODUCTION	7
THE RIGHTS TO HOUSING: INTERNATIONAL & NATIONAL CONTEXTS	9
Forced Evictions & Human Rights	11
Urban Transformation & Related Legal Regulations in Turkey	12
Urban Transformation & Slum Redevelopment in Romani Neighbourhoods	13
AN URBAN TRANSFORMATION STORY: YALOVA BAĞLARBAŞI NEIGHBOURHOOD	16
History & Overview of Bağlarbaşı Romani Neighbourhood	16
Ethnic-Spatial Perceptions & Socioeconomic Life	16
Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood in the Media Before Urban Transformation	17
Project Scope & Property Ownership	17
Planning Approach	18
Geological Structure and Seismic Conditions	18
METHODOLOGY	20
Study Aim	20
Research Design and Sampling Selection	20
Data Collection Methods	20
Data Analysis and Interpretation	20
Limitations of the Study	20
FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS (17–18 DECEMBER 2023)	21
Ongoing Debates on the Urban Transformation in Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood	23
The Reality of Urban Transformation for ‘Relocated’ Residents	23
Living in a Pre-Fab: The People’s Perspectives	26
Word from the Municipality: “ <i>A Model Urban Transformation in Turkey</i> ”	27
The Verdict on the Municipality’s Position	28
Meetings with Civil Society Actors	29
CONCLUSION	30
RECOMMENDATIONS	31
APPENDIX	33

PREFACE

The devastating Marmara Earthquakes – which hit Turkey on 17 August 1999, killing 17,479 people – provided the major impetus for subsequent rafts of legislation to construct a regulatory framework for urban renewal. Because most of the casualties in the 7.4-magnitude quake resulted from the collapse of residential buildings, there followed a huge public outcry against shoddy private contractors in the construction sector, and public officials who had refused to enforce building codes regarding earthquake-resistant designs.¹

In the 2000s the legal concept of ‘urban transformation’ emerged, increasingly mentioned in the same breath as ‘disaster risk’. Among the regulations which informed such transformations, including the renewal of dilapidated buildings, was the ‘Municipal Law (2005)’ number 5393, which provided the legal basis for local administrations to carry out urban transformation practices; Law No. 5366 on the ‘Conservation by Renovation and Use by Renewal of Dilapidated Historical and Cultural Immovable Properties’ (2005); and Law 6306 on ‘Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk’ aimed to increase the resilience of cities against earthquake disasters.²

While such new laws and regulations sought to determine the legal and institutional framework of urban renewal, according to Zeynep Gunay, *“the large-scale property-led renewal schemes, which have been employed as an evolving model in resolving the urbanisation problem, are turned into the instruments of ‘urbicide’ in Istanbul as a political ‘evolving’ model of urban destruction.”* This has led to the transformation of squatter settlements, deprived urban areas, and historic inner-city neighbourhoods, as well as waterfronts, public spaces, and natural protection sites, into *“giant construction zones of economic rent and land speculation.”*³

The first demolitions under Law No. 5366 were carried out in the historic Romani neighbourhood of Sulukule, known as the Neslişah and Hatice Sultan neighbourhoods.

The rationale behind ‘urban renewal’ – to replace existing housing stock with purportedly more earthquake-resistant construction – resulted in the disintegration of an historical community, its dispersal in a manner that deprived members of social networks, solidarity, and the means to earn a living. In December 2007 the ERRC, the Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly (hCa), and the Edirne Association for Research of Romani Culture and Solidarity (EDROM) initiated a court case aiming to cancel this urban renovation project targeting the oldest Romani neighbourhood in Europe.⁴

However, the ruling from the Istanbul court on 12 June 2012 came too late to save Sulukule. The court established that the municipality’s renovation project was “not in the public interest”, and was in violation of laws protecting immovable historic and cultural properties. By the time the court had issued its ruling, all that remained of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants was one Romani-owned, wooden Ottoman house that was preserved on historic grounds, and *“for its thousands of former inhabitants, relocated many miles away or living in the ruins of the settlement, the ruling was of cold comfort.”* The demolition of the neighbourhood went ahead in February 2010 despite an international campaign to ensure democratic consultation with the residents.

As the authors described it, *“the crumbling Ottoman wooden tenements were bulldozed as crowds of Romani people watched, to be replaced with neo-Ottoman, two-storey villas complete with parking for every household. A shopping mall and sports centre complemented this gentrification and the much-promised culture centre for the Romani people who used to live there never materialized.”*

1 Britannica, *Izmit earthquake of 1999*. Available [here](#).

2 GFDRR, *Global Lessons Learned for Urban Resilience and Regeneration Projects: Informing Turkey’s Urban Transformation Process*. 30 June 2021. Available [here](#).

3 Zeynep Gunay, ‘Renewal Agenda in Istanbul: Urbanisation vs Urbicide’, *International Journal of Architecture and Planning*, Vol. 3 (1), pp 95-108, 2015. Available [here](#).

4 Hacer Foggo, *The Sulukule Affair: Roma against Expropriation*. *Roma Rights Quarterly*, Number 4, 2007. ERRC Available [here](#).

“many of whom moved back to live in shanties in the newly renamed 'Karagümrük' neighbourhood, on the ruins of their former homes.”

The alternative for a few of the 3,000 residents was the newly-built Taşoluk village, located 45km outside of Istanbul, where families of seven were offered 50m² flats. The village had no hospital, no school, and no regular transport to the city. The rent for these apartments was too high for the former residents of Sulukule, *“many of whom moved back to live in shanties in the newly renamed “Karagümrük” neighbourhood, on the ruins of their former homes.”*⁵

This process of urban renewal took root across the country, with similar consequences for displaced tenants, growing disputes over gentrification, property speculation and human rights abuses; and as a consequence, the public perception of urban transformation policies soured. In various parts of Istanbul, particularly in neighbourhoods like Küçükbakkalköy and Sarıgöl, similar urban renewal processes took place, resulting in the displacement of Romani communities, and the relocation of entire neighbourhoods to the outskirts of the city. Between 2006 and 2013, as a result of urban transformation projects promoted as social initiatives, more than 10,000 Romani people were displaced in cities such as Istanbul, Bursa, Izmir, Sakarya, and Samsun.⁶

In general, these projects, which were mostly designed at desks without active and meaningful participation, have failed to adequately consider the specific needs of Romani communities, leading to the destruction of their social and spatial memory. In this context, urban renewal projects have deviated from their intended purpose, making Romani communities more vulnerable instead of strengthening their built environment.

According to Hacer Foggo, in addition to the damaging, dispersing impacts on historical communities, matters of resettlement and compensation are rife with further problems: *“many families who are relocated receive compensation only for the land to which they hold title of property, not for the houses on them, which are deemed as illegal construction. This deprives them of the choice to return as home buyers to the new developments emerging in their old neighbourhoods.”*

Families who have been provided with alternative accommodation find themselves relocated to remote outskirts, isolated from their communities and sources of income. Their plight is further aggravated because, as Foggo says, *“resettlement is mostly done without the necessary groundwork and provision of social services, so Roma often face greater suffering in their new settlement areas.”*⁷

While planning, as a participatory, transparent, and sustainable approach, is a declining model of practice in Turkey, there is an emergence of uncontrolled power in the governance of the built environment bypassing planning. The over-centralised structure of urban renewal interventions prevents the dynamics of local governance and limits transparency of process through the elimination of independent control mechanisms through the empowerment of new actors.

“resettlement is mostly done without the necessary groundwork and provision of social services, so Roma often face greater suffering in their new settlement areas.”

5 Martin Demirovski & Adrian Marsh, To Start Roma Integration, Stop Roma Evictions, *Open Society Voices* 10 July 2012. Available [here](#).

6 Agos, 'Bursa Valiliği: Romanlar uyuşturucu ticareti ve hırsızlıkla geçiniyor', 25 September 2013. Available [here](#).

7 Hacer Foggo, *Inclusive development for Roma: Top-down and bottom-up*. Local Development for Inclusion, UNDP Bratislava. Available [here](#).

This report focuses on the findings of three separate monitoring visits conducted in the Bağlarbaşı Romani neighbourhood in Yalova. During the field visits, the impacts of the early stages of the urban transformation project on housing rights were assessed in detail, and findings and recommendations were presented accordingly. The observations in this report reflect the situation between December 17-18, 2023, March 29-30, and June 7, 2024; however, it does not provide an assessment of any potential improvements or deteriorations in the project's future stages.

Contrary to past negative experiences, as Romani Godi, we hope that this report and similar civil society efforts will contribute to establishing an exemplary urban transformation process in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood. We also express our hope that Yalova Municipality and the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change will successfully complete the Bağlarbaşı urban

transformation process as a model initiative. We affirm that we will continue to monitor the process and will be pleased to provide support whenever needed.

This report is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives due to urban transformation, urban renewal, and slum redevelopment projects: to Hüseyin Gani and baby Zeynep, who froze to death in a tent; to Aydoğan Dalkoparan, who fought for his life on a respiratory device in the streets during the demolitions in Kağıthane; and to Yüksel Dum, who lost his home in the Küçükbakkalköy demolitions and passed away in his shack while continuing his legal struggle.

Additionally, it is dedicated to the soul of poet and writer Cemil Akmaca, who resisted the demolition of Yahya Kemal Roma Neighbourhood through his poetry. With deep longing and love.

To Baby Zeynep

*Maybe I won't see it,
But you will, my little one.
Beneath the nylon tent,
Your tiny body wrapped in a blanket,
Your little fingers, turning purple from the cold -
Hold on a little longer, don't freeze.*

*Believe me, you will see it, my little one.
One day, you will have a home,
A single-story house with a garden.
A park in front of your door,
And a swing made of rope.
Surrounded by many Romani friends.
You will live with your own traditions.*

Cemil Akmaca

INTRODUCTION

The forced and free movements of Romani communities have historically been attributed to their 'nomadic lifestyles' across various geographies, and the physical presence of Roma has long been negatively associated with spatial devaluation. During the Ottoman Empire it is well-documented that nomadic Roma were labelled with terms such as *ehl-i fesâd* (people of corruption), *fisk-u fücûr* (immoral and sinful), and *kavm-i şenâat* (a nation of disgrace), and Roma were subjected to various public order regulations aimed at controlling them. Moreover, the state's inability to effectively tax these itinerant and nomadic groups not only marked them as a public order problem, but also stigmatised them as 'vagabond communities' that did not contribute to state revenues.⁸ A similar approach was observed in the Byzantine Empire, where Romani groups such as those in Sulukule, were forced to live outside the city's walls in areas considered low-value and unsafe. This historical backdrop provides a crucial framework for understanding the spatial and social marginalisation of Romani communities and the exclusionary dynamics shaped by various political agendas.

Over time, Romani settlements, originally located on the peripheries of cities, became integrated into urban centres due to urban expansion, industrialisation, and population growth. However, instead of becoming fully incorporated into the city, these urban Roma spaces remained marked by economic and spatial inequalities, characterised by limited access to public services and exclusion from urban rights. Similar to French suburbanisation and American ghettoisation, Romani neighbourhoods came to be portrayed as the 'other' city spaces of illegal activity, crime, and urban decay.⁹ As these spaces gained value over time, the desire to shift power in favour of the elite led to the creation of a criminalised spatial identity, making Romani neighbourhoods prime targets for unjust urban

transformation projects. Instead of strengthening the built environment of Romani communities in

their original locations and preserving their spatial memory as an integral part of urban diversity, new mass housing projects, often designed exclusively for Romani people, were developed in the remote outskirts of cities.

Similar patterns of segregation and Roma exclusion are to be found across Europe. In its 2021 Roma survey, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), found that across 10 EU countries, more than half of Romani households (52%) experience acute housing deprivation, approximately three times as many as among the general population across the EU (17%). One in five Roma lived in households without indoor tap water in 2021, more than 15 times higher than among the EU-27 general population (1.5%).¹⁰

In Turkey, a significant portion of the Romani population lives in informal settlements (*gecekondu*s) or impoverished neighbourhoods that are at risk due to urban transformation projects. The housing conditions in these neighbourhoods leave residents exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of adverse weather conditions and inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). In some areas, Romani communities are forced to meet their housing needs through makeshift shelters or tents.

Many Romani households rely on stoves for heating and experience fuel and energy poverty, further exacerbating living conditions. Additionally, infrastructure deficiencies remain a major challenge in these communities.¹¹ Another striking issue is the overcrowding of households. According to a 2023 study conducted by Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 54.5% of Romani families live in households with four or more

- 8 Gürboğa, Nurşen. 2016. "Türk-Yunan Nüfus Mübadelesi ve Devletin Mübadil Romanlara İlişkin Söylem ve Politikaları." *Yakın Doğu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, April 2016. Accessed May 30, 2023. Available [here](#).
- 9 Gezici, Zühal, Seren Gül, Zozan Vargün, ve Gökten Yıldırım. 2024. Roman Toplulukların Adalet Erişimi ve Karşılaştıkları Sorunlar. *Romani Godi*. Available [here](#).
- 10 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Roma survey 2021: Roma in 10 European countries: main results*, Vienna 2023. Available [here](#). Uzpeder, Ebru, Seren Gül, and Gökten Yıldırım. 2023. *COVID-19 Pandemisinden Çıkış Sürecinde Türkiye'de Romanlar Raporu*. Yayınlayan: Roman Hafıza Çalışmaları Derneği (Romani Godi). Accessed November 27, 2024. Available [here](#).
- 11 Uzpeder, Ebru, Seren Gül, and Gökten Yıldırım. 2023. *COVID-19 Pandemisinden Çıkış Sürecinde Türkiye'de Romanlar Raporu*. Yayınlayan: Roman Hafıza Çalışmaları Derneği (Romani Godi). Accessed November 27, 2024. Available [here](#).

members.¹² Additionally, according to a 2021 study conducted by SODEV, only 10.5% of Romani households live in 3+1 homes (3 bedrooms + 1 full bathroom) homes, while 77.5% reside in 1+1 or 2+1 homes.¹³

All the indicators above highlight the barriers Romani communities face in accessing adequate, safe, and dignified housing opportunities. A violation of the right to housing directly impacts other fundamental rights such as health, education, and employment. Therefore, strengthening the built environment of Romani communities in Turkey is an urgent necessity. However, such efforts must prioritise transparency, active and meaningful participation, and the preservation of the cultural and social fabric, by designing on-site transformation projects rather than displacement-oriented solutions. These activities must adopt a human rights-based approach that prioritises the needs of the communities over financial speculation and profit.

A similar lack of adequate housing and infrastructure deficiencies can be observed in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood in Yalova, where the first urban transformation demolitions took place in early 2023. According to the Master Zoning Plan Report prepared for the urban transformation project, the neighbourhood faces severe infrastructure and superstructure issues. The report also highlights that a significant portion of the housing stock is over 30-years-old, and out of 766 housing units deemed in urgent need of renewal, 695 (91%) belong to Romani residents.¹⁴

The provision of temporary prefabricated housing for Roma whose homes were demolished in the first phase of the urban transformation project

implemented in Bağlarbaşı was a positive exception to standard practice. However, the provided prefabricated living spaces were located in a remote and inaccessible area, close to illegal waste disposal sites and livestock farming, which left the Roma disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. Additionally, uncertainties over the project timeline, and the lack of clarity concerning payments due for the new housing units, caused much anxiety for the Romani residents.

The Romani Godi team conducted field visits in the early stages of the urban transformation process in the Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood, Yalova, with a team of experts. During these visits, the team conducted a detailed analysis of the socio-economic and spatial disparities between the original neighbourhood and the prefabricated housing sites. Within the scope of this study, the research team engaged in discussions with municipal officials, as well as consultations with Roma civil society representatives, the Yalova Bar Association's Environmental, Urban, and Urban Transformation Issues Committee, and representatives from the Yalova Chamber of Architects.

The following sections include an overview of national and international legal frameworks on the right to housing, a human rights perspective on forced evictions, the legal framework governing urban transformation in Turkey, as well as a detailed examination of slum redevelopment and urban transformation policies in Romani neighbourhoods. This is followed by observations, analyses, and findings specific to Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood based on the field research conducted by Romani Godi.

12 Romaar.2023."Aile Yapısı." Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü. Erişim tarihi 19 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).

13 SODEV. 2021. Türkiye'de Roman Toplulukları ve Yoksulluk Araştırması Raporu. Erişim tarihi 19 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).

14 Arı Şehircilik, 2021 Yalova ili merkez ilçesi Bağlarbaşı Mahallesi Riskli Alana İlişkin 1/5000 Ölçekli Nazım İmar Planı Değişikliği Açıklama Raporu. Available [here](#).

THE RIGHT TO HOUSING: INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS

In 1948, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that *"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services ..."* The inclusion of housing made it clear that the core principles of human rights set out in the UDHR, *"such as universality, interdependence and indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination"*, fully applied to the right to shelter, entailing both rights and obligations from duty bearers and rights owners.

Article 11 of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, adopted by the United Nations on 16 December 1966, requires state parties to ensure an adequate standard of living for their citizens. The covenant defines the right to an adequate standard of living as including *"adequate food, clothing, housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions"*. This article recognises the right to adequate housing as a critical element in the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights; and the covenant emphasises the responsibility of states to ensure the equal right of all to the enjoyment of these rights, and that they will be exercised without discrimination of any kind.

Article 14/2(h) of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, which entered into force as an international treaty in 1981, specifically addresses the right to housing for women living in rural areas. This article requires state parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas, and to ensure that rural women *"enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation,*

electricity and water supply, transport and communications."

Article 27 of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, adopted on 20 November 1989, and entered into force in 1990, states that every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. This article emphasises the responsibility of both states and parents in ensuring that children have an adequate standard of living. It also highlights that states must implement financial assistance and support programs related to nutrition, clothing, and housing.

Another significant international document protecting the right to housing is the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)**, which was adopted in 1965 and entered into force in 1969. Turkey signed this convention in 2002. Article 5 of the convention explicitly states that the right to housing must be guaranteed to all individuals without discrimination.

The **Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements** was an outcome of Habitat I, convened by the United Nations in 1976 to take stock of the magnitude and consequences of rapid urbanisation. The Vancouver Declaration asserted that *"adequate shelter and services are a basic human right"*, and advanced a set of 64 concrete recommendations for governments so that people might be assured the basic requirements for human habitation – shelter, clean water, sanitation and a decent physical environment, and that *"priority must be given to the needs of the most disadvantaged people."*

“priority must be given to the needs of the most disadvantaged people.”

- 15 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Adopted 10 December 1948. Available [here](#).
- 16 United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights*. Adopted 16 December 1966. Available [here](#).
- 17 UN Women, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Adopted 18 December 1979. Available [here](#).
- 18 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Adopted 20 November 1989. Available [here](#).
- 19 United Nations, *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Adopted 21 December 1965. Available [here](#).
- 20 UN-Habitat, *United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver* 31 May-11 June 1976. Press release 11 June 1976. Available [here](#).

Following the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996, the Istanbul Declaration reaffirmed states' commitment *"to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as provided for in international instruments"*, and in a context of rapidly expanding urbanization, endorsed the universal goals of ensuring adequate shelter for all and making human settlements safer, healthier and more liveable, equitable, sustainable and productive; with special attention paid to the needs and contributions of women and vulnerable social groups *"whose quality of life and participation in development have been hampered by exclusion and inequality, affecting the poor in general."*²¹

According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the human right to adequate housing – the enjoyment of which must not be subject to any form of discrimination – *"is of*

central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights". The inherent dignity of being human is directly linked to "access to adequate housing," emphasising that having a home is not merely about physical shelter but also about living in a safe, peaceful, and dignified environment. Specifically, Paragraph 8 outlines that adequate housing must include legal security of tenure, accessibility to services, availability of infrastructure, affordability, cultural adequacy, and habitability: *"in terms of providing the inhabitants with adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease vectors."* The Committee also stressed that States parties must give priority and special consideration to social groups living in unfavourable conditions, and that legislation should not be designed to *"benefit already advantaged social groups at the expense of others."*²²

having a home is not merely about physical shelter but also about living in a safe, peaceful, and dignified environment.

Article 31 of the Revised European Social Charter obliges Council of Europe member states to ensure effective exercise of the right to housing, and take measures designed to promote access to housing that is affordable and of an adequate standard, and to prevent and reduce homelessness with a view to its elimination.²³ As a right of progressive implementation, states parties must take steps to operationalise the right to housing within a reasonable timeframe and with measurable progress. As outlined in Lukas (2021) according to the Committee's case law, the notion of adequate housing *"must be defined in national law and ought to meet the following criteria:*

- it must be safe from a sanitary and health point of view, more specifically, it possesses all basic amenities, such as water, heating, waste disposal, sanitation facilities, electricity, etc. and specific dangers such as the presence of lead or asbestos are under control;*

- not overcrowded, the size must be suitable in light of the number of persons and the composition of the household in residence;*
- with secure tenure supported by the law."*²⁴

The case of *Yordanova and Others v. Bulgaria* which was decided before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 2012 was of particular significance concerning the right to housing, and the need to take account of the historical, cultural, and economic realities of Romani communities. About 23 Romani families from the Sofia neighbourhood of Batalova Vodenitsa challenged the authorities' decision to remove them from their homes in 2006. The applicants maintained that after decades living there, they had rights under Article 8 – the right to respect for one's private and family life, and home – and the removal order depriving them of their homes was a most extreme form of interference with this right. They asserted that the authorities aim to clear the Romani 'ghetto' so the land could be sold to a private developer was illegitimate.

21 UN-Habitat, *Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements*. Adopted in 1996. Available [here](#).

22 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) *General Comment No. 4: The Right to Adequate Housing (Art. 11 (1) of the Covenant)*. Adopted 13 December 1991. Available [here](#).

23 Council of Europe, European Treaty Series 163, *European Social Charter (Revised)*. Strasbourg, 3 May 1996. Available [here](#).

24 Karin Lukas, *The Revised European Social Charter*, Article 31: The Right to Housing, pp. 328–338, Elgar Online 2021. Available [here](#).

The court held that as the case concerned the expulsion of the applicants as part of a community of several hundred persons with repercussions on their lifestyle, social and family ties, *“it may be considered that the interference would affect not only their ‘homes’, but also their private and family life.”* The Court considered that in view of the long history of undisturbed presence of the applicants’ families and the community they had formed in Batalova Vodenitsa, the principle of proportionality required that due consideration be given to the consequences of their removal and the risk of their becoming homeless. The Court concluded that enforcement of the removal order would violate the applicants’ rights under Article 8 on the grounds that it was issued and reviewed in a manner which did not secure the minimum procedural safeguards against disproportionate interference, but also involved a failure to consider the question of *“necessity in a democratic society”*.²⁵

In Turkey, the right to housing was first addressed in Article 49 of the 1961 Constitution, which stated that the state must take measures to meet the housing needs of low-income and impoverished families. Later, Article 57 of the 1982 Constitution, under the title ‘Right to Housing’, explicitly required the state to take necessary measures to meet housing needs and to support mass housing initiatives.²⁶

Article 56 of the Turkish Constitution addresses the right to a healthy environment, stating that everyone has the right to live in a healthy and balanced environment. This article also establishes

the duty of both the state and citizens to protect and improve the environment. Furthermore, it links environmental rights with the right to housing, demonstrating their direct connection to fundamental rights such as the right to life and the right to health.²⁷

The Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023-2030) and the Phase I Action Plan (2023-2025) in Turkey include commitments to implement housing projects tailored to the living styles and needs of Romani citizens, such as accessibility to transportation and infrastructure services. Furthermore, the action plan outlines additional measures aimed at increasing access to housing services for Romani citizens living in disadvantaged areas and improving their overall housing conditions.²⁸

The right to housing is a fundamental human right that has been secured through international conventions and declarations. This right ensures that individuals can live in conditions that uphold human dignity, and imposes obligations on state parties to take necessary measures to guarantee adequate housing for all without discrimination, giving priority and special consideration to disadvantaged social groups. The right to housing is defined as integral to the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights; and, more than physical shelter, having a home is about living in a safe, peaceful, and dignified environment.

FORCED EVICTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Forced eviction is defined in General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) as the removal of individuals from their homes against their will, emphasizing that such evictions constitute human rights violations (CESCR, 1997). Forced evictions often lead to the violation of multiple human rights.

Paragraph 4 of General Comment No. 7 states that these evictions can result in the infringement of the right to life, the right to personal security, and the right to respect for private and family life.²⁹

Paragraph 10 of General Comment No. 7 identifies the groups most vulnerable to forced evictions, including women, children, young people, the elderly, indigenous peoples, and ethnic and other minorities.

25 European Court of Human Rights, *CASE OF YORDANOVA AND OTHERS v. BULGARIA* (Application no. [25446/06](#)) Judgment: Final 24 September 2012. Available [here](#).

26 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti. (1982). Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası. 7 Kasım 1982 tarihinde kabul edilmiştir, 9 Kasım 1982 tarihli Resmî Gazete’de yayımlanarak yürürlüğe girmiştir. Available [here](#).

27 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Health, Constitution of the Republic of Turkey - Article 56. Available [here](#)

28 T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, *Roma Vatandaşlarına Yönelik Strateji Belgesi (2023-2030)* (Ankara: T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, 2022), erişim 27 Kasım 2024. Available [here](#).

29 UNHCR, Refworld, *General Comment No. 7: The right to adequate housing (Art. 11.1): forced evictions*. 20 May 1997. Available [here](#)

Paragraph 13 states that evictions must be conducted with minimal use of force and in consultation with affected groups. Paragraph 14 further emphasizes that such evictions must comply with international human rights law.

Finally, Paragraph 16 highlights that states must provide alternative housing, resettlement, or other suitable solutions to prevent homelessness. The relevant section explicitly states: *"In cases where affected individuals are unable to provide for their own needs, the state concerned must take all appropriate measures within its available resources to ensure alternative housing, resettlement, or access to productive land."*³⁰ As this provision makes clear, in urban transformation and environmental renewal projects that require compulsory evictions, alternative housing must be provided for groups at risk of homelessness. It is important to recognize that this is not just a policy preference but a fundamental human right under international conventions.

Between 2006 and 2013, more than 10,000 Romani individuals were displaced in Turkey as a result of urban transformation, urban renewal,

and slum redevelopment projects. When examined chronologically, in 2006, 650 Romani families in Sulukule (Istanbul), 140 Romani families in Küçükbakkalköy (Ataşehir, Istanbul), and approximately 60 Romani families in Kağıthane (Istanbul) were forcibly evicted from their homes. During the same period, more than 200 families in Kamberler (Bursa) and 20 families in Örnekköy Romani neighbourhood (Izmir) were also displaced.

By 2013, forced evictions had escalated, with more than 600 families in Sarıgöl (Gaziosmanpaşa, Istanbul) losing their homes. In the same year, over 400 Romani families in Gazipaşa neighbourhood (Sapanca, Sakarya) were displaced after their homes were expropriated for extremely low compensation. Additionally, in Samsun, 314 Romani families living in 200 Evler neighbourhood, a housing project built by TOKİ (Turkey's Housing Development Administration), faced eviction threats due to their inability to pay mortgage instalments. Many families received eviction notices, leaving them in fear of losing their homes.³¹

URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND RELATED LEGAL REGULATIONS IN TURKEY

The Squatter Housing Law No. 775, enacted in 1966, aimed to regulate and eliminate informal settlements (*gecekondus*). As a result of post-World War II urbanisation, *gecekondus* emerged in major cities, and this law led to demolitions and forced displacements of these settlements.³² The Mass Housing Law No. 2985, enacted in 1984, established the legal framework for mass housing and regulated the procedures and principles of housing projects.³³ Article 73 of the Municipal Law No. 5393, which came into force in 2005, granted municipalities the authority to carry out urban transformation projects. With this law, urban transformation became a common 'vision and election promise' for many mayors. Additionally, the law enabled the reconstruction and restoration of aging urban areas.³⁴

In the same year, the Law No. 5366 on the Renewal, Protection, and Use of Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets was enacted, aiming to restore and preserve historical and cultural heritage sites.³⁵ However, this law, which was intended to protect historical structures, led to the destruction of spatial memory and cultural heritage in areas such as Tarlabası and Sulukule, while also causing the displacement of low-income residents.³⁶

In 2012, the Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk was enacted to demolish buildings at risk and construct safer structures. However, inconsistencies in risk assessments and human rights violations were reported during its implementation.³⁷

30 *Ibid*

31 Agos (2013). 'Bursa Valiliği: Romanlar uyuşturucu ticareti ve hırsızlıkla geçiniyor', 25 September 2013. Available [here](#).

32 Akkan, B. E., Deniz, M. B., & Ertan, M. (2011). Sosyal dışlanmanın Roman halleri. İstanbul: Sosyal Politika Forumu.

33 Lexpera, 'Law No. 5366 on the Renewal, Protection and Revitalization of Worn-out Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets.' Available [here](#).

34 *Ibid*

35 Avcıoğlu, S. (2016). Tarihi çevrelerde kentsel koruma ve kentsel yenileme eğilimleri: yasal ve yönetsel çerçeve. *İdealkent*, 7 (20), 698-719.

36 Mekânda Adalet, 2020.

Additionally, urgent expropriation, authorised under Article 27 of the Expropriation Law No. 2942, resulted in violations of property rights within urban transformation projects. The urgent expropriation and subsequent demolitions in Sulukule led to the erasure of a 1,000-year-old Romani history.

Twelve years after legal action was first initiated in 2007 to save Sulukule, and seven years after an Istanbul court established that the municipality's original renovation project was 'not in the public interest' and violated laws protecting immovable

historic and cultural properties, in 2019, the 9th Administrative Court of Istanbul determined that the revised project *"was not of a nature that could serve the protection and utilization of Romani culture and the realization of its purposes, and that it was not in the public interest and in accordance with the law..."* Justice delayed was effectively justice denied, and a neighbourhood destroyed, for by then many Romani residents had been displaced, and the cultural fabric and spatial memory of the community had already been irreversibly damaged.³⁸

the cultural fabric and spatial memory of the community had already been irreversibly damaged.

In conclusion, although legal regulations from the Squatter Housing Law No. 775 onward have aimed at urban transformation, their implementation has been marked by serious injustices. Therefore, urban

transformation projects must ensure active and meaningful participation, be conducted transparently, and be implemented within the framework of environmental justice.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND SLUM REDEVELOPMENT IN ROMANI NEIGHBOURHOODS

The first urban transformation project in Turkey was implemented in Sulukule, known as the Neslişah and Hatice Sultan neighbourhoods. Despite the protection guarantees of Law No. 5366, which aimed to safeguard the urban fabric, Sulukule, a 1,000-year-old cultural heritage site of the Romani community under UNESCO protection, was not preserved but instead transformed. Presented as 'the world's most social project', this transformation was completed on the eve of Istanbul's designation as the 2010 European Capital of Culture. However, rather than improving conditions for the Romani residents, the project resulted in their forced displacement and the gentrification (or '*gacolization*') of the Romani space.³⁹

Over the past 18 years, many Romani neighbourhoods located in central areas with high investment potential have become the focus of urban transformation projects. These projects,

driven by the goal of 'de-Romanisation' of city centres, have led to the replacement of historic Romani settlements with new financial centres, as seen in Küçükbakkalköy, or 'luxury housing complexes with pools', as in the case of Sarıgöl's transformation.^{40 41}

Almost all urban transformation projects in Turkey are first decided in partnership with TOKİ (Housing Development Administration), the Ministry, and municipalities, and only afterward are negotiations with local residents initiated. However, these negotiation processes are often manipulated through urgent expropriation decisions, effectively forcing residents into agreements under pressure. In other words, the declaration of disaster-risk areas, and the issuance of urgent expropriation orders, not only prevent active participation in urban transformation processes, but also negatively impact the negotiation phases.

38 Güliden Aydın, A new era in Sulukule! 'A culture was destroyed because of delayed justice' *Hürriyet Pazar*, 22 September 2019. Available [here](#).

39 Mimarizm. "Aarti Planlama: Sulukule Projesi, İstanbul İçin Bir Fırsattır Çünkü Bu, İnsani ve Romantik Bir Projedir." *Mimarizm*, February 5, 2008. Erişim Tarihi: 21 Eylül 2024. Available [here](#).

40 Yayı. "Ev Alamayan Romanlar Sürgün Ediliyor." 5 Nisan 2013. Erişim tarihi: 21 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).

41 Evrensel. "Deprem Değil, Belediye Yıkıyor." *Evrensel*, March 19, 2014. Erişim Tarihi: 21 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).

As seen in the Bursa Kamberler transformation project, Romani residents whose properties were expropriated were compensated with minimal payments, which were directly transferred to their bank accounts without meaningful consultation. This practice raises serious procedural justice violations within the framework of environmental justice regarding urban transformation projects.

New urban transformation project planned in Romani neighbourhoods are often promoted with sensational headlines such as *“A first in Turkey, no one will be victimized, even tenants will become homeowners.”* However, in reality, these projects usually result in the forced displacement of Romani residents, the destruction of existing social networks, and the creation of new hardships rather than fulfilling promises. Instead of providing a safer and more sustainable living environment for Romani communities, these urban transformation projects further deepen their socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities. In other words, rather than improving living conditions, these projects reinforce social exclusion and make Romani communities even more economically, socially, and environmentally vulnerable.

After displacement, Romani individuals face discrimination in the housing rental market, making it difficult for them to secure a home simply because they are Roma.

With urban transformation, Romani communities are pushed out of city centres and, in some cases, relocated to distant TOKİ (Housing Development Administration) mass housing projects. These segregated housing complexes eventually turn into new ghettos. The Roma-majority buildings in such mass housing projects exhibit significant disparities in terms of construction quality, building materials, and environmental cleanliness compared to other TOKİ residences. Much like pre-transformation Romani neighbourhoods, these new settlements also suffer from inadequate access to public services. Furthermore, Romani families relocated to TOKİ housing face high instalment payments and maintenance fees, creating an economic burden.

Additionally, Romani individuals working in informal, daily-wage jobs in city centres struggle to sustain their livelihoods in these distant

To clarify the issue further, before urban transformation projects begin, neighbourhoods classified as depressed areas start facing limited access to public services, and their residents experience systematic discrimination in accessing municipal services. During the urban transformation process, Romani communities are subjected to dispossession and forced displacement, while environmental risks increase due to the accumulation of waste piles, rubble, and the dangers of asbestos exposure.

After displacement, Romani individuals face discrimination in the housing rental market, making it difficult for them to secure a home simply because they are Roma. This results in their exclusion from the real estate market, forcing them to relocate to the urban peripheries, where they live in makeshift shelters, vulnerable to extreme weather conditions such as heat, cold, wind, and rain, often without access to essential utilities like electricity and water. These circumstances indicate that environmental risks are disproportionately concentrated on Romani communities throughout the urban transformation process.

the needs of Romani communities in terms of accessibility and usability. For instance, Romani individuals engaged in recycling work have no storage spaces for their materials, and those working with horse-drawn carts or livestock have no stables or appropriate structures. As a result, these projects worsen Romani communities' economic vulnerability rather than improving their living conditions. In this regard, it can be argued that these urban transformation projects, from an environmental justice and livelihood perspective, systematically disadvantage Romani communities.

During our field visits as Romani Godi, we observed that Romani settlements undergoing urban transformation can be categorised into three distinct groups:

- Areas where urban transformation has **been completed**

42 See, for example, the Samsun 200 Evler neighbourhood.

- Areas where urban transformation is **still ongoing**
- Areas **designated as future** urban transformation **targets**

In all three cases, a common pattern emerges: the needs of the Romani communities living in these areas are disregarded during the planning and implementation of urban transformation projects. The spatial and social memory of Romani communities is overlooked, preventing them from benefiting from these transformation projects.

In summary, over the past 18 years, the majority of urban transformation projects in Romani neighbourhoods have excluded Romani communities from planning and decision-making processes, violating the principle of participatory justice. Furthermore, the lack of consideration for minority groups' specific needs and the absence of adequate consultation and information-sharing, highlight failures in procedural justice. Additionally, the infrastructure deficiencies and environmental burdens in newly-designated resettlement areas indicate violations in the distributional dimension of environmental justice.

- 38 Gülden Aydın, A new era in Sulukule! 'A culture was destroyed because of delayed justice' *Hürriyet Pazar*, 22 September 2019. Available [here](#).
- 39 Mimarizm. "Aarti Planlama: Sulukule Projesi, İstanbul İçin Bir Fırsattır Çünkü Bu, İnsani ve Romantik Bir Projedir." *Mimarizm*, February 5, 2008. Erişim Tarihi: 21 Eylül 2024. Available [here](#).
- 40 Yapı. "Ev Alamayan Romanlar Sürgün Ediliyor." 5 Nisan 2013. Erişim tarihi: 21 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).
- 41 Evrensel. "Deprem Değil, Belediye Yıkıyor." *Evrensel*, March 19, 2014. Erişim Tarihi: 21 Ekim 2024. Available [here](#).

AN URBAN TRANSFORMATION STORY: YALOVA BAĞLARBAŞI NEIGHBOURHOOD

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF BAĞLARBAŞI ROMANI NEIGHBOURHOOD

Yalova's Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood is located in close proximity to the city centre. Specifically, it is situated 850m from Yalova's main bus terminal, 2.8 km from Cumhuriyet Street, the city's busiest avenue, and 3.4 km from the coastal area. Due to the elevation differences in the city, Bağlarbaşı offers a panoramic view of the Marmara Sea, earning it the nickname "the balcony of Yalova." These geographical advantages make the neighbourhood highly desirable in terms of access to urban opportunities and amenities.

A 2024 land-valuation study assessed the land parcels in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood based on factors such as proximity to the coastline, land size, and elevation. The study identified parcels 117, 218, and 219 as the most valuable due to their close proximity to the sea, while parcel 118 was considered the most valuable in terms of elevation. These findings indicate that Bağlarbaşı, where the Romani population is concentrated, has a high land value.

The history of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood dates back approximately 100 years. It is believed that

the neighbourhood was founded by Romani families who migrated from Thessaloniki as part of the population exchange under the Treaty of Lausanne.⁴³ Additionally, some Romani families migrated from Constanța, Bulgaria, while others came from nearby cities such as Istanbul and Bursa. Over time, a combination of internal and external migration has shaped the current ethnic and social structure of the neighbourhood. According to representatives of Roma associations, Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood consists of 517 Romani households, with an estimated population of approximately 3,000 to 3,500 people. On the other hand, Romani community leaders have emphasised that various ethnic groups have historically lived in the neighbourhood, though some have relocated over time. While they confirm that most Romani residents in Bağlarbaşı are homeowners, they also highlight that many property ownership records remain incomplete. For example, although title deeds have been passed down through generations as inheritance, official ownership registration procedures have not been fully completed for some properties.

ETHNIC-SPATIAL PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE

Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood is more than just a place where Romani residents meet their housing needs; it also serves as a crucial space for economic survival, particularly for those engaged in urban-linked informal employment sectors such as recycling (paper, scrap, and waste collection), music, and domestic cleaning services. Among residents, the neighbourhood is informally divided into two sections: the 'lower neighbourhood' and the 'upper neighbourhood'. The lower neighbourhood is primarily inhabited by scrap collectors, while the upper neighbourhood is home to musicians and small business owners. Additionally, the 'Musicians' Coffeehouse', located in the upper part of the neighbourhood, functions as a social space where residents gather, host guests, and interact with one another.

Despite its central location, Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood experiences differentiated access to urban and municipal services compared to other parts of the city. The impact of urban transformation projects has further exacerbated environmental risks, with construction debris left uncleared and demolished or semi-demolished buildings posing safety hazards for local residents.

The neighbourhood is frequently portrayed as a problematic area in terms of urban security and aesthetics, and it is often associated with drug-related police operations in the media. The negative perceptions and ethnic stigmatisation attached to Bağlarbaşı will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

43 Uzpeder, E., Sevasti Danova, Sibel Özçelik, and S. Gökçen. *Biz Buradayız. Türkiye'de Romanlar, Ayrımcı Uygulamalar ve Hak Mücadelesi*. Translated by E. Taboğlu and S. Öney. İstanbul: Mart Matbaacılık, 2008.

BAĞLARBAŞI NEIGHBOURHOOD IN THE MEDIA BEFORE URBAN TRANSFORMATION

In mainstream media, a total of 20 news reports were published under the headline 'operations' related to Yalova Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood between 2014 and 2021. All of these reports focused on drug operations and dawn raids, and in six of them, Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood was explicitly referred to as a "Roma neighbourhood".

The portrayal of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood in the media, where Romani identity is both highlighted and linked to crime, can be considered an example of racial profiling and spatial stigmatisation. This type of representation may desensitise the public to potential human rights violations in the event of an urban transformation project, leading to less resistance against injustices and legitimising the displacement of Romani communities. Such practices have been commonly observed in urban renewal projects targeting Roma neighbourhoods.

To prevent a similar situation in Yalova,

a rights-based approach should be adopted, and strong collaboration between civil society, the municipality, and the ministry should be established. The process of spatial and ethnic labelling in the media has also extended to other areas, reinforcing stigmatising attitudes toward Romani communities in various ways. For example, in an academic study conducted in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood, researchers posed invasive and discriminatory questions to just the Romani residents, such as "Do you perform ghusl (ritual purification)?" "Do you believe in the existence and oneness of Allah?"; and "Do you believe that Hz. Muhammad (pbuh) is a true prophet?"⁴⁴ The survey form distributed to Romani school students to give to their parents to complete provoked an angry reaction from community representatives and parents who claimed that targeting only Roma was discriminatory and carried with it 'an accusation of atheism'. The questions were based on specific assumptions about the religious beliefs and practices of Romani communities, and were seen to further reinforce existing prejudices.⁴⁵

PROJECT SCOPE AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

A 9.89-hectare area within the boundaries of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood in Yalova was declared a "Risk Area" under Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk by a Council of Ministers decision (2013/5366), which was published in the Official Gazette (No. 28793) on October 12, 2013.⁴⁶ The Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation, and Climate Change, through its official letter No. 7623 dated 11 November 2013, authorised Yalova Municipality to oversee negotiations, demolitions, and evacuation processes within the designated risk area.

The 1/5000-scale master zoning plan and the 1/1000-scale implementation zoning plan amendment proposal, submitted to the ministry, were reviewed and approved in accordance with Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk and its relevant regulations.

On 25 January 2023, the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) conducted a tender for the construction of new housing units under the project titled "Yalova Province, Central District, Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood Urban Transformation Project: 717 Housing Units and 19 Shops, including Infrastructure and Environmental Planning." Following this process, the project was transferred to a new contractor.

According to Mustafa Tutuk, the acting mayor of Yalova at the time, 55 property owners applied for the project, had their homes demolished, and were relocated to a container city. In total, 430 property owners were identified in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, according to Yalova Municipality, an agreement rate of over 95% was reportedly reached within the scope of the project.⁴⁷

44 Taşyürek, A. K. (2015). Roman ailesinde çocuğun din eğitimi (Yalova örneği) (Master's thesis, Bursa Uludağ University (Turkey)). Available [here](#).

45 Gazete Vatan, 'Yalova'yı ayağına alacak işler anketi,' 19 December 2012. Available [here](#).

46 Editör, Y. G. 'Yalova'da Dönüşüm Adımları Atılıyor'. Yapıgündem.com | İnşaat Sektörünün Haber Portalı, 16 February 2021. Available [here](#).

47 "Yalova'da Bağlarbaşı Mahallesi'nde Kentsel Dönüşüm Çalışmalarına Başlandı," *CNN Türk*, 8 August 2022, erişim 27 Kasım 2024. Available [here](#).

PLANNING APPROACH

According to the 1/5000-Scale Master Zoning Plan Amendment Explanation Report prepared by Arı Şehircilik, the consulting firm for the project, the rationale for the planning approach is defined as follows:

*"Although the project area is officially within Yalova's planned development zones, it has largely been shaped by unlicensed construction, resulting in a distinct urban fabric that diverges from its surroundings. In addition to unlicensed structures, issues such as the occupation of private and public properties and the irregular development pattern have created significant physical, economic, and social challenges, making the project area substantially different from the surrounding residential zones."*⁴⁸

The report describes Yalova's Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood as the city's 'sediment area' and characterises it as a socially, economically, and physically disadvantaged zone. The visibility of spatial inequalities and segregation is emphasised with phrases such as *"a fabric that diverges from the surrounding area"* and *"along with physical, economic, and social issues, the project area stands out significantly from neighbouring residential areas."*

Moreover, the report highlights that the neighbourhood lacks sufficient recreational,

community areas available to serve the local population. The neighbourhood suffers from serious infrastructure and superstructure deficiencies, with a high concentration of buildings older than 30 years. Out of 766 housing units identified as needing urgent renewal, 695 (90.73%) are owned by Romani residents.

This vulnerable built environment, a product of social and economic inequalities, is a situation commonly observed in marginalised and stigmatised communities. In the academic literature, such situations are linked to covert colonial dynamics, histories of enslavement, and systemic social injustices. It is well-documented that 'sediment areas' such as this one, are more prone to greater destruction and higher mortality during natural disasters.⁴⁹

In summary, according to the Master Zoning Plan Report, prior to the urban transformation process, Romani residents had limited access to municipal services and environmental benefits (such as green spaces, road networks, and infrastructure). As a result, environmental risks became heavily concentrated in this area. This also indicates that the Romani community's pursuit of environmental justice did not begin with the urban transformation process. On the contrary, it underscores the long-standing environmental inequalities that

GEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND SEISMIC CONDITIONS

The coastal strip stretching from Altınova District in the east of Yalova to Armutlu District in the west is expected to experience more intense shaking during potential earthquakes due to the presence of structures built on young alluvial soils. As one moves from the northern coastline towards the southern interior regions, the ground conditions become more stable, and elevations increase, leading to a reduction in the anticipated seismic impacts. Within Yalova's Central District, neighbourhoods such as Fevzi Çakmak, Süleyman Bey, Rüstem Paşa, and Bahçelievler, as well as the

Central Neighbourhood of Çınarcık District, Kuru Town, and Hürriyet Neighbourhood, are considered the most vulnerable areas during a potential major earthquake. This is due to their old, multi-story building stock and high soil amplification values, making them more prone to significant damage.⁵⁰

Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood is considered one of Yalova's most vulnerable areas in the event of a potential earthquake due to its ground dynamics and building stock. According to the geological and geotechnical study report prepared within

48 Arı Şehircilik, 2021 Yalova ili merkez ilçesi Bağlarbaşı Mahallesi Riskli Alana İlişkin 1/5000 Ölçekli Nazım İmar Planı Değişikliği Açıklama Raporu Available [here](#).

49 Pyles, L., Svistova, J., & Ahn, S. (2017). Securitization, racial cleansing, and disaster capitalism: Neoliberal disaster governance in the US Gulf Coast and Haiti. *Critical social policy*, 37(4), 582-603.

50 Afad Yalova İrap Deprem Risk Raporu 2022 'İl Planları'. Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

framework of the urban transformation and development project approved by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation's Spatial Planning Directorate in 2014, the area was classified as a 'Zone with Stabilization Problems Requiring

Measures' and a 'Disaster-Prone Area'. The geotechnical study revealed that the ground consists of various layers, which were identified as follows:

Level 1	Topsoil (vegetative layer)
Level 2	Silty clay with sand
Level 3	Clay
Level 4	Kilic Formation (conglomerate, sandstone, mudstone, and claystone)

Due to the ground's high swelling potential, the report emphasised the need for special engineering measures. This area was declared a disaster-prone zone in both 2007 and 2020, eliminating the necessity for a new geotechnical assessment.⁵¹

area of Çiftlikköy may expose Romani communities to heightened risk in the event of a landslide, potentially increasing casualties and losses. Furthermore, this area is also one of the vulnerable regions in Yalova when it comes to seismic activity.

However, in February 2024, following the initiation of the first phase of urban transformation, ground movement occurred in the upper section of the area (around the Musicians' Coffeehouse), resulting in large fissures along the roadway.⁵²

In conclusion, the safe development and earthquake resilience of Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood in Yalova's Central District necessitate the implementation of special engineering measures. This requirement has been clearly demonstrated by the geological and geotechnical studies conducted in the area. Additionally, the temporary prefabricated housing units located in Çiftlikköy's Sultaniye area are positioned in regions exposed to both landslide and earthquake risks. It is therefore critically important to take the necessary precautions promptly in order to prevent potential losses.

Looking at the landslides that have occurred in Yalova over the past 20 years, Çiftlikköy District stands out as one of the most affected areas. The five reported landslides in this district indicate that its geographical location and slope make it particularly vulnerable to landslides.⁵³ Placing temporary prefabricated structures in the Sultaniye

51 Arı Şehircilik, 2021 Yalova ili merkez ilçesi Bağlarbaşı Mahallesi Riskli Alana İlişkin 1/5000 Ölçekli Nazım İmar Planı Değişikliği Açıklama Raporu. Available [here](#).

52 Yalova Gazetesi. "Kentsel Dönüşüm Kayarak mı Geliyor?" Video, February 23, 2024. Erişim Tarihi:25 Kasım 2024. Available [here](#).

53 Afad Yalova İrap Deprem Risk Raporu 2022 'İl Planları'. Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#); see Figure 7.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY AIM

The aim of this research is to understand the impacts of the urban transformation project in Yalova's Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood on its residents, and to examine the social, economic, and spatial outcomes of this process. The study focuses primarily on changes in **living standards** before and during the transformation, the **living conditions** in the prefabricated container settlement, **employment opportunities**, and **access to social rights**. This research was conducted through fieldwork in two different areas (Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood and the Prefabricated Living Area) at three different time points. Qualitative data collection methods were employed. The subsequent sections provide a detailed explanation of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLING SELECTION

This research was primarily based on interviews conducted with residents of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood, where urban transformation is being implemented, and individuals relocated to prefabricated living areas. The fieldwork was conducted in three stages on 17–18 December 2023, 29–30 March 2024, and 7 June 2024. A total of 24 participants, identified through a snowball sampling method, were interviewed using semi-structured open-ended questions. The research design ensured diversity in gender and social status: among the participants, 11 were women, aged between 20 and 40, and 13 were men, aged between 18 and 60. In addition to interviews, direct observation was carried out throughout the study. Social and environmental variables in both areas were reported without intervention. Supplementary interviews were conducted with two Roma association leaders; the Deputy Mayor of Yalova; a representative from the Urban Transformation Office; a member of the Yalova Bar Association's Environmental, Urban, and Urban Transformation Issues Committee; and a representative from the Yalova Chamber of Architects.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

During the data collection process, one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants. Each interview lasted an average of 20–30 minutes, and detailed notes were taken throughout the sessions. The questions were designed to cover topics such as living standards before and during the urban transformation, issues in the container settlement, employment opportunities, and discrimination. To gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions, the questions were open-ended and additional questions were derived during the interviews as needed.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The collected data was evaluated using qualitative analysis techniques. Interview notes were manually coded, and themes were developed based on these codes. During the coding process, the main themes and subthemes expressed by the participants were identified. This coding was conducted as an iterative process in order to reveal the underlying trends and variations in the data set.

The resulting themes were then analysed to uncover the social, economic, and spatial impacts of the urban transformation process. Issues, expectations, and experiences highlighted during the interviews were compared and evaluated comprehensively to provide a deeper understanding of the findings.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research is limited to the 24 individuals living in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood and the prefabricated housing areas. The snowball sampling method used may not fully represent the entire population, restricting the potential to generalise the findings. Additionally, there is a possibility that the semi-structured open-ended interview format may have led to some participants being unable to fully articulate their views despite efforts to the contrary.

FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS (17–18 DECEMBER 2023)

Residents in general responded that they felt public services, however inadequate, were better **before** the urban transformation process began. Since then, services have declined, garbage and environmental waste has begun to pile up, repairs and maintenance have gone neglected, and promises of children's play areas quickly forgotten.

These are the key general observations and participant perspectives concerning the state of the neighbourhood and services during the urban transformation process:



In certain areas of the neighbourhood, construction debris and non-household waste have accumulated. The number of garbage containers in the neighbourhood is insufficient. Interviewees stated that before the urban transformation, garbage was collected irregularly, and during the transformation process, it was rarely collected at all.



Although electricity is available, participants noted that the power cables, meters, and overall infrastructure are worn-out, poorly maintained, and inadequate. Moreover, the streetlights have stopped functioning during the transformation, and even though the issue was reported to authorities, it remains unresolved. Insufficient lighting at night was identified by participants as a security concern.



The neighbourhood's roads, already in poor condition, have deteriorated further due to heavy machinery entering the area during the transformation process, resulting in potholes. In one interview, a participant described a personal approach to addressing the situation: *"The road had collapsed. Two days ago, I brought a truckload of gravel and had it spread. The road was very low."* (Interviewee 1)



The lack of sidewalks throughout the neighbourhood and the complete absence of sidewalks along some main roads is particularly noticeable.



There is no park or play area for children in the neighbourhood. Participants reported that officials had promised to build a park before the urban transformation process began, but once the transformation started, this promise was not fulfilled.



The neighbourhood has a notable scarcity of green spaces, and the existing green areas are covered in scrap materials and piles of waste. These environmentally hazardous spots have effectively become children's play areas.



A ruptured sewage line runs through the neighbourhood, with sewage flowing openly along the streets. Residents stated that this problem had been reported to the authorities previously, but no action was taken. While a thorough investigation of the contaminated sewage water is needed, the current situation poses a serious public health threat. Residents expressed their concerns in these words:

"Look, this broken water line has been flowing like this for a month. We tell them (the authorities), they come and look, but since it's part of the urban transformation, they don't do anything. You can see the state of our neighbourhood – filthy! Yesterday they cleaned the entire neighbourhood just because the TV crews were coming." (Interviewee 1)

"As far as I know, this water is coming from a sewage line break. It might be sewage water or tap water, I'm not sure, but it's burst from the upper side, and the authorities aren't addressing it. If this water flows like this, won't it spread diseases? You see it with your own eyes. No one comes, my dear brother." (Interviewee 2)



Although there is a piped water infrastructure in the neighbourhood, residents believe that the broken sewage water may be mixing with the tap water. This has caused many residents to doubt the safety of their drinking water. Furthermore, most residents do not own the filtration equipment or devices needed to purify the water. In other words, residents lack the economic means to protect themselves from the environmental degradation and feel compelled to use water they suspect might be contaminated.



There are open and semi-open manhole covers throughout the neighbourhood. In addition, residents generally express dissatisfaction with the sewage infrastructure.



Residents are also facing energy poverty. Many households rely on stoves for heating and have noted that after the urban transformation began, the coal assistance they previously received stopped. As a result, they have been left without fuel in the middle of winter. One participant explained the situation as follows:

"Romani people have no value anywhere... Look at the disgrace we're living in. The elections are a month away, maybe someone will show up in the neighbourhood then. But look, the coal hasn't even come to our neighbourhood yet. People are suffering—just look. They distributed coal in İnegöl, Yenişehir, Bursa—everywhere except here. The price of firewood is now five billion per ton. Some people can afford it, some can't. I keep going back and forth to social services. They say it'll come today, it'll come tomorrow, and before you know it, winter will be over." (Interviewee 2)



During the urban transformation process, it became apparent that there was insufficient and non-transparent communication regarding who were the rightful beneficiaries, the timeline for provision of their housing, the structure and size of the homes to be provided (the total square metres), the financial obligations imposed on beneficiaries, and the specific roles and responsibilities of various public institutions at different stages of the project.



There were also uncertainties about the housing rights and entitlements of those without formal title deeds. These include long-time residents of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood who possess legal documents such as title deed records or utility bills, as well as renters who face ambiguity concerning their housing status and rights as stakeholders in the process.



Images from the field visits to Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood by Romani Godi

ONGOING DEBATES ON THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN BAĞLARBAŞI NEIGHBOURHOOD

Residents mentioned that they learned about the general conditions in the prefabricated houses through relatives and acquaintances, and occasionally went to see them in person. They described the living conditions in the prefabricated units as inhumane, expressed satisfaction with living in their original neighbourhood, and noted that the demolition of homes had caused significant hardship for many.

As a result, they viewed the experience as a lesson and stated that they no longer wanted their homes to be demolished. The interview notes on this subject are presented here:

“They came and asked us, ‘Do you want urban transformation?’ but people were deceived, man. Now they are the ones who were deceived. We saw that place (the prefabs) – do you think we’d fall for it now? (Interviewee 5)

“We stand by our word about urban transformation, but do they have the right to make us live there? You look up, and you see the mountain. They won’t be able to tear these places down; they won’t get what they’re hoping for. (Interviewee 3)

One interviewee emphasised the high value placed on the location of Bağlarbaşı, known as ‘Yalova’s balcony’ with its expansive sea views, and expressed concerns that their living spaces might be allocated to others after the ‘transformation’:

“This place overlooks the town; they call Bağlarbaşı the balcony, right? That’s here. You can see the sea. Apparently, they’re going to give these places to outsiders—doctors, police officers. When officials come to raid the neighbourhood, they ask us how many houses we’re getting, and if I’ll sell them one. They want these places. It’s the

nicest spot in Yalova. Look, the sea is right at your feet.” (Interviewee 3)

One of the residents mentioned that contractors began purchasing homes in the neighbourhood before the urban transformation process began, but restrictions were placed on title deeds to prevent this practice. A representative from Yalova Municipality’s Urban Transformation Office confirmed this, explaining that annotations on the titles were introduced to prevent speculative profits during the transformation process. According to the resident:

“Contractors swarmed here at one point. There was one from Istanbul who bought this place and that place. They even purchased houses from the lower parts of the neighbourhood. Later, since there was going to be urban transformation, annotations were placed on the titles in the neighbourhood, so they couldn’t buy any more. Otherwise, they were offering good money, and the locals would’ve sold their homes.” (Interviewee 1)

According to interviewees, the authorities told local residents that drug dealing and drug use were widespread in the neighbourhood. They claimed that the demolition would help free Bağlarbaşı from its association with drugs and make it a better place. The urban transformation was presented as a social policy aimed at combating drug issues:

“They (the authorities) told us that drugs were widespread in our neighbourhood and that they wanted to put an end to it. We also want it to end so that our kids don’t get caught up in it. They demolished everything here. Did the drugs stop here? No, they didn’t. It’s gotten even worse.” (Interviewee 3)

THE REALITY OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION FOR 'RELOCATED' RESIDENTS

In order to examine and monitor the general conditions of the prefabricated housing where the former residents were relocated, Romani Godi made three visits to the prefabricated living area. The alternative accommodation

provided is situated in the Sultaniye area of Çiftlikköy, in a remote and segregated location, surrounded by an illegal dumping site, a livestock market, and a stock farm, far from the city.

The prefabricated housing site is located 11km away from Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood and 7.4km from Cumhuriyet Avenue, Yalova's busiest street. There is no public transportation link between the site and the city. There are no supermarkets, shopping centres, or food stores nearby. The closest store,

Yılmaz Market, is 2.1km away, but it is not equipped to meet the full range of residents' needs. Within the prefabricated housing area, there is a small convenience store converted from a residential unit.



Images from the field visits to the prefabricated housing site by Romani Godi

Residents report that the site is located in an environmentally hazardous area, with insufficient infrastructure leading to frequent flooding. The absence of proper facilities—such as storage or stable spaces—hinders the livelihoods of the local population, many of whom depend on jobs like recycling and livestock farming. As a workaround, residents have built makeshift structures from salvaged materials to serve as storage or animal shelters.

Relocating the Romani community to this remote and rugged 'mountainous' site, makes it more difficult for them to carry out certain urban-based occupations. This distance from the city centre adds significant challenges for their day-to-day economic activities. Residents have also expressed safety concerns about the presence of wild animals, with sightings of wolves, jackals, and packs of stray dogs reported near the prefabricated housing area.

Furthermore, prohibitions on using wood or coal stoves in these prefabricated units have left the residents, who already face energy poverty, struggling to stay warm. Many have had to rely on electric heating, which has led to monthly bills as high as 3,000–4,000 TL (€65-87), a significant burden for a community that relies on daily wage

labour. This additional economic pressure severely restricts their ability to sustain themselves in the area.

The roads leading to the prefabricated housing area are marked by potholes, patches, and occasional waste resembling manure. Inside the housing area, however, the internal roads appear to be in relatively better condition, made of sturdy cobblestone paving. Additionally, because the prefabricated housing site is located on lower terrain relative to the adjacent hillside, rainwater and mudflows from the slope collect in front of the units after heavy rainfall, posing a serious health threat. The lack of sufficient street lighting creates safety concerns at night, with women and children reporting feeling uneasy about going outside after dark.

Although the sewage system is newly installed, it is still inadequate. Some residents have reported cases where sewage water has seeped into their homes. While authorities have taken steps to address the issue, interviewees noted that it has not been fully resolved. On the other hand, residents did not express any complaints regarding the piped water infrastructure.

Apart from a football field, the prefabricated housing area lacks playgrounds where children can enjoy recreational activities. Access to the football field is via a muddy road littered with debris. However, a regular school bus service is provided for children who are continuing their education.

Isolated on a grim site far from the city's amenities, the location was described in vivid terms by one of the 'relocated' as the place of cemeteries, where all the filth is dumped, and the livestock market, a place where even the local headman reckoned was cursed; "They threw us into a place that even God has forgotten!"

“They threw us into a place that even God has forgotten!”

Interviewees explained that the location was 40-45 minutes on foot from town, that scrap-collecting had become impossible, and only those with motorcycles could make their way to find work. As one resident explained:

“When we were in the neighbourhood, we could go to the market and be back in five minutes. During our lunch-break, we could eat at home. We left our kids with our relatives. Now, just to get to work from here costs 100 lira in fuel, and a round trip is 200 lira (€4.34) ... The children can't go to school. They send a school bus here, but if something happens to a child in the neighbourhood, how will the parents get to them? How will they protect them? (Interviewee 6)

Due to the remote and isolated location of the prefabricated housing area, residents have reported that wild animals, such as wolves and jackals, pose a threat to them at night. As one put it:

“After 11 p.m., the wolves start howling. We can't leave our children alone at night. (Interviewee 6)

Another danger frequently mentioned by participants is the presence of stray dogs roaming the area which made walking the road on foot often impossible:

“The problem with the dogs starts as soon as you step onto the road. If one barks, three more appear from one side, five more from the other—they surround you. (Interviewee 7)

Residents stated that they were relocated to the prefabricated houses in June 2023, and it took three to four months for life in the temporary settlement to start feeling somewhat normal. They also reported that authorities often delayed in addressing problems in the settlement, and in many

cases, interventions only occurred after repeated complaints and strong demands from the residents:

“Life here only started settling down after we moved in. For example, these railings—they installed them later because kids kept falling and getting hurt. The thing is, they don't do anything until someone gets injured. Now, with social media, when you post something, the municipality shows up the next day and has to fix it. But what really matters is thinking ahead—taking action before something happens to the children.” (Interviewee 6)

“This place was a filthy dumping ground. Trucks come to unload manure and waste—and they dump it here. (Interviewee 7)

Residents stated that the new settlement area was formerly Yalova's landfill site, and construction companies still occasionally dump debris nearby. Additionally, they reported that during the summer months, unpleasant odours come from the livestock market and barn located at the entrance of the prefabricated housing area.

Due to the ban on using wood or coal stoves in the temporary housing area, residents have been forced to rely on electric heaters, leading to high electricity bills that many are unable to afford. As one resident explained:

“The houses are 41 square meters. I live with 10 people in one house. We can't use a stove, how could we? It's forbidden. We have to use electricity. I got a 5.500 lira electricity bill. I don't know what I'm going to do, how I'll manage. If they could help us with this, it would be good. I do extra work, but I can't support 10 people on a single salary. (Interviewee 6)

When the prefabricated housing area was first established, an estimated 25-30 families were living in the units. However, over time, due to the harsh living conditions, an increasing number of residents have left the area, including those running the only convenience store. One resident from the last remaining eight households described the current predicament:



This place was a filthy dumping ground. Trucks come to unload manure and waste—and they dump it here. (Interviewee 7)



Images from the field visits to the prefabricated housing site by Romani Godi

LIVING IN A PREFAB: THE PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

As described above, displaced residents found the prefabricated housing site was too far from the city; that harsh living conditions were compounded by infrastructure problems; and roaming wild animals added an element of fear to the pervasive misery of daily life in the prefabs. As for the structure of the prefabs, residents recounted a host of problems, including damp, dodgy plumbing, and rainwater seeping into homes. As one interviewee described it:



The houses are built on bare soil, and when it rains, the mud flows right in front of the houses. My two-and-a-half-year-old grandchild lives there with my daughter. Is this what God intended for us? ... There's

one toilet, but when you flush, instead of the water draining down, it flows into the living room. Everyone had to drill holes in their bathrooms, like the size of a soda bottle cap, just to let the water drain. The authorities come, take pictures, and then leave.

(Interviewee 3)

Interviewees from Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood also stated that the remote location of the prefabricated houses creates obstacles in accessing food. As one resident stated, there were better places close by, where the prefabricated houses could have been built, where you could take a bus to nearby markets, and it was easy to get to the bazaar;



But none of that exists there (in the prefabricated area). If you have a car at your door and money in your pocket, you can tell your husband, 'Let's go buy some ground meat and cook.' But if you don't have a car, even if you have money, who can you ask to going? How are you supposed to cook that meal? (Interviewee 3)

The prefabricated dwellings are colder on account of their remote location and the lack of surrounding structures, which leave them more exposed to harsh weather conditions. The need to keep warm combined with the prohibition on using wood or coal stoves forced residents to rely on the more expensive option of electric heaters.



Installing a stove in the prefabricated houses is forbidden! They say there's a fire hazard! People have no choice but to use electric heaters and air conditioners. My daughter (who lives in a prefabricated house) got a 3 billion lira electricity bill this month. (Interviewee 3)

As mentioned earlier, the urban transformation process has had a damaging effect on the livelihoods of those relocated to the prefabs. One example is that of a woman who has to travel back and forth daily from the prefabs to the old neighbourhood:



Look, this woman lives in a prefabricated house, but she keeps her animals in my brother's stable. Every day, she comes all the way from the prefabricated area to take care of them. (Interviewee 3)

This woman's predicament and that of others, stands as a clear indictment of the failure of the urban transformation process to meet the needs and livelihoods of residents.

WORD FROM THE MUNICIPALITY: "A MODEL URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN TURKEY"

In 2020, the Yalova Metropolitan Municipality established a special Urban Transformation Office to manage the urban transformation process more effectively. According to a municipal official, this office has conducted informative and participatory efforts, resulting in over 95% agreement with residents regarding the transformation.

When asked whether any Romani individuals were employed in the Urban Transformation Office, the official stated that since the transformation was being carried out in a Romani neighbourhood, hiring a Romani person in the office could create a conflict of interest. Therefore, they decided not to employ any Romani individuals in the department.

With the start of the urban transformation process, the Ministry halted all title deed transfers and property sales within the designated area. According to the Urban Transformation Office official, this decision was made to protect the rights of current property owners and prevent speculative real estate sales. The official emphasised that this measure prevented property handovers for profit and ensured that the project progressed securely.

The official also clarified that the municipality's role was limited to evacuation and demolition, while reconstruction and planning were handled by other institutions. To prevent homelessness among Romani residents after the demolitions and to address discrimination in the rental market, the municipality negotiated with the ministry to establish a container housing area as a temporary solution. Acknowledging that one-room containers would not be sufficient for the large Romani families, the municipality official stated that 60 two-bedroom, one-living-room containers were set up within the borders of Kazimiye village.

When asked why the temporary housing area was placed in a remote and segregated location, surrounded by an illegal dumping site, a livestock market, and an animal farm, the municipality official responded that there were no other available municipal lands of that size, and that this location was deemed the most suitable. Additionally, the official promised that the livestock market in the area would cease operations permanently after the 2024 Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayramı) holiday.

The Urban Transformation Office stated that in the urban transformation project, not only property owners but also renters and long-term settlers were recognised as beneficiaries. They were given the opportunity to become homeowners through a debt-based financing plan tied to their current housing situation. In an effort to manage the process more humanely and avoid displacing people, the municipality has delayed the enforcement of eviction orders while waiting for additional containers requested from the Ministry.

The official explained that, according to the agreement between the Ministry and the beneficiaries, the newly built homes under the urban transformation project would be sold at a price of 3,000 TL per m² (€64.22 per m²). Due to this older pricing model, the Ministry is expected to operate at a loss, rather than making a profit from the project. Following the local elections in March 2024, a change in administration occurred in Yalova Municipality. While the Urban Transformation Office official remained in their position, a new political party and leadership took over the municipality.

During a meeting with the Deputy Mayor, he stated that they were approaching the Bağlarbaşı urban transformation process with great sensitivity and doing their best to prevent harm to the residents. However, he emphasized that they had only recently taken office, that the municipality was struggling with significant debt, and that their authority in the transformation process was limited since they were only responsible for evictions and demolitions, with no control over reconstruction or planning.

Additionally, the municipal official mentioned plans to spread sulphur in certain areas near the container settlement to address the frequent presence of snakes and wild animals. The belief is that this method will prevent snakes from entering the residential area and increase the safety of those living in the container homes.

THE VERDICT ON THE MUNICIPALITY'S POSITION

It is clear that Yalova Municipality has thoroughly examined the efforts and challenges encountered during the urban transformation process. The Urban Transformation Office has been monitoring the process with good intentions and appears to have sufficient knowledge on the matter. However, the absence of a Romani individual in the Urban Transformation Office responsible for a transformation project in a Romani neighbourhood cannot be justified on the grounds of avoiding a conflict of interest. Participation of the affected community is fundamental in such projects.

The justification that no alternative site of adequate size could be found for the container settlement is not entirely convincing. Relocating the Romani community to an area that is inaccessible and environmentally hazardous is unacceptable. The fact that the container settlement is far from the city affects the livelihoods of Roma, many of whom work in daily labour jobs within the city. Additionally, locating and constructing the settlement without any consideration of the community's needs, lifestyle, and cultural dynamics, exacerbates security concerns for the

Romani residents. In this context, before establishing the container settlement, alternative locations suitable for communal living should have been secured through a participatory process that took account of these risks.

Despite agreements made with homeowners at a rate of 3,000 TL per m², the total cost of the houses and the amount that beneficiaries will be indebted remains unclear, as contracts have not yet been finalised. Following the urban transformation process, the potential for Roma to face high debt burdens raises serious concerns regarding their capacity to meet instalment payments.

Finally, the use of sulphur trioxide, a highly toxic chemical, in residential areas could pose significant threats to both the health of the Romani residents and the local ecosystem. This chemical reacts quickly with water vapour in the air to form sulphuric acid (H₂SO₄), which can cause severe irritation to the respiratory system. In cases of excessive use and exposure, it presents a major danger, particularly for individuals suffering from asthma and bronchitis in the region.^{54 55}

54 Chemicalsafety, 2024 'ICSC 1202 - SULFUR TRIOXIDE'. Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

55 Sabah 2021. 'SO3 Nedir, Asit Mi Baz Mı? SO3 Yaygın Adı ve Molekül Ağırlığı Nedir?' Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

Additionally, children who come into contact with elemental sulphur scattered around the container settlement and its surroundings may suffer from severe irritation and poisoning due to the highly corrosive nature of this substance. The local animal populations could also be adversely affected by this exposure. Sulphur seepage into the soil and water may lead to acidification, negatively impacting the region's vegetation and aquatic life.

For these reasons, instead of using sulphur to deter snakes and wild animals from the container settlement, plant-based solutions (such as planting mint, lavender, and garlic), physical barriers (such as installing chicken wire), and vibration-based devices should be implemented as alternative protective measures.

MEETINGS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

Romani civil society organisations active in Yalova's Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood emphasised shortcomings in access to basic services within the neighbourhood and container settlements during the urban transformation process. However, they also underline that this situation is ultimately a transitional phase, stating that their more significant concern is access to safe, comfortable, and liveable housing in their neighbourhood following the completion of urban transformation.

Civil society representatives stated that they and local residents would appreciate the authorities providing more comprehensive information about the process. They expressed their trust in commitments made by public institutions, especially the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation, and Climate Change, as well as local authorities, regarding the prevention of grievances. However, they stressed that they are eagerly awaiting immediate and concrete steps toward fulfilling these promises.

A board member of the Yalova Bar Association stated that although the Bar's Commission on Environmental, Urban, and Urban Transformation Issues intended to organise an informative meeting specifically involving residents from Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood regarding the ongoing urban transformation, there was no participation from the Romani community. He highlighted that this

situation reflects social exclusion, demonstrating the difficulty residents face in becoming aware of public events organised by institutions such as the Bar Association. Additionally, the Bar Association acknowledged that this indicates the necessity for further efforts to ensure effective communication and outreach.

During discussions with the Yalova Chamber of Architects, officials emphasised the importance of involving TMMOB's (Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects) other components in the urban transformation process and incorporating their perspectives. They also referred to previous discussions held with the municipality's former administration, during which municipal authorities expressed their willingness to take responsibility to prevent harm to local residents. Considering the neighbourhood's high risk in terms of earthquakes, officials stressed the significance of implementing urban transformation without disadvantaging Romani citizens. Additionally, representatives from the Yalova Chamber of Architects pointed out that involving all stakeholders' views is crucial for achieving healthier and more sustainable urban development. Due to the area's vulnerability to earthquakes, officials underscored the necessity of conducting the transformation process in a manner that enhances the safety and quality of life of Romani citizens.

CONCLUSION

When examining the urban transformation process in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood between 17–18 December 2023, and 7 June 2024, it becomes increasingly evident that the needs of local residents have not been adequately considered, neither in prefabricated living areas nor within the neighbourhood itself. As the process has progressed, the grievances and concerns of residents have notably increased. It has also become clear that environmental inequalities in both types of living spaces have developed to the disadvantage of Romani residents. In effect, Romani residents have been relocated—albeit temporarily—from their neighbourhood with its sea views, to an area marked by illegal waste disposal sites, livestock markets, and stables. Positioned far from the city, these temporary settlements threaten the economic livelihoods of Romani residents. Consequently, even though the urban transformation process has not yet been completed, the Romani community is already negatively impacted socially, environmentally, and economically.

On the other hand, some positive developments have occurred during the urban transformation process in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood. The establishment of the Urban Transformation Office has allowed the process to become more organised and manageable. Despite the fact that the alternative housing was found to be inappropriate and inadequate on every count, for the first time in an urban transformation project the principle that

those displaced from their homes should be provided with alternative accommodation has been conceded by the authorities. However, in order to fully honour this principle, the authorities should ensure that alternative accommodation is located in a place that offers safety, and the ability to seek livelihood opportunities, and that the affected communities enjoy their rights to participate in decision-making processes as stipulated under the right to adequate housing in international law.

Another development worthy of note was the imposition of annotations (şerh) on property deeds to prevent speculative property exchanges and profiteering until the transformation is completed, which marked an important first step toward ensuring transparency. In conclusion, it is essential to urgently address the grievances arising from urban transformation activities, clearly define contracts and financial obligations, and consistently take into account the views and needs of local residents at every stage of the project.

Such measures are crucial to ensuring that the urban transformation process becomes more fair and more sustainable, and less punishing on the most marginalised. It is vital that the fears of residents can be minimised and their concerns addressed so that the outcomes be more compliant with human rights norms and obligations, and that processes of urban transformation become a benefit for all.

54 Chemicalsafety, 2024 'ICSC 1202 - SULFUR TRIOXIDE'. Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

55 Sabah 2021. 'SO3 Nedir, Asit Mi Baz Mı? SO3 Yaygın Adı ve Molekül Ağırlığı Nedir?' Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Site selection and participation:** Prefabricated housing areas should be relocated to regions that are more accessible and have reduced environmental risks. The active participation of local residents must be ensured during the site selection process, and the socio-cultural characteristics, needs, and requirements of the population must be taken into account.
2. **Regulation of ownership rights:** Urban transformation should be structured not based on a tenant-property owner distinction but through the lens of housing rights and social justice. Separate legal regulations and assurances should be provided for citizens holding non-title documents and tenants.
3. **Financial planning and legal support:** Fees to be paid by beneficiaries for new housing must be urgently determined, and payment plans should be established. Legal consultancy and support services should be provided to neighbourhood residents during the urban transformation process. Information campaigns and training on legal rights specifically targeting Roma communities should be organised.
4. **Clean water and sanitation, electricity supply and waste collection:** Garbage collection services in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood and the prefabricated housing area must be regularly provided until the new evacuation process is completed, and the number of waste containers should be increased. Areas containing construction and industrial waste must be cleaned, and such waste should be disposed of appropriately. Specifically, and as a matter of urgency, the livestock market and barn around the prefabricated area should be closed, and the illegal waste site located near the old cemetery must be cleared.

Broken sewage systems in both residential areas should be urgently repaired, and drinking water quality monitored to protect public health.

Electricity infrastructure in both prefabricated and neighbourhood areas should be strengthened, worn cables and meters replaced, street lighting should be functional, and additional measures to enhance night-time security must be implemented.

5. **Roads, pavements, green areas and playgrounds:** Roads and sidewalks in the non-transformed sections of Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood must be maintained, potholes repaired, and missing sidewalks constructed to ensure pedestrian safety. Playgrounds and green spaces should be created in both residential areas. The football field in the container city should be cleaned, and a temporary playground established until evacuation.
6. **Energy assistance and heating:** Coal and fuel assistance should be regularly provided for residents experiencing energy poverty, and measures should be implemented to reduce high electricity bills for residents using electric heaters in the container city. Restrictions on stove usage in prefabricated houses should be reconsidered, and safe heating methods promoted.
7. **Transportation and food access:** Public transportation should be provided to the prefabricated living area, with city services operating throughout the day. Temporary food retail locations should be established until evacuation, and solutions facilitating food access should be developed.
8. **Education and employment:** Vocational training and skill development programs should be organised for neighbourhood residents during the transformation process, along with employment support and job placement programs. Transportation services for school-going children should be expanded, and measures to prevent educational rights violations during the transformation process should be implemented.
9. **Psychological support and healthcare:** Psychological support and counselling services should be provided to Romani residents in need throughout the transformation process. Mobile health clinics should deliver healthcare services to the neighbourhood, complemented by health screening programs and preventive healthcare services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. **Ensuring civic participation and community solidarity:** Romani civil society organisations, Yalova Bar Association, Yalova TMMOB, human rights organizations, and neighbourhood residents must be included in planning every step of the urban transformation process. Urban transformation projects must be designed according to the local population's culture and lifestyle, facilitating in-situ transformation. Mechanisms involving professional chambers and civil society should be established to monitor and enforce compliance with regulations and architectural standards during demolition and construction phases. Cultural and social events should be organised in the neighbourhood to enhance community solidarity and cultural integration, supported by socialisation programmes.
11. **Environmental Protection:** Elemental sulphur planned for use in the prefabricated living area should be abandoned. Plant-based solutions (mint, lavender, garlic planting), physical barriers (application of chicken wire), and vibration-based devices should be used to protect container city residents from snakes and wildlife.
12. **National Human Rights Mechanisms:** Institutions such as the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey (TİHEK) and the Ombudsman Institution must actively participate in urban transformation processes, particularly in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood and other Romani neighbourhoods, to prevent human rights violations. TİHEK should conduct informational activities for citizens encountering discriminatory practices such as being denied housing rentals.
13. **Local and Central Government Collaboration:** Cooperation between local governments and central government should be strengthened to prevent citizen grievances during urban transformation projects.
14. **Amendments to Legal Foundations:** The Law on the Transformation of Areas at Risk of Disaster, serving as the legal basis for urban transformation policies, does not comprehensively address practical experiences, leading to significant discrepancies in practice. Emergency Expropriation Decisions in practice obstruct citizens' autonomy. An inclusive, participatory, and transparent legal framework for urban transformation should be established.

54 Chemicalsafety, 2024'ICSC 1202 - SULFUR TRIOXIDE'. Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

55 Sabah 2021. 'SO3 Nedir, Asit Mi Baz Mı? SO3 Yaygın Adı ve Molekül Ağırlığı Nedir?' Accessed 1 July 2024. Available [here](#).

APPENDIX

Freedom of Information Request Application to Yalova Municipality

QUESTION (1): *What are the start and end dates of the urban transformation project carried out in Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood, located in the Central district of Yalova? What are the planned activities under the urban transformation project?*

ANSWER:

An area of approximately 9.89 hectares located in Bağlarbaşı neighbourhood, Central District of Yalova Province, has been declared a "Risk Area" by a decision of the Council of Ministers under the Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk. According to the Ministerial Approval numbered 244794 dated 18.11.2020, it has been stated that all operations within the specified risk area must be conducted under Article 6/A of Law No. 6306.

Yalova Municipality has been assigned by the Ministry to manage the evacuation and demolition processes within the scope of this Urban Transformation Project. Upon initiation of the evacuation and demolition procedures, residents of the Risk Area reported difficulties in finding rental housing due to various reasons. Therefore, they requested the construction of a Container City to provide free accommodation until the completion of the new housing units. In response, our Municipality established a Container City, partially evacuated the Risk Area, and carried out demolition of the existing structures.

The demolished and evacuated area has now been made suitable for construction. The area where evacuation and demolition have not yet been completed will be prepared for construction following the establishment of a second-stage Container City. The Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood Urban Transformation Project is conducted under the authority of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change. The construction of new buildings will be executed by the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) with authorization from the Ministry. Within this context, TOKİ has already conducted the tender process for the construction of new residences in the Urban Transformation Area. The winning company has commenced operations in the project area.

Respectfully submitted for your information.

QUESTION (2): *Has an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) been conducted for the urban transformation project carried out in Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood, Yalova? If not, what are the anticipated potential environmental and social impacts outlined in the Project Introduction File? Could you please provide the full text of the Project Introduction File?*

ANSWER:

The Project Introduction File prepared for the project titled "Urban Transformation Project Comprising 717 Residences and 19 Shops along with Infrastructure and Environmental Landscaping" planned by the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) in Bağlarbaşı Neighbourhood, Central District of Yalova Province, was submitted to our Provincial Directorate. Necessary review and assessment procedures were conducted in accordance with the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Regulation published in the Official Gazette numbered 31907 on July 29, 2022. The environmental measures proposed in the Project Introduction File have been deemed sufficient. Additionally, it was determined that an EIA Report was not required for this project, resulting in a decision that an *"Environmental Impact Assessment is Not Required"* for the mentioned project. The Project Introduction File can be accessed through the search engine available in the "ÇED Duyuruları" (EIA Announcements) section on the homepage of our Provincial Directorate's website: <https://yalova.csb.gov.tr>.

According to the EIA Regulation, Housing Projects with 300 or More Residences fall within its scope, and environmental impact assessments are conducted accordingly for such projects. Matters related to the specific needs of Roma citizens, architectural designs of residences, and similar topics are not covered within the EIA Regulation and information regarding these aspects can be obtained from the relevant municipality.

