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'Channeling' power: Water, politics and development in Southeast Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Rule

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'Channeling' power: Water, politics and development in Southeast Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Rule

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Preface

Space is extremely limited in the Netherlands, which means that there are intense debates over every square meter. Urban planning, shaping public space, is therefore inherently political. Whether you choose to build a new neighborhood, preserve land as a nature reserve, or maintain it as farmland, these decisions are all guided by political priorities. These priorities often clash. One group may push for housing development to address the housing crisis, while another may argue for reforestation to tackle the nitrogen crisis. Growing up, I heard about these dilemmas every day. My family would come home and talk about their work, about the challenges at the local, regional, and national levels. During holidays, we visited notable architectural sites, and I was taught to observe how cities and landscapes were constructed.

Similar political debates shape water infrastructure. About 27% of the Netherlands lies below sea level; we have world-class dikes and dams, frequent rainfall, many rivers, and canal-filled cities like Amsterdam. Decisions surrounding water infrastructure are also inherently political. In Dutch, it is called: “*de strijd tegen het water*” translated: “*the battle against water*”, because this struggle has fundamentally shaped the Netherlands as it exists today.

For my thesis, I focused on Türkiye, specifically the prehistoric region of Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Mesopotamia is known as part of the Fertile Crescent: the cradle of civilization. I visited Mardin and Şanlıurfa in southeastern Türkiye, near the Syrian border. Şanlıurfa is considered the birthplace of the Abrahamic religions, and the old cities of Mardin and Midyat are filled with remarkable ancient buildings from biblical times. The region is a fascinating blend of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish symbolism.

I traveled there during a break from my internship at the Embassy of the Netherlands in Türkiye, where I worked in the political department from February to August 2025. My internship revolved around major political developments, including the fall of Assad, the

arrest of Mayor İmamoğlu, and the demonstrations that followed. I started to think about how I could connect my interests in Mesopotamia, water politics, and the larger political forces that shaped my internship experience. Starting from the premise that infrastructure can serve as a reflection of the politics of its time, I asked myself whether infrastructure might also function as an indicator of rising authoritarianism. Given that the GAP project, a major water-infrastructure initiative on the Euphrates and Tigris, has been underway for roughly 50 years, I wondered whether it might reveal such patterns.

Before beginning, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support throughout this process, and my thesis supervisor, Dr. Crystal Ennis, for guiding me through an unconventional path, providing critical feedback, and engaging in enjoyable discussions during our meetings.

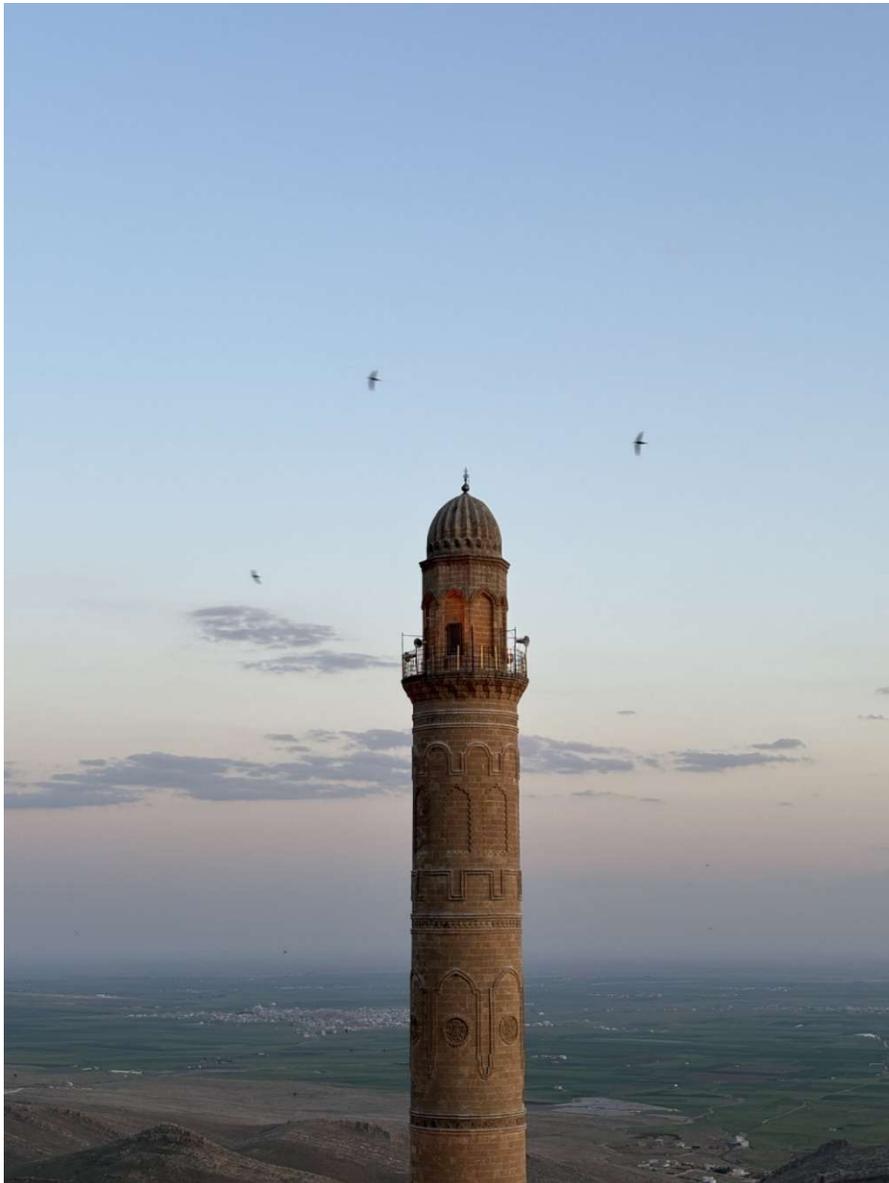


Figure 1: The minaret of the historic Mardin Ulu Mosque, Southeast Türkiye, created by the author, 2025.

Abstract

The Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP), or Southeastern Anatolia Project, is a large-scale water infrastructure project in Türkiye that harnesses the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, extending across six provinces and into neighboring Syria and Iraq. Today, the GAP includes 22 large dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants. Beyond its economic rationale of enabling irrigation and generating electricity, this thesis approaches the GAP as a political project designed to fulfill state objectives. From the understanding that large infrastructural projects can reflect contemporary political priorities, this study examines what insights the GAP can offer regarding broader political developments in Türkiye during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from 2002 to 2022. Using a combination of qualitative content analysis, expert interviews, and academic sources, this longitudinal process-tracing thesis researches the GAP's relationship with democracy through institutional reforms, political economy, discursive framing, and cooperation with riparian states. This thesis hence provides a deeper understanding of how the GAP reflects Türkiye's increasingly authoritarian trajectory between 2002 and 2022. From a broader perspective, the thesis seeks to investigate whether large infrastructural projects can serve as indicators of a country's democratic course. However, establishing causal links between the GAP and democratic backsliding proved difficult due to the interplay of various external political, economic and regional factors, limiting the transferability of the findings and preventing watertight conclusions about water infrastructure as an indicator of democratic change.

Keywords: development, infrastructure, democracy, authoritarianism, water politics, hydrohegemony, Türkiye, Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP)

Introduction



Figure 2: Map of Euphrates-Tigris Basin. From “Development through design: Knowledge, power, and absences in the making of southeastern Türkiye” (2020) by Akinci et al.

Water-retaining structures have existed for over 5000 years in their pursuit to control rivers, enable irrigation, and advance agricultural production. Ancient empires such as the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Chinese are known for their mastery of water. In contemporary society, dams and the generation of hydropower have become instruments of economic growth on the one hand (Altınbilek, 2002), and reduce disparities between socioeconomically unequal regions on the other (Huber & Josh, 2015). Simultaneously, these sizable hydro projects have negatively impacted rivers and ecosystems, and caused the displacement of people, changes in land ownership and submerged cultural resources (McCully, 2001).

In spite of the disadvantages that dams bring, they have increasingly been constructed to stimulate national development since the end of the colonial era (Biswas & Tortajada, 2001). This phenomenon led to a new understanding of large-scale water infrastructure, where it was directed to fulfill state goals beyond economic development: goals of legitimacy, strengthening national identity, and exercising social control (McCully, 2001).

This thesis focuses on the Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP), or in English the Southeastern Anatolia Project in Türkiye: a large-scale regional development initiative centered on an extensive network of dams and hydroelectric power plants designed to regulate the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers since the 1970s. Large infrastructural

megaprojects make visible the priorities of the state, the distribution of resources, and the political networks that shape who benefits and who does not (Carse, 2012; Larkin, 2013; Meehan, 2014). Viewed through this lens, infrastructure serves as a valuable entry point for analyzing broader political dynamics. Accordingly, this thesis examines the GAP on the premise that infrastructural development offers insights about Türkiye's political trajectory.

The GAP's significance becomes particularly clear in the context of Türkiye's regional disparities. While the western provinces, including Istanbul and key ports such as İzmir, have historically benefited from trade routes, dense infrastructure, and economic development, the eastern regions have remained relatively underdeveloped, lacking comparable access to markets and strategic advantages (Ozkahraman, 2017). The east is also home to ethnically diverse populations, including large Kurdish communities with distinct social and cultural structures. By framing the GAP as a tool to address these imbalances, the Turkish government positions the project not only as an economic initiative but also as a means of state-led political integration and social engineering, reflecting broader priorities in resource allocation and governance (Ozkahraman, 2017).

Nevertheless, Türkiye is not the only country that relies on the water of the Euphrates and Tigris. The GAP retains and controls the flow of water, while Iraq and Syria rely on this water supply (Ozkahraman, 2017). The systems, agricultural practices and traditions, and communities in downstream Türkiye, Iraq and Syria have been vastly impacted by droughts since the change in water flow from the 1970s (Ersoy, 2023). Overall, the GAP is a complex project that encompasses various political themes and layers.

Alongside developing the GAP, between 2002 and 2022, Türkiye underwent significant political transformation under the leadership of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, the Justice and Development Party under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (after this: AKP or AK Party). Scholars widely recognize that the early period (2002–2010) was characterized by economic stabilization, IMF-backed reforms, and a commitment to democratization driven by EU accession incentives (Öniş, 2015; Keyman & Gümüştü, 2014). After 2010, however, research documents a steady centralization of power, weakening of institutional checks and balances, and increasing pressures on the judiciary, media, and opposition (Çınar, 2019; Esen & Gümüştü, 2016). The 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 coup attempt are widely identified as turning points that accelerated authoritarian consolidation (Arat & Pamuk, 2019; Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019).

The post-2016 period, marked by a 2-year emergency rule and the transition to an executive presidential system, showcased what the literature increasingly describes as authoritarianism (Esen & Gümüştü, 2021; Özbudun, 2015). By 2022, academic analyses characterize Türkiye as a political system with contracting democratic space, rising nationalism, and strong executive dominance over political and economic institutions (Çarkođlu & Kalaycıođlu, 2021).

Thesis structure

This raises the question of whether broader political trends in Türkiye between 2002 and 2022 are reflected in the GAP, seeing that infrastructure can be understood as the entry point for broader political dynamics. Accordingly, the central research question of this thesis is: *What does the GAP reveal about broader political patterns in Türkiye between 2002-2022?* This study seeks to identify correlations between GAP developments and national political developments over the same timeframe.

To identify these correlations, the theoretical framework first introduces the concept of authoritarian developmentalism and places it within existing debates on large-scale dams. This concept serves as a lens to examine political patterns in Türkiye between 2002 and 2022. By analyzing GAP infrastructure, the study investigates continuities and changes in governance, economic integration, and discursive framing that may indicate democratic backsliding. To assess these patterns systematically, the framework also draws on democratic theory, providing indicators to evaluate the democratic trajectory of the GAP.

The theoretical framework is followed by the methodology, which will explain the qualitative research methods employed, and a brief historical overview of Türkiye and the GAP, providing essential context for the events and developments within the study period. Building on this context, the main body of the thesis employs a process-tracing approach to examine governance practices, policy narratives, economic patterns, and changes in international cooperation related to the GAP. In other words, the thesis takes a longitudinal approach, assessing the project over the 20-year period from 2002 to 2022. The analysis is structured into three chapters, each focusing on a distinct period:

1. The GAP between 2002-2010: a period of the AK Party's start in Turkish politics, an economic boom, EU accession negotiations and the implementation of key political reforms.
2. The GAP between 2010-2016: a period of halted EU accession, multiple political reforms that impacted the balance of power and increased public unrest.
3. The GAP between 2016-2022: a period of great political instability, a coup d'état, an emergency rule that lasted two years and a shift to a presidential system.

Following the analysis of these three periods, the thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings, highlights the limitations of the research, and offers suggestions for future study.

Hypothesis

In quantitative research methods, hypotheses are used to test theories by examining relationships between variables using numerical data and statistical procedures. Although qualitative research is not typically designed to statistically test hypotheses, a hypothesis section was included in this study to make explicit the theoretical

assumptions guiding the inquiry. This thesis proceeds from the assumption that large-scale infrastructure projects can function as political instruments that reflect and reproduce broader regime dynamics. Building on the literature on authoritarian developmentalism and state-led hydro-infrastructure, the following hypotheses guide the analysis; they are provisional and flexible, serving as theory-informed propositions that remain open to refinement or rejection based on the analysis.

H1: The governance of the GAP between 2002 and 2022 increasingly reflects patterns associated with authoritarian developmentalism.

This includes a narrowing of participatory mechanisms, reduced transparency, limited accountability, and more centralized decision-making. As Türkiye shifted toward a more authoritarian political system after 2010, and especially after 2016, the author anticipates that these regime-level changes are likely mirrored in the governance practices surrounding the GAP, drawing on insights from existing theory.

H2: The GAP's discursive framing becomes more nationalistic and securitized over time.

Based on the literature, the author expects that GAP discourse will emphasize development, regional equality, and integration of the southeast from the 1990s onward. Over time, the language used by the state may increasingly highlight national unity, territorial integrity, and state security, reflecting the nationalist rhetoric of the AKP era.

H3: Türkiye's regional water diplomacy with Iraq and Syria becomes more unilateral as domestic authoritarianism develops further.

Authoritarian developmentalist states tend to assert infrastructural sovereignty and prioritize national development over cooperative or multilateral arrangements. The author anticipates a potential shift from a relatively cooperative water-sharing discourse toward a more assertive or rigid negotiation stance.

H4: The GAP's integration with the broader economy increasingly serves state-aligned capital and patronage networks.

As the literature links authoritarian developmentalism to crony capitalism and the expansion of state–business alliances, the author anticipates that the GAP's economic dimension, including contracting, investment patterns, and regional development initiatives, may increasingly reflect a role for politically connected firms.

Relevance

The “hydraulic mission” (Wester, 2009, p. 10) that has been employed by many states attempts to manage water to meet domestic, industrial, and agricultural demands. Alongside optimizing economic output, constructing water infrastructure was also implemented as a means to solve social problems and prevent disintegration of their

nation (Hanna et al., 2018, p. 83). On the other hand, the cost of hydraulic projects can be high, benefitting some groups and disadvantaging others.

Various academics have also taken an interest in dams in other states, regions or basins: for example, in Tajikistan (Menga, 2015), Ethiopia (Bezahler, 2024), Ghana (Miescher, 2022), Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and South Africa (Mokorosi & van der Zaag, 2007), Central Africa (Tischler, 2014), India (Routray, 2020), and Wales (Atkins, 2018). Dams are central to debates on the economy and energy production, agriculture, food security, and distribution of wealth, in the domestic and international spheres due to transboundary water networks. It touches on livelihoods of people in and around the area, employment, and strategic autonomy, but also biodiversity, the climate, and societal matters of displacement, equality and security. This thesis aims to contribute to the study of dams beyond technical and economic dimensions.

In the broader sense, the GAP, or in the narrower sense, a dam in Türkiye, is examined in its relationship to Türkiye's political system. This approach is valuable because it allows us to assess whether the project evolves in line with broader political trends, or remains relatively autonomous, and whether it can serve as an indicator of Türkiye's wider political or democratic trajectory. To achieve this, this study analyzes governance practices, discursive framing, regional water diplomacy, and economic integration associated with the GAP, tracing how these elements change over time in relation to national political developments. The extent to which GAP developments align with the broader political trajectory may suggest that dams can serve as tools for assessing a country's democratic course. Understanding this potential could also provide insights applicable to other dam projects internationally. Overall, the thesis aims to offer longitudinal insight into indicators of democratic backsliding.

In addition, this thesis seeks to contribute to academic debates on authoritarian developmentalism, and its application to Türkiye, particularly in the context of water infrastructure. By examining the GAP over two decades, the thesis aims to provide an empirical link between regime change and long-term water infrastructure governance. Analyzing how the GAP provides insights into how state-led development advances both economic and political objectives, it offers a concrete case through which to strengthen our understanding of authoritarian developmentalism in practice.

Lastly, the study is regionally significant because water resources in Türkiye and the broader Euphrates–Tigris basin face growing vulnerability due to climate change and socio-political pressures. Analyzing the GAP provides a window into how state-led infrastructure shapes resource management, governance, and regional relations, insights that will become increasingly important as water scarcity might intensify and competition over transboundary resources is likely to grow.

Literature review

Infrastructural development and political economy

It is important for this thesis to examine the GAP not only in terms of its economic outputs, such as hydroelectric production and irrigation expansion, but also as a political project. Scholars widely note that large-scale infrastructure functions as a window of state power: the planning, financing, and implementation of dams, ports, highways, and similar megaprojects make visible the priorities of the state, the allocation of resources, and the political networks that determine who benefits and who does not (Carse, 2012; Larkin, 2013; Meehan, 2014).

Seen from this perspective, infrastructure becomes an entry point for understanding wider political patterns. Accordingly, this thesis evaluates the GAP under the assumption that infrastructural development offers insight into the political system of Türkiye; demonstrating the state's capacity to mobilize resources, impose regulations, and coordinate across institutions, while at the same time exposing inequalities in access, participation, and decision-making authority (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Altinbilek, 2002).

Among infrastructural projects, large dams are particularly central in the interplay between politics and development. Dams are impactful undertakings that require substantial investments. Decisions about their location, scale, and beneficiaries often reflect underlying social hierarchies and bureaucratic interests (Scudder, 2005; Tilt et al., 2009). Dams carry symbolic weight as instruments of modernization, national development, and even national security (Swyngedouw & Menga, 2018). Studying dams within the broader context of infrastructure therefore enables an analysis of how states exercise power, manage resources, and reproduce or contest economic and political inequalities (McCully, 2001; Arsel, et al., 2021).

Research on dam projects worldwide provides numerous examples of how hydraulic infrastructure intersects with state authority, economic development, and social and environmental outcomes. Case studies include Tajikistan (Menga, 2015), Ethiopia (Bezahler, 2024), Ghana (Miescher, 2022), the Southern African region encompassing Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, and South Africa (Mokorosi & van der Zaag, 2007), Egypt (Hanna, Allouche, & Swyngedouw, 2018), Central Africa (Tischler, 2014), India (Routray, 2020), and Wales (Atkins, 2018). Collectively, these studies highlight how dam projects not only shape the technical and economic landscape but also display and influence governance structures, resource allocation, local communities, and environmental conditions.

Other scholars have focused specifically on dams and their broader socio-political and environmental implications. Shah et al. (2021) examines mega-hydraulic projects and the conflicts that emerge during their construction and operation. Murphy (2011) critically

evaluates dams, weighing their economic and infrastructural benefits against the social and environmental harms they often produce. Dye (2016, p. 304) introduces the concept of “high modernism,” highlighting the role of large dams in state-led development projects and the broader visions of progress they embody.

Authoritarianism and irrigation

Having established the GAP as a useful lens through which to examine state structures and governance, the next step is to consider its significance within the broader Turkish political economy. Given Türkiye’s evolution toward an increasingly authoritarian political system, it could be valuable to explore the potential relationship between large-scale irrigation projects and authoritarianism. Empirical research suggests that extensive irrigation infrastructure can reinforce authoritarian governance: Bentzen (2015, p. 49), for example, concludes that countries reliant on irrigated agriculture are less democratic than those with rainfed agriculture

According to Bentzen’s (2015) research, this pattern arises because irrigation allows elites to monopolize water and land, consolidating economic and political power and limiting democratization. The effect is observed both across countries and within regions and is linked to higher land inequality historically and in premodern societies. These findings highlight how control over water resources can strengthen elite power and support authoritarian structures (Bentzen, 2015).

This raises the question of the GAP’s role and its potential relationship with authoritarianism. For the purposes of this research, examining the overall prevalence of irrigation and its possible link to autocratic tendencies in Türkiye would extend beyond the scope of the thesis. Instead, this study focuses on whether the GAP can be understood as a microcosm reflecting the broader democratic trajectory of the country, providing insights into how large-scale state projects interact with patterns of political centralization, control, and governance.

Authoritarian developmentalism

To analyze the GAP, this study adopts the theoretical lens of authoritarian developmentalism, which allows for an examination of the political-economic dimensions of dam development and its intersections with authoritarian governance. Understanding this concept is essential, as it provides a framework for interpreting how state-led development projects, such as large dams, can serve both economic objectives and the consolidation of political power.

The concept of authoritarian developmentalism refers to a political situation in which state authorities pursue rapid economic transformation while restricting political pluralism and democratic participation. Although neoliberalism is often associated with market liberalization, privatization, and the promotion of competitive markets, it does not

necessarily mean a retreat of the state. Instead, neoliberal reforms often require a strong state capable of constructing, regulating, and enforcing markets, even as it withdraws from the provision of services (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010). This distinction is crucial: whereas classical liberalism is linked to political freedoms, civic rights, and individual autonomy, neoliberalism reframes individuals as competitive economic actors: entrepreneurs, investors, and consumers embedded in global markets (Brown, 2015).

A growing body of scholarship argues that neoliberalism can coexist with, and sometimes reinforce, authoritarian governance. In such contexts, economic liberalization continues alongside constraints on civil liberties, centralization of executive power, and weakened institutional checks (Bruff, 2014). Market freedoms, such as capital mobility, privatization, and labor flexibility, can expand even while political freedoms contract. This combination is partly rooted in neoliberalism's tendency to subordinate political and social demands to market requirements, reducing democratic input in the name of efficiency, competitiveness, or fiscal discipline (Wacquant, 2012; Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). As a consequence, neoliberal reforms sometimes increase inequalities or fail to satisfy the expectations of poorer parts of society. This causes governments to emphasize economic growth as the primary source of political legitimacy rather than legitimacy through democratic principles (Arsel & Dasgupta, 2015).

In some cases, this evolves into what scholars describe as *authoritarian neoliberal developmentalism* (Arsel, 2012, p 262-262): a phase in which the state continues to champion market-oriented growth while increasingly managing economic resources through centralized political authority. Public contracts, infrastructural investments, and state-business networks become tools for consolidating political power, fostering loyal economic elites, and projecting images of national strength or modernity (Öniş, 2015; Babacan & Onis, 2021). Development is not only framed as an economic strategy but also as an ideological instrument, promising that social and political tensions can be resolved through growth, investment, and market expansion rather than democratic negotiation or institutional reform (Arsel, 2012, p. 262-263).

These large-scale development projects thus carry political meaning beyond their mandate. They operate simultaneously as economic policies and as symbols of state capacity, unity and progress. As a result, neoliberal developmental projects may function to justify centralization, contain dissent, or encourage electoral legitimacy at moments when democratic institutions weaken. Thus, authoritarian developmentalism is best understood as an interplay between economic liberalization and political control, where development is mobilized not only to transform the economy but also to reshape state-society relations under conditions of democratic backsliding.

A key contribution to authoritarian developmentalism in Türkiye by Tansel (2018) applies the lens to the AK Party rule in Türkiye. His publication mainly rejects a strict analytical separation between political (institutions, elections) and economic (neoliberal reforms,

market liberalization) explanations. Instead, it shows that economic restructuring under neoliberalism was itself shaped by authoritarian tendencies, so the two cannot be disentangled. Hence, he argues that there was no hard ‘*authoritarian turn*’ (Tansel, 2018, p. 209-210) in AK Party rule. On the contrary, he argues the neoliberal economic reforms that were made in the early 2000s and later in the 2010s already laid the groundwork for authoritarian rule. With this argument, he showcases that normal democratic procedures and the implementation of neoliberal policies can work alongside, and sometimes enable, deliberately authoritarian practices (Tansel, 2018).

His analysis identifies four main patterns: (1) the exclusion of laboring classes from policymaking under AK Party rule; (2) the rise of clientelist relationships between the state and pro-government conglomerates across several corporate sectors, particularly the media, alongside market liberalization; (3) the growing use of security-oriented discourse by state institutions; and (4) the government’s effective production of consent through the promotion of the “National Will” narrative within the Turkish right (Tansel, 2018, p. 209). These patterns all contributed to the gradual democratic erosion and slow decrease of civil rights and liberties (Tansel, 2018).

Because the GAP sits at the intersection of political and economic state objectives, this framework of authoritarian developmentalism is well suited to capturing how developmental objectives and economic policies are intertwined with shifting patterns of state power and authoritarianism in Türkiye.

Democracy and Rule of Law

If an authoritarian developmentalist state can liberalize markets while simultaneously maintaining strong central control, limiting political freedoms, and weakening institutional checks, this raises important questions about the democratic trajectory of the country: in this case, Türkiye. To address these questions, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by democracy and its core principles. Which mechanisms are most affected when a state experiences democratic backsliding? Understanding these concepts is crucial for this thesis, as it evaluates the democratic trajectory of the GAP and examines whether the project reflects or diverges from broader trends in Türkiye’s political system.

Democratic theory

Democracy is broadly understood as a system of governance in which political power is derived from and accountable to the people, encompassing not only free and fair elections but also the protection of civil liberties, the rule of law, and the separation of powers (Merkel, 2004, p. 36). Central to democratic governance are principles such as political participation, transparency, accountability and effective institutional checks on executive power (Merkel, 2004; Coppedge et al., 2011).

Institutional checks and balances in decision-making processes

The separation of powers is a foundational principle of democratic governance, designed to prevent the concentration of authority and to ensure accountability across different branches of government. By dividing power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, each branch can provide oversight and check the others, thereby protecting individual rights (Lijphart, 2012). Effective separation of powers allows for balanced decision-making and limits the potential for abuse within the political system.

Political participation

Political participation is another core component of democratic theory, shaping the ways in which citizens engage with and influence the political process. Participation can take many forms, including voting, joining political parties or civil society organizations, attending public meetings, or engaging in protests and advocacy (Norris, 2002). High levels of participation are essential for the legitimacy and responsiveness of democratic institutions, as they ensure that government decisions reflect the preferences and needs of their population.

Transparency and accountability

Transparency and accountability are other essential pillars of democratic governance, ensuring that public officials act in accordance with the law and are answerable to citizens. Transparency refers to the availability of government information and the openness of decision-making processes, enabling citizens to monitor policies, resource allocation, and administrative actions (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013, p. 4). Accountability complements transparency by establishing mechanisms through which (political) actors are held responsible for their decisions, including legal oversight, audits, parliamentary scrutiny, and public reporting (Pilon & Brouard, 2023, p. 423). Together, these principles promote trust in institutions, prevent corruption, and facilitate informed citizen participation.

Rule of Law

The rule of law is hence the principle that all individuals and institutions, including the state itself, are subject to and accountable under publicly known and equally enforced legal norms. It requires that laws are applied consistently, decisions are made according to established procedures, and no one, including government officials, is above the law (Waldron, 2021, p. 92). Other important democratic principles are for example electoral integrity and competitiveness, pluralism and political inclusion (Schedler, 2002, p. 38), judicial independence and equality.

These concepts display some overlap, as judicial independence is part of a separation of powers and the rule of law also entails that the government is constrained by the law.

Political participation allows for civic rights and freedom of expression to hold the government accountable and support informed political debate (Norris, 2017).

Procedural vs substantive democracy

Contemporary democratic scholarship increasingly distinguishes between procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy, while emphasizing that formal mechanisms, such as free and fair elections, competitive parties, and rule-of-law institutions, are only one dimension of democratic quality. It is important to understand the difference, as it is also relevant to the workings of the GAP in the analysis.

Procedural democracy remains important because it ensures citizens have the formal means to choose and replace leaders and constrains leaders' power through institutions and legal frameworks. However, recent studies argue that substantive democracy must also account for how well democracy delivers on rights, social justice, equality, and meaningful participation (Coppedge et al., 2019; Bunce & Wolchik, 2019). In other words, democracy's legitimacy depends not only on whether elections occur, but also on whether outcomes reflect citizens' interests, protect vulnerable groups, and guarantee civil liberties, inclusion, and due process.

Democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to the process by which these principles are systematically weakened, often (but not always) gradually and legally, rather than through abrupt or revolutionary overthrow (Bermeo, 2016, p. 14). Mechanisms of democratic erosion typically include the restriction of civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and assembly; the politicization and weakening of independent institutions like the judiciary and electoral commissions; the limiting of press freedom; and the manipulation of electoral rules to favor specific officials (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann et al., 2020). This often goes hand in hand with seemingly rational choices and simultaneous vexing ambiguity (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15).

In addition, backsliding can manifest in the concentration of executive power, the undermining of opposition parties, and the centralization of policy-making authority, effectively limiting citizen participation and pluralistic contestation. Understanding these mechanisms provides a framework for assessing how institutional practices, policy implementation, and large-scale development projects intersect with broader trends of democratic erosion (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021; Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019).

The idea of democratic backsliding aligns with the argument made by Tansel (2018), who challenges the notion of a sudden '*authoritarian turn*' (Tansel, 2018, p. 209-210) in Türkiye and instead emphasizes a long-term process of gradual, legally mediated democratic erosion. In contrast, prior to the Gezi Park protests, scholars such as Bâli (2011, p. 25) and Atasoy (2011, p. 86) portrayed the "Turkish Model" of conservative democracy as functioning effectively, even suggesting it could serve as a model for other Middle Eastern

countries or as a stabilizing framework in the context of the Arab Spring. However, the government's response to the Gezi Park protests in 2013, followed by heightened restrictions on rights and freedoms, undermined the AKP's claims to embody freedom and democracy (Bilgiç, 2018).

Hydrohegemony

To understand the GAP's broader political significance, it is also important to examine its role in transboundary water politics. Because the Euphrates–Tigris rivers cross national borders, Türkiye's upstream management affects water availability for downstream states, particularly Syria and Iraq. The resulting patterns of cooperation, tension, and contestation over these shared waters have been widely studied, especially in water-scarce Middle Eastern contexts (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

This transboundary dimension is relevant for the present study because a state's approach to international water governance can offer insights into broader patterns of accountability by its transparency, adherence to established norms, and engagement in cooperative mechanisms. Although such behavior is not a direct measure of democracy, research on transboundary water politics shows that cooperative, rule-bound, and transparent water management practices tend to correlate with stronger governance quality and institutional constraints on executive authority (Dinar & Dinar, 2005; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006; Wolf, 2007).

“Hydro-hegemony” (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006, p. 437) is a concept that describes how a powerful state in upstream countries exercises control over shared water resources, not only through coercion but also by influencing norms, knowledge and strategies for water management, often at the cost of downstream countries. Zeitoun and Warner (2006) explain hydro-hegemony is hegemony established at the river basin level, which is consolidated through resource capture, integration and containment.

The hydro-hegemony academic debate of the last 30 years revolved around the question of “water wars” (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006, p. 437) in the Middle East. Two camps fought over this debate: the proponents propagated that strife over scarce water would lead to full-scale war in the Middle East (Amery, 2002), whereas opponents reject this idea and see opportunities of cooperation based on water management (Delli Priscoli, 2009). Currently, the consensus of the academic debate has shifted to the rejection of ‘water wars’, since cooperation between riparian states has continued amidst conflicts and crises in the Middle East. However, water still can be a crucial instrument within conflict, as water access, supply and use can be manipulated to serve military purposes or can be targeted in conflict (Daoudy, 2020). Kibaroglu (2019), Kibaroglu & Sayan (2021), Tunti (2023) and Douglas (2016) discuss transboundary water management with Türkiye, Iraq and Syria: the situation of ‘imperfect peace’, in regard to governance, justice and water rights.

Overall, the literature indicates that the GAP serves not only as a domestic development initiative but also as a tool of regional influence, reinforcing its character as a political project. Türkiye's management of the Euphrates–Tigris basin, through its transparency, adherence to international water norms, and engagement with Syria and Iraq, offers insight into accountability measures and governance of the Turkish state. Understanding this international dimension of GAP water governance, including the scholarly debate on 'water wars,' is useful for comprehending the analysis. Considering the spectrum of interactions from cooperation to conflict with Syria and Iraq helps assess the broader political patterns the GAP reflects in Türkiye between 2002 and 2022.

Historical background of Türkiye

This chapter offers a historical overview of Türkiye and the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), emphasizing the political, economic, and social developments that shaped the construction of the GAP prior to the 2002–2022 research period. Understanding this context is important for interpreting the analysis in the following chapters, as it provides insight into key aspects of the Turkish socio-political landscape.

The establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 marked a decisive shift from the Ottoman past, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk leading a comprehensive program of political, legal, social, cultural, and economic transformation aimed at modernizing Anatolia. Atatürk, a nationalist with strong Western-oriented and secularist convictions, viewed modernization as essential for Türkiye's political independence and economic self-sufficiency (Zürcher, 2004). Central to his ideology were three interrelated objectives: securing Turkish sovereignty and national self-sufficiency, reforming the role of Islam in public life, and implementing broad modernization across society (Ahmad, 1993; Karpat, 2002).

Economic modernization accompanied these societal reforms. The early republic invested heavily in state-led industrialization, banking systems, land reform, and labor legislation, with the aim of increasing production capacity, dismantling feudal agrarian structures, and integrating rural regions into the national economy (Keyder, 1987; Sönmez, 2000). Education programs targeted farmers, while the development of private and public enterprises sought to generate sustainable growth. Yet, these economic transformations produced uneven effects: while urban centers and newly industrialized regions often prospered, peripheral areas, particularly along the southeastern border, lost historical trade advantages and experienced relative impoverishment (Keyder, 1987).

The ambition for self-sufficiency and modernization laid the groundwork for large-scale infrastructural initiatives in the 60s and 70s. Early visions for harnessing the Euphrates and Tigris rivers for hydroelectric power and irrigation reflected the continued Kemalist emphasis on state-led modernization and national development (Alpaslan, 1999). By the 1970s, these ambitions solidified in the Keban Dam Project (Kilinç, 2009), which assessed water flows for energy production, and led to the formal establishment of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in 1989. GAP's stated objectives sought to normalize regional development, income, and living standards between the southeastern provinces and the rest of the country (Ersel & Özsoy, 2001).

The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), by the time of its formal institutionalization in 1989, included the construction of 22 large dams on the Euphrates and Tigris and 19 hydroelectric power plants (GAP Regional Development Administration, 1989; Ersel & Özsoy, 2001).



Figure 3: Elazığ Keban Barajı. From Wikipedia Commons (2020) by Z. Kılınç.

GAP's multidimensional aims reflect the interweaving of technical, socioeconomic, and political objectives. Technically, the project sought to expand irrigation, increase agricultural and industrial output, and generate hydroelectric energy (Diker, 2005). Socioeconomically, it aimed to reduce regional inequalities, raise living standards, and integrate marginalized populations into the national economy (Ersel & Özsoy, 2001). Some academics argue that the GAP was leveraged to reinforce state authority in the southeast, restructure land ownership, contain migration, and counteract traditional power structures and insurgent activities, particularly related to the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, which translates to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (from now on: PKK) (Çalışkan, 2004).

In conclusion, Türkiye's recent history offers valuable context for understanding the development of the GAP. It highlights that large-scale water infrastructure predates the 2002–2022 research period and is rooted in the Kemalist legacy of modernization and self-sufficiency. Keeping in mind the longstanding regional disparities in development between the western and eastern parts of the country is also important. This historical context sheds light on developments during the 2002–2022 period and traces the origins of the GAP as both a technical initiative and a political instrument.

Methodology

This thesis addresses the following research question:

What does the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) reveal about broader political patterns in Türkiye between 2002 and 2022?

Research Design

This research adopts a longitudinal qualitative research design to examine the democratic trajectory of the GAP over time, comparing it to the broader national political patterns to see how they align. The longitudinal approach enables a process-tracing analysis of continuity and change in democratic practices and power relations across a twenty-year period, spanning from 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to 2022.

The analysis is structured around three political-economic periods: (1) 2002–2010, (2) 2010–2016, and (3) 2016–2022, which existing literature identifies as critical turning points in Türkiye’s political trajectory (Öniş, 2016, p. 142). In particular, the period following 2016 represents a significant juncture due to major political and institutional transformations following the coup d’état.

The GAP was chosen as a critical infrastructural case because of its scale, longevity, and central role in state-led development in Türkiye. As one of the country’s most ambitious development projects, it offers a valuable context for examining changes in governance structures, state–society relations, and democratic practices under AK Party rule. Practically, the extensive availability of data and existing research on the GAP also made it a feasible topic for this study.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by the framework of authoritarian developmentalism (Bruff, 2014; Tansel, 2018), which allows for an examination of how centralized political authority intersects with state-led economic development. Within this framework, the study assesses democratic governance through four thematic dimensions:

1. Governance dimension, including decision-making processes, participation, transparency, and accountability;
2. Discursive dimension, examining the symbolic and rhetorical value attributed to the GAP in political narratives and how it is perceived by civil society;
3. Regional dimension, focusing on Türkiye’s cooperation with Iraq and Syria in relation to GAP water management;
4. Economic dimension, assessing the role of the GAP within the broader economy and its interaction with private-sector actors.

GAP governance is first operationalized through qualitative indicators including decision-making processes, transparency in planning, accountability mechanisms, and opportunities for participation. However, the scope of democratic governance extends beyond institutional arrangements. Accordingly, state justifications and public perceptions of the GAP are also examined as a distinct analytical dimension.

Furthermore, as the GAP does not operate in isolation, its international dimension is incorporated into the analysis. Finally, drawing on Tansel's (2018) conceptualization of authoritarian developmentalism in Türkiye, which emphasizes that political and economic processes cannot be disentangled, state–market relations are treated as a crucial indicator of democratic governance. These indicators are assessed longitudinally to identify patterns of democratic continuity, transformation, or erosion within the GAP.

Methods

A qualitative research approach is employed because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of evolving power relations and the contested meanings of democracy. To capture both institutional practices and the perspectives of key actors, the study adopts a mixed qualitative-methods design, combining qualitative content analysis of relevant policy documents with semi-structured expert interviews. This approach integrates official narratives with expert insights, providing a nuanced understanding of how democratic governance within the GAP has developed, transformed, or eroded over time.

Primary data are drawn from policy documents and expert interviews, while secondary sources are used to complement and contextualize these findings. For instance, secondary data on Turkish media are incorporated to bypass Turkish-language constraints. By triangulating primary and secondary sources, the study enhances the credibility and reliability of its findings.

Qualitative Content Analysis

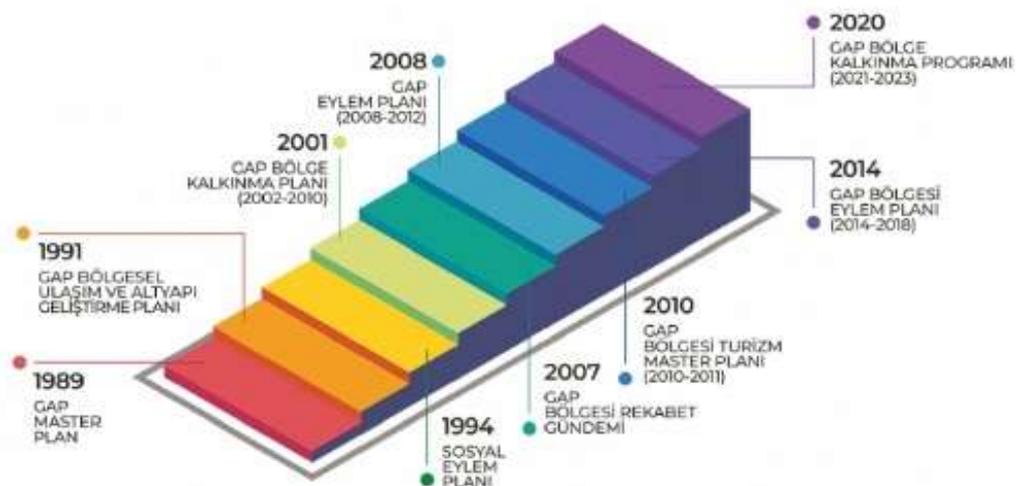


Figure 4: Timeline of GAP master plans and action plans. From the GAP Regional Development Administration website (2023), by the GAP-RDP.

Qualitative content analysis is used to examine the GAP Action Plans and GAP Regional Development Plans published by the Turkish state between 2002-2022. These policy documents were chosen to analyze because they provides consistent insight into official strategies, priorities, and governance approaches over time. The analysis focuses on both the substantive content of these policy documents, such as stated objectives, budgets, and development strategies, and discursive elements, analyzing the language and framing used to identify underlying power structures and political-economic meanings.

Rather than relying on a formal coding scheme, the analysis adopts a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), in which existing theory on authoritarian developmentalism and democratic backsliding informs the analytical focus. These dimensions provide a structured way to examine policy documents over time and to trace how governance practices, policy priorities, and justificatory narratives associated with the GAP evolve across different political periods. In this sense, qualitative content analysis is used in combination with a process-tracing approach, allowing the study to identify sequences, shifts, and continuities. This approach emphasizes contextual interpretation of the democratic trajectory over time and is well suited to the longitudinal, case-based focus of the thesis.

Interviews

To complement the qualitative content analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four academic experts based primarily in Türkiye and the Netherlands. Participants were selected due to their expertise in GAP-related policy, regional development, democratic governance, or related issues such as the Kurdish question. Their academic knowledge and field experience made them well suited to provide informed perspectives on the governance and democratic dynamics of the GAP between 2002 and 2022. The interviews were conducted digitally from the Netherlands and the transcripts of the interviews are available in the Appendix. In the research the four interviewees will be named as the following: Academic 1, Academic 2, Academic 3, and Water Expert.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy combined purposive and snowball sampling. Initial participants were identified through academic publications, online research and contacted directly via email. In some cases, interviewees recommended additional experts with complementary or contrasting perspectives. No fixed number of interviews was predetermined; instead, the aim was to capture a diversity of viewpoints, including both state-aligned and critical perspectives. Practical considerations such as accessibility and willingness to participate in English-language interviews also directed participant selection.

Interview Procedure

A semi-structured interview format was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for open discussion and follow-up questions. Interview questions focused on the aforementioned four thematic dimensions of governance, justifications and perceptions, and the regional and economic dimension. Care was taken to formulate neutral, non-leading questions to encourage open and reflective responses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were important for this research due to the politically sensitive nature of the topic. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was offered to all interviewees, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and findings.

Given the potential professional and political risks associated with discussing state-led development, democratic governance, and regional issues in Türkiye, particular care was taken to protect participants' confidentiality. Interview data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

Researcher Positionality and Limitations

This study acknowledges the role of researcher interpretation in qualitative analysis. The researcher approaches the GAP as an external researcher, relying on English-language interviews and publicly available policy documents. While this facilitates analytical distance, it may limit access to informal practices and locally embedded perspectives.

Several limitations should be noted. Policy documents primarily reflect official state narratives and may not accurately represent implementation on the ground. Expert interviews, while insightful, are shaped by participants' academic positions and personal perspectives. Additionally, reliance on English-language sources may exclude certain local viewpoints. These limitations are mitigated through triangulation and thematic consistency.

Conclusion

By combining qualitative content analysis with expert interviews, this study assesses how the GAP positions itself in the broader political developments of Türkiye over time. These findings are then compared with broader political-economic developments to evaluate whether changes in the project's governance reflect wider political patterns in Türkiye between 2002 and 2022. Finally, the thesis aims to contribute to the broader academic debate on large infrastructural projects such as the GAP and if it can serve as an indicator of the democratic trajectory in a country.

Chapter 1: the GAP between 2002-2010

The way that the GAP is planned, financed, justified, governed, and received indicates how decisions are made, who holds power, whose interests are prioritized and how dissent is managed. Who holds the power, whose interests are managed and how dissent is approached might indicate the democratic degree of a project.

Hence, in this chapter the GAP is assessed based on its decision-making process, participation, accountability and transparency mechanisms, its justifications and perceptions, its cooperation with foreign actors and its private/public partnerships. It is compared to the broader political changes in Türkiye and thereby examines how it reflects broader political-economic patterns in Türkiye between 2002-2010.

The governance dimension

The GAPs decision making process

The following section examines the GAP's institutional and procedural organization, including reforms and continuities among the actors involved, the distribution of power, and the laws and directives that guide the policy cycle and shape decision-making.

At the start of AKP leadership in 2002, the Turkish General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (The DSI - Devlet Su Isleri) was recognized as the most important actor in the decision-making processes around the GAP by all my interviewees. In addition, another important actor for the GAP during the period of 2002-2010 was The Turkish State Planning Agency (Devlet Planlama Teskilati – DPT), an agency that was responsible for constructing 5-year plans on political, social and cultural goals, not exclusive to water management and ensuring “*strong and structural coordination among relevant ministries*” (Kibaroglu & Baskan, 2011, p. 8). The DPT had a rather advisory role (Kibaroglu & Baskan, 2011). In 2011 the DPT was disbanded and her duties were taken over by the Ministry of Development.

Kibaroglu and Baskan (2011, p. 6) mention: “*While it is sometimes argued that Türkiye's administrative set-up for water resources is highly fragmented with overlapping responsibilities, the organizational structure is actually not so complex: at the strategic decision-making and planning level, the Prime Minister, the State Planning Organization (DPT, in Turkish acronym) and ministries are involved*”. As scholarship notes, the DPT functioned as a semi-autonomous institution that upheld supra-political developmental norms and provided the analytical backbone for regional action plans (Türker & Musaoğlu, 2022). In this way, the DPT acted as a counterweight against the DSI within the governance of GAP (Bilgen, 2023). This indicates, in comparison to the disbandment of the DPT in 2011, a more pluralist governance structure in this time frame. It signals more institutional checks on water policy between 2002-2010 compared to later stages.

On the other hand, according to Kibaroglu and Baskan (2011, p. 7): *“The Turkish administrative system, including the water-related institutions, has three administrative levels: the national, the provincial and the local level (i.e. municipalities and villages). Being modelled on the French system, it is highly centralized and linked to strong central government organizations”*; this aligns with Academic 1’s claims that all decisions in regards to water management always have to go past the Prime Minister either way. Even though there are several institutional checks with different administrative (DPT) and executive (DSI) powers, the final decision lying by the Prime Minister signals a strong concentration of power at the top.

Furthermore, the State Planning Organization (DPT), gradually lost influence and bureaucratic weight (Bilgen, 2016; Günes, 2014). The 2008 GAP Action Plan introduced a formalized regional development framework, setting strategic objectives for the Southeastern Anatolia Project and assigning responsibilities to GAP-RDA/BKI. While these measures aimed to improve coordination across ministries and were intended to align with EU-inspired monitoring and evaluation practices, scholarly sources indicate that real inter-ministerial coordination remained limited, and DPT’s role as an institutional check was increasingly sidelined (CIAO, 2005; Bilgen, 2016). Thus, the 2002–2010 period reflects both attempts at institutionalized regional planning and the broader trend of centralizing power under the executive branch during the AKP’s early rule.

On the other hand, as part of the publishing of the GAP Regional Development Plan (GAP-RDP), the administration decided to move the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP BKI) to Şanlıurfa in 2009, referring to the need to be more closely embedded in the region where the project operates (GAP-BKI, 2009/2020). Academic 1 confirms the rationale to bring central planning closer to the region as the following:

“As part of the new GAP action plan, they decided to open a new office in Şanlıurfa. But thinking that, because it's a regional project, the administration should be located in the region too. That was the rationale. And then years later, I heard that they closed the office in Ankara for good.”

Although the relocation of GAP-BKI was successfully implemented, there is no direct evidence attributing this move to the EU accession procedures; however, it coincides with broader debates on decentralization and regional governance promoted during the EU harmonization period. In October 2005, formal accession negotiations with the European Union began. It served as a catalyst for a range of significant reforms (Schimmelfennig, 2021). These included for instance lifting penalties on freedom of speech, enacting laws to protect children, and improving trade union rights (Schimmelfennig, 2021). In terms of water policy, Türkiye drafted a national water law around 2007 to align its water management framework with the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). While some institutional and planning reforms were introduced, full implementation remained limited (Kibaroglu, 2015; Üstüner Birben, 2019; Burak, et al., 2022).

The extent to which the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) was incorporated into Turkish water law remains ambiguous. Bulut and Birben (2019) suggest that implementation was partial. Kibaroglu (2015) specifies that the measures adopted primarily focused on demand management and environmental impact assessments, without addressing EU concerns regarding the construction of new water infrastructure. Both Kibaroglu (2015) and the Water Expert interviewee note that the EU largely overlooks the role of dams in Türkiye's socioeconomic development, which Turkish authorities used to justify continuing their national policies rather than fully aligning with EU requirements. This indicates that, throughout the 2000s, the Turkish government was only selectively willing to adapt its decision-making processes to international frameworks. Arguably, this selective approach reflects broader political dynamics in Türkiye, particularly as the EU accession negotiations had stalled by around 2010.

In conclusion, the 2002–2010 period of GAP decision-making reflects a tension between attempts at institutionalized regional planning and strong centralization of power. While agencies like the DPT and GAP-BKI introduced planning frameworks, regional offices, and EU-inspired reforms, ultimate authority remained concentrated with the Prime Minister and the DSI. Reforms were often selective, and inter-ministerial coordination was limited, signaling that early AKP governance combined formal pluralist structures with top-down control, laying the groundwork for later centralization trends.

Participation

Shifting focus from the institutional structure of the policy cycle, the participation section examines the role and influence of actors beyond government institutions in the GAP between 2002 and 2010. This includes civil society, local stakeholders, and commercial actors. The section also considers the diverse perspectives on the GAP, particularly in relation to the Kurdish issue, and how these viewpoints interact and intersect.

Aside from the DPT, DSI, GAP-BKI, and, most importantly, the Prime Ministry, relatively few other actors were involved in the planning of the GAP. Akıncı et al. (2020), argues that GAP's planning logic privileges technical rationality and state-led development narratives, marginalizing local social, cultural and political agency. Even though the GAP-BKI was relocated to Şanlıurfa, the sidelining of the DPT illustrates a top-down governance approach from Ankara, with limited scope for bottom-up influence (Akıncı et al. 2020). Academic 1 confirms the strong, top-down governance model of the Turkish state:

“If you look at Türkiye's administrative structure, everything is still decided in Ankara. It's so centralized that no matter how hard you try to decentralize decision-making, including economic decision-making, it doesn't work because you still have to get permission from the central government in Ankara”.

As Academic 1 describes, the private sector and civil society had limited influence, despite the participatory objectives outlined in the 2002 GAP Regional Development Plan

(GAP-RDP). These trends signal effectively low political participation from locals in the areas where the dams and HPPs are built.

The Water Expert employed by a Turkish government institution reflected on her experiences with local actor participation in the construction of GAP water infrastructure in that particular area, which might affect their daily lives. She discussed her observations of what they call “stakeholder consultations”, where government officials visit villages and towns in the southeast to explain and discuss state plans:

“Of course the villagers do not have full influence on the decision, but they can impact the way the decision is made. They may influence the concept of the decision, but the decision-making takes place, of course, in Ankara”. Regarding changes in local participation between 2002 and 2022, she observed: *“I think it has been increasing. Of course, there are political aspects I can’t fully answer. But based on my visits to most cities, I have personally seen an increase in participation over time.”*

The experiences of the Water Expert suggest that during 2002–2010, the involvement of local, commercial and societal organizations was minimal, but, according to her personal opinion, increasing. Also according to Kibaroglu (2014), Türkiye’s water policymaking became more participatory, with decision-makers engaging stakeholders, NGOs, universities, and water users in the formulation of water legislation. On the contrary, Academic 1 highlighted a persistent discrepancy between formal mechanisms and actual practice:

“Most of the time, participation occurs at the very last minute once decisions are already settled. Most decisions are top-down rather than bottom-up”.

With this statement, Academic 1 insinuates that even though mechanisms for participation were consistently established on paper, their actual impact remained limited. The Water Expert’s account confirms that while stakeholder consultations existed in 2002–2010, their effectiveness in shaping decisions was minimal. From a broader perspective, this pattern reflects Türkiye’s political dynamics in the early 2000s: Türkiye’s EU accession process urged legal and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening local administration, decentralization, and multi-level governance, including the use of EU pre-accession funds to build municipal capacity, the establishment of regional/local agencies, and formal alignment with European administrative standards (Tektaş & Kuyucu, 2010; Şeyhanlıoğlu, 2014; Tan, 2018). However, in practice, municipalities often retained limited political autonomy, local civil society and grassroots actors remained marginalized, and central state dominance persisted in many domains (Bayraktar, 2007; Sadioğlu & Ergönül, 2020).

This pattern also intersects with broader developments related to the Kurdish issue, particularly in regions affected by GAP infrastructure. Encouraged by the EU harmonization process and following decades of conflict, the government began to

partially acknowledge local needs and elements of Kurdish identity, as reflected in limited cultural liberalizations around 2005, commonly referred to as (one of) the “Kurdish Opening” (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Despite these measures, local civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and Kurdish political actors continued to face significant repression, including restrictions on expression, media censorship, and pressure under anti-terror legislation. These structural constraints limited opportunities for protest, public debate, and meaningful participation, particularly in Kurdish-majority provinces (Human Rights Watch, 2005). As a result, Kurdish voices were increasingly consulted in policymaking processes, but their influence remained largely non-decisive and non-binding.

The World Bank and UNDP were also involved in the GAP region, often in cooperation with the GAP-BIK with projects that aimed to strengthen decentralization and local governance. The World Bank assisted in creating Water User Associations (WUA) in the 90s, acting as a link between local farmers and central agencies (UNDP, n.d.; World Bank, 1993). Even though WUAs improved local involvement, since responsibilities for irrigation maintenance were transferred to the locals, the villagers faced legal, financial, and capacity problems (Özerol, 2013; Aydoğdu et al, 2015). Although a Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) framework was set up, it never really got off the ground and was not entrenched in stable legal and institutional frameworks, which hindered meaningful participation (National Research Council, 2007; Özerol, 2013).

In conclusion, between 2002 and 2010 participation in GAP policymaking remained largely symbolic. While mechanisms like stakeholder consultations and Water User Associations existed, decisions remained highly centralized in Ankara, and local, civil society, and commercial actors had limited influence. Incremental improvements were observed, and international support (UNDP, World Bank) promoted decentralization, but structural, legal, and political barriers constrained meaningful engagement. The Kurdish issue further limited participation for marginalized communities, highlighting the gap between the GAP’s participatory rhetoric and the realities of top-down governance.

Accountability and transparency mechanisms

In a top-down governance system, to what extent can authorities be held accountable? What information is made available to the public, and is there space for critique? The accountability and transparency section examines the GAP between 2002-2010 in terms of the openness of its decision-making and policy processes, the existence and effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, and the ways in which public criticism is allowed and expressed.

The GAP between 2002-2010 presents a case of formalized transparency and accountability mechanisms, juxtaposed with centralized governance in practice. Officially, GAP is administered through the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP-BKI) and coordinated across multiple ministries and executive agencies. These

ministries published policy documents between 2002-2010: GAP-RDP (2002-2010) and the GAP Action Plan (2008) outlining monitoring and evaluation procedures across water, socio-economic, and infrastructural sectors, such as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA).

These GAP documents emphasize, from 2002 on, a “*human based approach*”, highlighting cooperation with public, local, and voluntary organizations and aims to include local communities in the development process (GAP Action Plan, 2008, p. 33-51). The mandate of the GAP, in comparison to the 90s, was broadened to promoting social policies, health services and gender equality programs in the GAP region (GAP Action Plan, 2008, p. 3).

However, critical scholarship suggests that these formal structures largely serve to project the appearance of inclusion rather than facilitate meaningful local participation (Akıncı et al., 2020). Coordination between ministries and regional authorities has been described as weak, and formal mechanisms for consultation often fail to translate into influence over actual project outcomes (Toker, 2015; Yıldız, 2020).

Regarding accountability, academics show that many of GAP’s promised socio-economic and infrastructural targets, such as fully operational irrigation networks, decreasing economic disparities, and social development initiatives, have been implemented inconsistently or remain unfulfilled. This raises questions about the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms (Kadıoğlu, 2021). While data on macro-level outputs such as hydropower generation or irrigated hectares are publicly available, critical observers note that reporting on environmental impacts, social displacement, or budget flows remains limited, reducing the scope for independent verification and public scrutiny (Akıncı et al., 2020; Yıldız, 2020).

Overall, the evidence suggests that GAP’s transparency and accountability mechanisms are formalized in official documents but only partially realized in practice. Technical reporting and centralized oversight provide visibility at the macro level, but local actors, civil society, and independent observers have limited access to the decision-making process or detailed impact information. As a result, GAP exemplifies a project with formal mechanisms in place that appear to support accountability and transparency, yet in practice, these mechanisms have limited effectiveness (Akıncı et al., 2020; Kadıoğlu, 2021; Toker, 2015; Yıldız, 2020).

While the early 2000s saw a general push toward EU harmonization, including legal and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening local administration and aligning with European administrative standards (Şeyhanlıoğlu, 2014; Tektas & Kuyucu, 2010), in practice, decision-making authority remained concentrated at the central level. GAP’s limited transparency and weak accountability thus exemplify a broader tension between formal commitments to political participation and the persistence of centralized control,

characteristic of Türkiye's political landscape under the AKP during this decade (Akıncı et al., 2020; Yıldız, 2020).

These GAP policies reflect the broader political patterns, because the AKP was not fully committed to maintaining the constraints of its own policies later in the 2000s. The new rule-based order, developed in part to comply with the IMF, World Bank and EU, conflicted with the party's ideology (Esen & Gumuscu, 2020). From 2007 onwards, a turning point occurred in Türkiye's political-economic trajectory. The global economic crisis exposed vulnerabilities in the country's growth model, and the earlier strengthening of democratic institutions and representation began to reverse (Esen & Gumuscu, 2020).

In conclusion, between 2002 and 2010, the GAP documents included formal mechanisms for transparency, such as information on state objectives and plans and for example periodical reporting on the environment. However, in practice, (local) actors had limited influence to keep the government accountable. While policy documents and official EIAs were reported, meaningful scrutiny of social, environmental, and financial impacts was constrained. This reflects the increasing unwillingness of the AK Party to comply with the rule-based order that was EU-inspired in the late 2010s.

The discursive dimension

While the previous section highlighted the gap between formal mechanisms for transparency and their limited practical impact, understanding how the GAP was justified and perceived provides further insight into how these policies were framed, communicated, and received. The next section therefore examines the narratives surrounding the GAP, analyzing both official justifications and alternative perspectives, as reflected in policy documents, speeches, expert interviews, and academic research.

The GAP is justified through divergent narratives among the experts, reflecting its multi-dimensional role in Southeastern Anatolia. One prominent narrative presents the GAP as a flagship modernization and development initiative, emblematic of state capacity and legitimacy (Sayan, 2016). According to Sayan (2016, p. 10), high level politicians praised the GAP during speeches as a changing perception from "*water flows, Turk watches*", to "*water flows and Turk constructs*". Similarly, Academic 1 emphasized the technical and political magnitude of the project, describing the rivers' management and transfer through giant canals as a "*magnificent engineering project*" and an "*iconic*" demonstration of the state's ability to harness water for techno-political purposes. In this view, the GAP represents a convergence of technical, social, economic, political, and even transboundary ambitions, highlighting the state's centrality in shaping regional development and asserting authority.

Another justification is functional and pragmatic, focusing on the GAP's economic potential and resource utilization. While Academic 1 highlighted grandeur and state achievement, the Water Expert framed the project more concretely, noting its irrigation

and electricity generation due to the “*huge untapped water potential*” in Türkiye, or as “*agricultural powerhouse*” by academic 2. Here, the emphasis shifts from symbolism to practical benefits, portraying water and infrastructure as resources that can be deployed to maximize agricultural productivity and energy output. This narrative reflects a utilitarian lens, concentrating on the tangible outputs rather than the project’s ideological or political dimensions.

Finally, there is a critical and politically charged narrative in which the GAP is understood as a tool for social and cultural assimilation, a remedy for the Kurdish Question, or to some even a strategic ‘anti-Kurdish’ plot (Bilgen, 2017, p. 188). Academic 3 and Academic 1 both noted that from their perspective and research, the project has been employed to address the Kurdish Question by attempting to “*win the hearts and minds*” of the local population and integrate Kurdish communities into, what the central government understood as, the broader Turkish identity in a neoliberal market society. Others claim that the dams were built strategically to limit freedom of movement for Kurds, sabotage PKK networks and increase state control (Bilgen, 2018a). From this perspective, the GAP is not merely an economic or engineering project but also a mechanism of political control and nation-building.

Taken together, these narratives reveal the multi-layered political significance of the GAP between 2002 and 2010. It served simultaneously as a symbol of state legitimacy, a vehicle for economic modernization, a site of contested expectations, and an instrument of socio-political engineering. This diversity of interpretations illustrates how the GAP was leveraged to reinforce state authority, legitimize the AKP government’s development agenda, and assert control over a politically sensitive region, while also highlighting the tensions between grand narratives of modernization and the practical realities experienced by local populations.

The regional dimension

While the previous section highlighted how the GAP is framed as a tool of state authority within Türkiye, the project’s authority also extends beyond national borders. The next section examines GAP cooperation with downstream riparian states, Syria and Iraq, considering how Türkiye’s management of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers reflects broader political and strategic priorities between 2002 and 2010.

The period of 2002-2010 proves to be a fruitful couple of years for bilateral water cooperation for the riparian states. In 2001, Syria and Türkiye reissued a Joint Communiqué (JTC) promoting the sustainable use of regional land and water resources through joint projects and knowledge exchange (Lorenz & Erickson, 2013). While the communiqué did not immediately result in concrete actions, it provided a framework for agreements that were later formalized at the end of the 2000s (Kibaroglu, 2014). Among these agreements, the most important were the Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)

on water management signed between Iraq and Türkiye and between Syria and Türkiye in 2009. Notably, Iraq and Türkiye signed the MoU: the “*Friendship Dam*”, in which they agreed to jointly construct a dam in the Hatay province (Kibaroglu, 2014, p. 486).

The reasons for this shift in cooperation are largely due to internal developments within Türkiye. In the early years following the AK party’s electoral victory in 2002, the government pursued a “*zero problems with neighboring countries*” policy (Askerov, 2017, p. 150), which helped foster improved relations within the Euphrates-Tigris basin. However, while Türkiye demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with downstream neighbors, its priorities as an upstream country were clearly asserted. As Academic 2 observes:

“From a regional, or hydrological perspective, it’s basically a decision-making process in Türkiye, entirely grounded in national sovereignty, which Ankara has repeatedly claimed and emphasized. This, of course, is not fully aligned with international water law, norms, or principles.”

In his statement, Academic 2 highlights Türkiye’s longstanding reluctance to commit to international water agreements. The country has refrained from signing the 1992 UNECE Water Convention, the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, and the 2004 Berlin Rules, preferring instead to engage in bilateral or trilateral frameworks (Askerov, 2017). This approach limits Türkiye’s international accountability, as there is no supranational authority to enforce equitable water distribution or ensure due diligence. According to Academic 2:

“And then the question is, yeah, what are the problems, and at what time? Yeah, how GAP, and more globally, in other cases, such projects, yeah, do play a role. What is accepted or not accepted? Yeah, there are no rules. Also, in other basins, there are no clear rules in place. What can be stated, of course, is that it does play a role, and it is a tool. It can also be a +1 in terms of there being water reserves in the reservoirs: of course, what to do with them at some point in time. That, of course, is a domestic question as well.”

This quote from Academic 2 underscores the difficulty of establishing legally binding frameworks among riparian states. Upstream riparian states can unilaterally build dams and manage flows in ways that significantly affect downstream water security (Zeitoun & Warner, 2013). Nevertheless, the period between 2002 and 2010 demonstrates Türkiye’s conditional willingness to cooperate on the GAP, a stance that does correlate with its broader (also partial) pursuit of EU harmonization policies during the same period.

In conclusion, between 2002 and 2010, Türkiye’s management of the Euphrates-Tigris basin reflected a balance between unilateral sovereignty and cautious cooperation. While the AKP pursued bilateral agreements and knowledge-sharing initiatives with Syria and Iraq, these efforts were limited to frameworks favorable to Türkiye and avoided

binding international commitments, highlighting a conditional and nationally prioritized approach to regional water governance.

The economic dimension

Türkiye's conditional cooperation with downstream neighbors underscores the political priorities guiding the GAP. Equally important is the project's role as a domestic economic instrument, where infrastructure development and financing arrangements demonstrate how politics and economics are inseparable in state-led development. This raises the question: what public-private partnerships have played a role in the planning, governance, and financing of the GAP?

In 2002, the AKP won a decisive electoral victory in the wake of Türkiye's severe economic crisis of 2001 (Çınar, 2019). The crisis had forced the country's conservative political establishment to accept deep structural reforms mandated by the IMF and the World Bank. The AKP implemented these reforms and simultaneously decreased the military's long-standing influence over politics (Schimmelfennig, 2021). This combination of economic and political changes improved Türkiye's relationship with the European Union, making EU accession appear as a realistic prospect (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

The GAP has mostly been financed through the Turkish central government: the Ministry of Treasury and Finance channels public funds through to the DSI and GAP-BKI, with investment plans updated periodically (Toker, 2015). In the 1980s and 1990s, some parts of the irrigation and energy infrastructure were co-financed through multilateral loans (Kibaroğlu, 2015).

Research on public works contracts between 2004 and 2011 reveals that politically connected firms had a significantly higher probability of winning large infrastructure tenders, particularly when contracting was done via restricted procedures: a pattern that undermines competitive bidding and favors clientelist networks (Çeviker Gürakar & Bircan, 2019; Gürakar, 2016). Even though regulations for competitive procurement are in place (Arslan & Tas, 2015), in practice, public tenders, especially for large water and energy projects like dams or hydroelectric plants, may involve pre-qualified bidders (Kadioğlu, 2021; Yıldız, 2020). Direct contracting or restricted tenders are, argued by some academics, frequently used under the exceptions allowed in the law, limiting public oversight (OECD, 2017).

These strongly stimulated and steered liberalization policies, together with favoritism in tendering, indicate signs of the grip of a strong state on the economic model of Türkiye. Scholars note that non-transparent procurement, opaque budget allocation, and restricted contracting can reinforce power concentration at the center (Gisselquist, 2014; Toke, 2015), signaling authoritarian tendencies.

Aside from publicly financed projects, some HPPs have been partially financed through public-private partnerships (PPPs) or build-operate-transfer (BOT) arrangements,

although the majority of the investment remains public (Yıldız, 2020). Türkiye laid the groundwork for a liberalized electricity market within its GAP hydropower infrastructure in the beginning of 2000. The Electricity Market Law (No. 4628) enabled licensing for private actors, including in hydroelectric generation (Erol, 2024). The Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EMRA), founded in 2001, began regulating generation and distribution under competitive-market principles (Erol, 2024).

At the same time, publicly owned dams such as the Atatürk Dam remained in state hands, but private firms gained rights to construct, use, and operate hydro plants (Erol, 2024). The World Bank (2015, p. 33), in its energy sector assessment from 2000-2010, noted that Türkiye was “fully committed” to market liberalization. This period reflects a hybrid model: state-led development of dam infrastructure (especially in GAP) combined with significant market opening for production and generation.

As part of these social-economic developments, the state promoted export-based production in the GAP area: large agribusinesses in cotton, wheat, vegetables, and other export-oriented crops; contract farming and integration of farmers into value chains and expansion of private food-processing and logistics companies in the region (Bilgen, 2018). Water expert, who works for the Turkish government, describes how the state promotes export-based production:

“If you for example produce cotton, I will give support. If you produce for example corn, I will support of you if you can change your crop pattern. I will support and you can if you implement model irrigation systems, I will support and if you need education, I can give you this kind for this”.

This statement by the Water Expert illustrates how the state used incentives to encourage farmers to shift from traditional local crops to market-oriented, exportable products. For example, if farmers switched from cotton to other crops, the state provided support through modern irrigation systems, technical assistance, and related resources. These measures reflect the state’s broader efforts to shape a neoliberal, export-focused agricultural economy.

In conclusion, while the GAP water infrastructure remained publicly owned, the hydroelectricity market underwent liberalization, and the GAP facilitated irrigation in the Southeast for export-oriented purposes between 2002 and 2010. Contracts for constructing GAP infrastructure were often limited or directly awarded to state-affiliated companies, reflecting clientelist practices. This illustrates two simultaneous dynamics: an active government operating within an increasingly liberalized economy. In short, although the IMF and World Bank supported liberalization, the subsequent clientelist allocation of contracts to AK Party-affiliated firms laid the groundwork for authoritarian tendencies that would later characterize AKP rule.

Conclusion

Between 2002 and 2010, the GAP reflected a mix of formal institutional pluralism and strong centralized control under the early AKP government. While agencies like the DPT and GAP-BKI provided planning frameworks and encouraged regional agency, ultimate authority remained with the Prime Ministry. Local participation and civil society influence were limited, and transparency and accountability mechanisms existed more on paper than in practice. The project was justified through state-building, economic modernization, and politically strategic objectives. Internationally, Türkiye pursued cautious cooperation with downstream neighbors while prioritizing national sovereignty, and economically, the GAP combined state-led infrastructure with selective market liberalization and clientelist contracting. Overall, the period illustrates how the GAP mirrored broader political-economic trends, balancing the first steps of pluralism with top-down control.

Chapter 2: the GAP between 2010-2016

This chapter examines the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) during the period 2010–2016, focusing on governance, justifications and perceptions, international cooperation, and economic management. The way how a project is planned, financed, governed, and justified reveals who holds the power and who's interests are prioritized. Building on the analysis of the early AKP years (2002–2010), this chapter explores how the changes and continuities of these indicators might reflect the broader political trajectory in Türkiye.

The governance dimension

Decision-making process

2010 not only marked a fast economic recovery, but it also marked a constitutional reform package that by some allegedly consolidated the AKP. The AKP presented an amendment 'democratization' package, while opponents argued it increased executive influence over the judiciary (Aytürk, 2023, p. 477). It allowed the Prime Minister to restructure the judiciary and gain more power to appoint judges and the Parliament to elect members of the constitutional court, while also limiting the power of the martial courts. Political opponents but also academics claim that this restructuring package laid the groundwork for the decay of democratic principles in Türkiye (Aytürk, 2023).

In terms of the GAP, even though considerable funds and efforts had been dedicated to finishing the GAP once and for all around 2012, it was not able to succeed. This is due to, as stated on the GAP website, "difficulties mobilizing local initiatives", "limited resources", and "macro-economic cyclical changes", and "technical obstructions". As a consequence, a new GAP action plan (2014-2018) and a new GAP strategic plan (2013-2017) were published.

Between 2010 and 2016, the GAP decision-making process showcased signs of increasing centralization in line with broader political-economic trends in Türkiye: the GAP Regional Development Authority (GAP-BKI) was formally reattached to the Ministry of Development in 2011, reflecting tighter control from the center (Bilgen, 2018b). Legislative changes extended the GAP BKI's mandate and concentrated coordination of regional development within it, reducing its autonomy.

However, in the 2014-2018 Action Plan it was still emphasized to build more capacity of local staff (GAP-BKI, 2014). Budget, coordination and monitoring were also increasingly being streamlined under GAP BIK, continuing the trends of the 00s. The judiciary changes among the other political reforms of 2010 and the gradual development to a presidential system align with the centralization of the GAP BIK, but the emphasis on local governance does not necessarily align with these broader political developments. The emphasis on local governance rather contradicts the broader political development of democratic backsliding between 2010-2016, which signifies a centrally governed system.

The emphasis on local governance seems again to be only for the books. The relocation of the GAP-BKI office from Ankara to Şanlıurfa, discussed in the previous chapter, was described by a former GAP-BKI employee in an interview conducted by Bilgen (2018b, p. 147) as: *“Decentralization is just a myth. If you do not have the authority, it does not matter whether you are in Urfa or Ankara. Decisions are made here [in Ankara]. A regional development administration must make financial allocation according to the plans within its jurisdiction [...] In their current forms, they are nothing but the extension of central authority”*. This argument by a former GAP-BKI employee underlines the centralized nature of GAP’s, in spite of the stated intentions to increase local governance on paper (Bilgen, 2018b). Another GAP-BKI expert that Bilgen (2018b) interviewed described the move as: *“a disaster for the administration, for the region, and for employees”* (Bilgen, 2018b, p. 147).

Another reform that affected GAP’s decision making is mentioned by Academic 1: *“So in that sense that was I think the biggest administrative shift [moving the BKI to Sanliurfa] in addition to the things that I've already told you, like under the abolishment of state planning organization and also later on the Minister of Development”*. This statement by Academic 1 underscores how the abolition of the State Planning Organization (DPT) and the transfer of its functions to the Ministry of Development reshaped the institutional landscape. The DPT had operated as a specialized, semi-independent body staffed by career civil servants and technical experts, whose focus on long-term, evidence-based planning provided a counterweight to political pressures (Övgün, 2011). Its dissolution into a politically led ministry made development planning more susceptible to short-term political priorities, reducing institutional checks on decision-making and signaling a broader trend toward centralization in the governance of GAP. The quote highlights the importance of this bureaucratic restructuring for the democratic governance of the GAP.

Simultaneously, the High Planning Council was reorganized so that all its members are politicians, and the Money, Credit and Coordination Board lost many of its career civil servants, being reorganized into smaller internal committees within the ministry. This restructuring shifted national planning away from expert-driven decision-making toward a system more sensitive to the political climate (Övgün, 2011). Both reforms indicate that the Regional Development Plans and Action Plans would reflect the national government’s priorities rather than long-term planning needs and that executive control increased by replacing career civil servants with elected political actors. This shift reflects the broader political pattern of gradual democratic erosion in Türkiye.

In conclusion, between 2010 and 2016, GAP decision-making became increasingly centralized, reflecting broader political trends in Türkiye. Local governance and capacity-building were emphasized on paper, but strategic and financial decisions remained under Ankara’s control. Executive influence over planning and appointments reduced

institutional autonomy, highlighting a gap between the rhetoric of participatory governance and the reality of top-down control.

Public participation

What are the implications of this increasing centralization for public participation in the GAP region? The period 2010-2016 marks a warming of relations between the Turkish government and the Kurdish groups living mostly around the GAP area. Even though the talks that were part of the Oslo Accords were in motion since 2005 and stalled in 2011, around 2012 dialogue resumed leading to the Dolmabahçe agreement in February 2015 (Pinc & Ozduzen, 2023). However, rapidly after the agreement, the Turkish parliament passed an internal security package to remilitarize the Kurdish question, and violence resumed. Due to multiple terrorist attacks, Erdoğan called for the urgency of a working government and thus called for a snap election (Pinc & Ozduzen, 2023).

From the early 2010s onward, political tensions in southeastern Türkiye (including spikes of conflict and changing national politics) hence affected civic space, NGO activity and the room for constructive local participation: this reduced the ability of some local actors to influence GAP governance meaningfully (Bilgen, 2018a). Social development programs, with their critiques, remained in place. There have been accounts of stakeholder meetings that served rather as information provision than as meaningful negotiation (Aydin & Gunes, 2005). The depth and quality of participation differed greatly across provinces and projects (Aydin & Gunes, 2005). This confirmed the similar conclusion that was reached in the prior chapter and is in line with Water Expert's observations. In other words, the warming of relations was not significantly reflected in GAP policies between 2010-2016, whereas the political tensions from 2015 did negatively impact political participation from the civic space (Bilgen, 2018a).

Academic 3 confirms this view of limited participation. He argues that the reason for the lack of participation of Kurdish voices in the GAP is the Turkish government's perspective on the Southeast of Türkiye and the people living there. In fact, he argues that the GAP and its social development programs are not to increase socio-economic standards in the area, but rather to promote Turkish identity. Academic 3 explains it carefully in the interview:

“I had my interactions at the time with social scientists at GAP and they really looked at the social side, so at the farmers and the peasants and the villagers they worked for, as people they had to transform. So they were not really considered as agents in a development process, but as the subjects which had to be transformed from those who are embedded in a, let's say in a pre-modern network of tribal relations. Primitive relations as they saw it had these had to be transformed into people who would become modern agents in the market”.

This example reflects the view of various academics who argue that GAP and its social development projects function as tools of assimilation and not as active stakeholders with agency to participate in political processes (Akıncı et al, 2020). However, this view is contested. Academic 1 is among those who are skeptical about the GAP projects being a tool for assimilation: he argues that GAP's community centers (ÇATOM) and social programs are too limited and underfunded to drive assimilation and that broader modernization and increased methods of communication, such as social media, and not GAP itself, have played a larger role in integrating the region with the rest of Türkiye.

Building on this, Academic 1 disagrees that assimilation was a primary goal of GAP projects, but he concurs with Academic 3 that local communities had limited agency in most aspects of GAP's processes. Academic 1's own fieldwork findings illustrate:

“The anecdote I was telling you was when I was doing my field 10 years ago, for instance, like when I went to the Altatruk town. I met someone who told me that his village in Adiyaman didn't have electricity. I mean, that was unthinkable for me. This specific dam is providing maybe 1 fourth, 1 fifth of Türkiye's electricity, but it doesn't provide the benefit it's supposed to benefit to its vicinity. So in that sense, of course, there are those who are benefiting from them, but I would say they're not designed for this purpose”.

This anecdote illustrates less the participation of local communities in shaping the GAP than their exclusion from the project's material benefits. This stands in contrast to state narratives portraying the GAP as a vehicle for development, progress, and prosperity for the local population (Bilgen, 2018a). Instead, the anecdote suggests that geographical proximity to dams and hydropower plants does not necessarily translate into shared gains for surrounding communities. This interpretation is supported by Bilgen et al. (2021, p. 1593), who argue that GAP appears to have benefited the state more than the region's inhabitants, with the development it claims to deliver often proving “*ephemeral, fragile, and unsustainable*” rather than long-term. The project has been “*selective and exclusive*”, failing to distribute benefits evenly across communities (Bilgen et al., 2021, p. 1593). Wealth and resource gains remained concentrated among a few groups already possessing land, capital, and influence, while the majority saw little advantage from the improvements.

The benefits to people living in close proximity to GAP infrastructure are thus contested. According to Academic 1: “*I always ask this question, like, what if GAP didn't happen? (...) I asked this question to a politician in Sanliurfa. He was a very blunt person, and he said: without irrigation, I mean, without the shift to irrigated farming, nothing would come out of this region. He was so clear about it. So actually, he answered my questions*”. Naturally, there are also groups and individuals that benefit from the GAP. In addition to irrigation opportunities, the Water Expert mentioned increased employment opportunities that come along with GAP infrastructure. These perspectives of Academic 1 and Water Expert

show that the interaction with GAP is neither exclusively bad nor exclusively good, as some communities are able to reap the benefits and others are disadvantaged.

WUA's continued in the time frame from 2010-2016, however the Law No. 6172 (2011) formally codified the legal status, governance structure and obligations of WUAs. WUAs were formally removed from the prior category of *mahalli idare birlikleri* (local-administration unions), and became more directly connected to DSİ (Kibaroglu, 2020, p. 86). The legal text defines that irrigation unions become public legal entities managed under DSİ, with duties for operation, maintenance, and management of irrigation facilities (Kibaroglu, 2020, p. 86). Hence, meaningful participation was not necessarily decreased compared to the prior period between 2002 and 2010; however due to the legal codification, executive oversight (top-bottom) was slightly increased and the agency of local farmers became more limited.

In summary, between 2010 and 2016, public participation in the GAP region remained constrained despite formal mechanisms and social programs. Political tensions, security concerns, and the centralization of decision-making limited the agency of local communities, particularly Kurdish populations, in shaping or benefiting from GAP projects. While WUAs and social development programs continued, their impact was uneven and often served state objectives more than local needs. Overall, participation was largely symbolic, and the gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the reality of top-down governance persisted.

Transparency and accountability

This limited participation raises a critical question: if local actors and communities have little influence over decision-making, to what extent can they hold GAP authorities accountable? The next section examines GAP governance between 2010 and 2016 in terms of transparency and accountability, focusing on the openness of decision-making processes, the availability of information to the public, and the mechanisms that allow, or constrain, scrutiny and critique of the project's social, environmental, and financial impacts.

The period between 2010 and 2016 in Türkiye witnessed a relative decline in transparency and accountability in public governance compared to the post-2002 reform years. Early reforms following the 2002 AKP electoral victory were motivated by EU accession requirements and World Bank recommendations and aimed to strengthen competitiveness, transparency, and institutional checks (Soyaltın, 2017).

However, by the 2010–2016 period, these governance gains were gradually eroded. Political centralization, including the consolidation of decision-making within ministries and reduced horizontal checks and limited bureaucratic autonomy (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Moreover, civil service appointments increasingly reflected political loyalty rather than merit, further weakening institutional independence and

accountability mechanisms (Soyaltın, 2017). External incentives for good governance, such as international donor reporting requirements also diminished during this period, reducing institutional pressure to maintain transparent practices (Soyaltın, 2017). Donor funding from the EU declined due to the stalled EU accession talks. Transparency in public procurement was similarly to the 2002-2010 period limited, where politically connected firms disproportionately benefited from large-scale infrastructure contracts (Çeviker Gürakar & Bircan, 2019; Gürakar, 2016).

Nevertheless, formal reporting mechanisms persisted: GAP and other development agencies continued to produce annual performance programs, strategy documents, and activity reports. This suggests that while transparency and accountability declined in implementation and scope, they were not entirely absent; rather, the state adopted a selective approach. This selective approach provides the appearance of accountability (Soyaltın, 2017). Yet key information on procurement processes, political influence over contractor selection (crony capitalism), and implementation challenges is withheld, allowing the government to maintain centralized control (Gürakar, 2016). Hence, the GAP reflects broader authoritarian tendencies in Türkiye in 2010-2016.

In conclusion, the 2010–2016 period illustrates a tension between formal structures of transparency and the reality of centralized control. While reporting mechanisms and strategic documents remained in place, meaningful accountability was constrained by political influence, selective disclosure, and the weakening of independent oversight. This reinforces the earlier observation that limited local participation was mirrored by limited ability to scrutinize or influence GAP governance, highlighting the continuity of top-down control in the project despite formal commitments to transparency and accountability.

The discursive dimension

Building on the limited participation and constrained accountability discussed above, it becomes important to ask how the GAP was justified and perceived during this period. If local actors and communities had little influence over decision-making or the benefits of the project, how were its goals framed by the state, and how were these narratives received by stakeholders and the public? The next section examines the rationale and reception of the GAP between 2010 and 2016, exploring both official narratives and alternative perspectives on the project’s social, economic, and political significance.

The justification for the GAP being a flagship modernization and development project continued throughout 2010-2016. In addition, the GAP was also justified as an expert project, a technocratic project, that requires expertise and education to understand. When Sayan (2016) interviewed government officials, asking about local, perhaps traditional knowledge of water management in a region. He received (as he defined himself) dismissive responses: “*DSI knows the best about water*” and “*if DSI approves*

a [water] project, it means it is [socially, economically and ecologically] *feasible*”, implying that locals were not competent to be involved in issues of water governance (Sayan, 2016, p. 10). This idea of local incompetence and thus expert savior necessity further justifies the presence of GAP and explains potentially one of the reasons for limited meaningful participation of locals in GAP.

Furthermore, between 2010 and 2016, a particular narrative surrounding the GAP emphasized the need to “give it a boost” to ensure project completion. The AKP frequently used terms such as “accelerating” and the GAP from 2007 to 2014, accompanied by an action plan aimed at delivering tangible results (GAP-RDP, 2014, p. 7). However, after the project failed to meet its target completion year of 2014, its popularity waned, and it lost some of its earlier appeal (Adaman & Arsel, 2016). Academic 1 described this period as one of “*maturing*”, noting that the GAP’s popularity declined as broader development progressed across Türkiye.

Following 2014, attention to the GAP sharply declined, which may be linked to the collapse of peace talks with the PKK or other engaging events that took place those years. In 2015, violence intensified in the Southeast as well as in central cities such as Ankara and Istanbul (Dinc & Ozduzen, 2023). Interpreting this from the carrot-and-stick perspective, the approach of the Turkish state to the Kurdish question shifted increasingly toward coercive measures, with security concerns dominating political priorities. This might indicate that there was less room for discussion on the development (carrot) of the Southeast. The GAP’s final push for finalization in the 2014 Gap Action Plan (2014-2018) could correlate with the broader political dynamics regarding the Kurdish issue, where emphasis moved from soft power to hard power.

The increasing emphasis on security measures was also caused by foreign actors. Due to the influx of refugees caused by the Arab Spring, in particular Syrian refugees, city infrastructure was under pressure (GAP, RDP-2014, p. 15). The justification of the GAP and all its side projects also became increasingly focused on urban planning and facilities after 2013, and especially after 2015. The Action Plan (GAP-RDP-2014, p. 7) hence emphasized the notion of *livability of cities* (Bilgen, 2018b, p. 148). As Academic 1 confirms: the GAP is notorious for implementing what is “*sexy in the development agenda*”.

In sum, between 2010 and 2016 the GAP was increasingly justified as a technocratic and state-led development project aimed at correcting historical neglect and managing regional instability. These narratives marginalized local agency, framed infrastructure as proof of state commitment, and shifted from development-oriented promises toward security and crisis management. As such, the GAP functioned less as an inclusive development initiative and more as a tool to reinforce state authority and centralized governance during a period of democratic backsliding.

The regional dimension

These developments raise the question of how Türkiye's increasingly centralized approach to the GAP translated into its external relations. Examining cooperation and conflict over shared water resources between 2010 and 2016 therefore offers insight into whether the patterns of state control observed domestically were also reflected in Türkiye's regional water diplomacy.

Between 2010 and 2016, water cooperation among Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq in the Euphrates-Tigris basin was characterized by a decline in trilateral coordination, largely due to political instability and security crises in the region (Kibaroglu, 2021). Following the 2009 memoranda of understanding and the Türkiye–Syria HLSCC, technical meetings were held in 2010 to advance joint projects such as the “Friendship Dam.” However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 effectively froze all cross-border cooperation between Türkiye and Syria, halting the implementation of these projects (Kibaroglu, 2021).

Iraq and Türkiye attempted to maintain cooperation, but the trilateral agreement never came into force (Aldalooi, 2024). Academic 4 and the Water Expert highlighted two key aspects of these discussions: the concept of significant harm and the concept of equitable distribution. During periods of acute water stress in either Iraq or Syria, both Baghdad and Damascus occasionally sent emergency delegations to Ankara to request increased water releases (Aldalooi, 2024). The discussions around significant harm were largely definitional, centered on determining what “significant harm”, and “equitable” entails in the context of transboundary water management. Academic 2 illustrates this debate on the definition of significant harm as:

“Do we need the water in southeast Türkiye for drinking water or do we continue with the agricultural production? And the same goes then, yeah, do we, can we, shall we share it with Syria and Iraq? Who is suffering more? It does not mean that suffering that, you know, you cannot put that on a scale. I mean, that is sometimes what people also in other reverberations try to highlight who is suffering more. It's an assessment and of course, ideally a trustful dialogue.”

In addition, Water Expert summarizes it as:

“The aim is not to give significant harm, but we have to define what is the significant harm is”.

These two statements highlight the difficulty of defining significant harm in transboundary water management. Does it refer to the inability to irrigate crops, limited access to running water for a few hours a day, or restrictions on basic domestic use such as daily showers? The lack of a clear, shared definition has hampered the establishment of a common framework and complicated cooperation between the parties. The declining political willingness of Türkiye to collaborate and the breakdown of trilateral coordination between

2010 and 2016 appear to reflect a broader pattern of Turkish assertiveness toward regional neighbors. Scholars such as Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) suggest that such assertive foreign policy can be characteristic of autocratic regimes, which engage in foreign adventures to consolidate domestic support through a *rally around the flag* effect. In this context, Türkiye's assertive stance on the GAP and water management can be seen as indicative of its gradual democratic backsliding during this period.

In conclusion, between 2010 and 2016 transboundary water cooperation in the Euphrates–Tigris basin deteriorated as regional conflict and political instability undermined trilateral engagement. The absence of shared definitions of key principles such as “significant harm” and “equitable use,” combined with Türkiye's preference for discretionary and sovereignty-driven management, limited meaningful cooperation. This increasingly assertive and unilateral approach to water governance mirrors broader patterns of political centralization and democratic backsliding in Türkiye during this period, with the GAP functioning not only as a development project but also as an instrument of regional power projection.

The economic dimension

While the international dimension underscores the GAP's role in Türkiye's more assertive regional stance, the economic dimension is marked by a continuation of privatization trends. The next section explores the economic aspects of the GAP between 2010 and 2016.

Between 2010 and 2016, for GAP projects privatization of generation capacity intensified, especially for the generation of hydropower. For instance, in 2011 the Privatization Administration sold 49-year operating rights for several hydropower plants (HEPPs) (Oxford Business Group, 2012). According to the Heinrich Böll Foundation, two-thirds of EÜAŞ's (state electricity generation company) installed capacity was slated for privatization, including hydro plants (Türkyılmaz, 2014). Meanwhile, PPP-type or “transfer of operational rights” (TOOR) mechanisms were used to grant rights (World Bank, 2015, p.20). Although major dams (like Atatürk Dam) remained under state control, the trend empowered politically connected private actors.

Focusing on the economic implications of the GAP social development program, most interviewees were not able to answer questions on marketization and privatization initiatives. On the attraction of investment in the region for entrepreneurship or opportunities as a result of the GAP's economic and social projects, Academic 1 observed:

“And in that sense, I don't think, the private sector has been the main motor of economic growth there or why would a private sector actor want to voluntarily lose money? I mean, you don't have the sufficient infrastructure, sufficient human power or the social capital”.

Academic 1 displays a rather skeptical view on the idea that the region would be attractive for investments. According to Academic 1, the region still lacked the sufficient capital to be able to flourish, in spite of GAP's investments over the years.

From this perspective it seems like the large infrastructural projects remain under state control, while there is an increase of privatization of the HPPs. The groundwork was laid in the period between 2002-2010 and now the privatization has been put further into motion. Furthermore, the economic development impact of the GAP is, according to the interviews, of smaller scope. The GAP enabled some minor financial freedoms on individual levels, but it did not set off the economic boom that was predicted in the 1989 GAP Master Plan yet. These developments reflect broader political patterns in Türkiye, where sustained centralized control and the privileging of politically connected actors may indicate increasing levels of authoritarianism.

Conclusion

Between 2010 and 2016, the GAP reflected Türkiye's increasing centralization and democratic backsliding. Decision-making became concentrated in Ankara, limiting local governance, public participation, and accountability, despite formal commitments to inclusion. The project was justified as technocratic and developmental but often prioritized security and crisis management over local agency. International cooperation over transboundary waters declined, while domestically, major infrastructure remained state-controlled and hydropower privatization favored politically connected actors. Overall, the GAP functioned less as an inclusive development initiative and more as a tool to increase political and economic power, illustrating broader authoritarian trends in Türkiye.

Chapter 3: the GAP between 2016-2022

This chapter examines the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) during the period 2016–2022, focusing on governance, justifications and perceptions, international cooperation, and economic management. The ways in which the project is planned, financed, governed, and justified determine the democratic course of the GAP. Building on the analysis of the 2002-2010 and 2010–2016 period, this chapter explores how changes and continuities in these indicators may reflect broader political trends in Türkiye.

The governance dimension

Decision-making processes

The period from 2016 to 2022 in Türkiye was shaped by profound political and institutional shifts. On 15 July 2016, a failed military coup attempt by the Gülen movement triggered the declaration of a state of emergency that remained in force until mid-2018, allowing the executive to issue emergency decrees with the force of law and to expand its authority at the expense of legislative and judicial checks. Scholars have identified this period as a phase of democratic backsliding, where emergency powers enabled structural changes and constraint of civic space beyond immediate security needs (Tortolini, 2024).

In 2017, constitutional amendments approved by referendum restructured Türkiye's political system, shifting from a parliamentary to a presidential system and further concentrating executive authority in the presidency. This constitutional change is understood in the literature as part of broader institutional centralization and weakening of independent governance bodies (Tortolini, 2024).

Interview evidence suggests that despite these draconian national reforms, GAP's internal decision-making mechanisms remained relatively stable compared to the pre-2016 period. Academic 1 noted:

“I mean, Türkiye used to have the state planning organization and the Ministry of Development, but now they are closed they are gone after the shift to the presidential system. They also had a say, but they are now gone. So, of course, I would say the AKP government or the post-2002 government has made organizational changes, but I think the mentality or the main approach to water hasn't changed that much. At least, you know, that I can tell based on my observations or my interactions with the water bureaucrats or the politicians or their discourses and policies towards water.”

Accordingly, Academic 2 suggested similarly that institutional routines persisted despite administrative reshuffling:

“I don't think this changed in any way. And again, I'm not, let's say, a sociologist or an anthropologist who looked at the internal functioning of the GAP. But when I look from the

outside to the GAP, I did not notice, let's say this way. I didn't notice any significant changes in its organization or in the decision-making mechanisms, no."

The Water Expert reinforced this view as well, using the example of the Turkish Water Institute:

"The Turkish Water is instituted how the lakes work and the water management, general directorate are under these ministry. So it deals with the same issues but under the different ministry of with the presidency, the ministry name has changed, but our responsibilities are the same."

These interview findings indicate that organizational labels changed following broader public administration reforms, but decision-making practices within the GAP remained anchored in existing bureaucratic routines and professional practices rather than undergoing a comprehensive shift. This demonstrates continuity in practice amid broader political centralization.

In July 2018, Decree Law No. 703 transferred the GAP Regional Development Administration from the abolished Ministry of Development to the Ministry of Industry and Technology (GAP-RDA, n.d.). Although this re-alignment under a line ministry brought GAP's administrative supervision closer to national industrial and investment priorities, this shift had a horizontal nature and did not represent a new centralization of authority. The GAP remained under executive control before and after the transfer. Interview evidence validates that this administrative change affected reporting lines and policy framing more than the internal decision-making processes themselves.

However, the decision-making processes of the GAP were affected by security-driven emergency governance between 2016 and 2019 and by the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. The state of emergency declared after the July 2016 coup attempt and intensified security measures in southeastern Türkiye complicated monitoring and project implementation (European Commission, 2016; European Parliament, 2017). Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted project timelines and budgets and led the GAP Regional Development Administration to reprioritize activities, as documented in its 2020 and 2021 activity reports (GAP-RDA, 2021, 2022).

In conclusion, despite sweeping national political and governance transformations between 2016 and 2022, the internal decision-making processes of the GAP displayed relative continuity. Formal institutional changes, including the shift to a presidential system and the reassignment of GAP-RDA to a line ministry, changed administrative supervision but did not radically alter decision-making practices or the focus of executive control. Interview evidence supports this continuity, suggesting that the broader political upheavals of the period drew public and administrative attention away from substantive reform of GAP decision-making processes.

Participation

While GAP's internal decision-making processes remained largely consistent with the 2010–2016 period, opportunities for civil society and local actors to participate became even more constrained between 2016 and 2022. The following section elaborates on this trend.

The reports by the European Union (European Commission, 2016; European Parliament, 2017) indicate that the state of emergency did negatively impact the degree of political participation in the southeast of Türkiye. Local municipalities, civil society, or opposition actors were not formally empowered to influence strategic decisions, but channels for meaningful participation were further limited. As stated by the Water Expert: while stakeholder consultations continued from time to time, citizen engagement did not substantially influence decisions made.

In addition, many Kurdish-majority municipalities in the GAP region (e.g., Diyarbakır, Mardin) had AKP-appointed trustees after 2016 (Baudner, 2025). GAP projects in these cities continue under centralized oversight rather than through elected local authorities, reflecting a democratic deficit in local governance. These trends of limited participation and a decline in local participation align with the broader political hardening and democratic crackdown in Türkiye from 2016 onwards (Baudner, 2025).

This argument can be illustrated by the example of Hasankeyf, a 12,000 year old town along the Tigris in the Batman province. After the completion of the Ilisu Dam in 2020, Hasankeyf had been inundated despite local and international opposition (Kornfeld, 2020). International investors had withdrawn their investments and there was substantial local opposition (Tezcür, 2021). Minister of Forestry and Environment Veysel Eroğlu emphasized that the government would complete the Ilisu Dam despite all objections, framing it as a “*project of honour*” for the Turkish state (Ekonomik Ayrıntı, 2014). He stated, “*We do not need their (foreign) money. We will construct this dam at any cost*” (Ekonomik Ayrıntı, 2014). The Ilisu Dam affected approximately up to 78,000 mainly Kurdish people in Türkiye and many thousands more downstream in Iraq, affected wildlife ecosystems and rich cultural heritage (Kornfeld, 2020, p. 132). Kornfeld (2020) mentions that the affected inhabitants were not consulted, in any phase of the project.

In terms of WUAs, Law No. 7139 (2018) marked a significant shift where deep alterations were made in the administration of WUAs (Kibaroğlu, 2020, p. 86). The responsibilities for irrigation maintenance were transferred from the WUAs to the DSI, (WUAs are irrigation associations, IAs), putting “*them under close government control, particularly by appointing the chairs of the IAs from among civil servants working at various public institutions*” (Kibaroğlu, 2020, p. 89). In addition, the irrigation systems were either transferred to municipalities or private entities, rather than mandating the Irrigation Associations (Kibaroğlu, 2020). These adjustments heavily impacted this pathway for

public participation, further signaling centralization and increasing executive top-down control, hence hindering meaningful participation from local actors (Aydogdu, 2015).

Lastly, the prior chapter discussed not only the meaningful political participation of the local Kurdish groups but also meaningful participation in the benefits and the gains that the GAP provided. According to Li, (2014, p. 3): *“the promise that modernization would provide a pathway from country to city, and from farm to factory, has proven to be a mirage [...] for thousands of people because their old set of relations that enabled them to live and work were gone and the new ones were far from providing a viable livelihood”*. Jongerden et al. (2021, p. 1594) confirms this conclusion with the estimates that 181,000 to 400,000 people were displaced due to all dams built within GAP, and 3000 settlements and their unique heritage were destroyed. For instance, among those displaced by the Atatürk Dam, 72% reported that their economic situation had deteriorated compared to before, whereas only 20.5% felt their circumstances had improved (Bilgen et al. 2021, p. 1594). These insights paint a bleak picture of the GAP area’s distribution of gains when building GAP infrastructure, excluding the majority of the southeastern populace from the profits.

In sum, the period from 2016 onwards highlights the severe limitations on local political participation and access to project benefits in the GAP region. Centralized oversight, the appointment of trustees in Kurdish-majority municipalities, and reforms weakening WUAs curtailed meaningful engagement, while major infrastructure projects, such as the Ilisu Dam, proceeded despite local and international opposition. These developments underscore how the GAP’s gains were concentrated among the state and elites, leaving most local communities politically and economically marginalized.

Transparency and accountability

After the political upheaval during the state of emergency, observers have raised concerns about the reliability of official statistics under emergency governance, highlighting potential limitations in the accuracy of reported data (European Commission, 2016; Freedom House, 2020). For the GAP, there is also not extensive reporting the first couple years of the 2026-2022 period. In 2021, reporting is resumed.

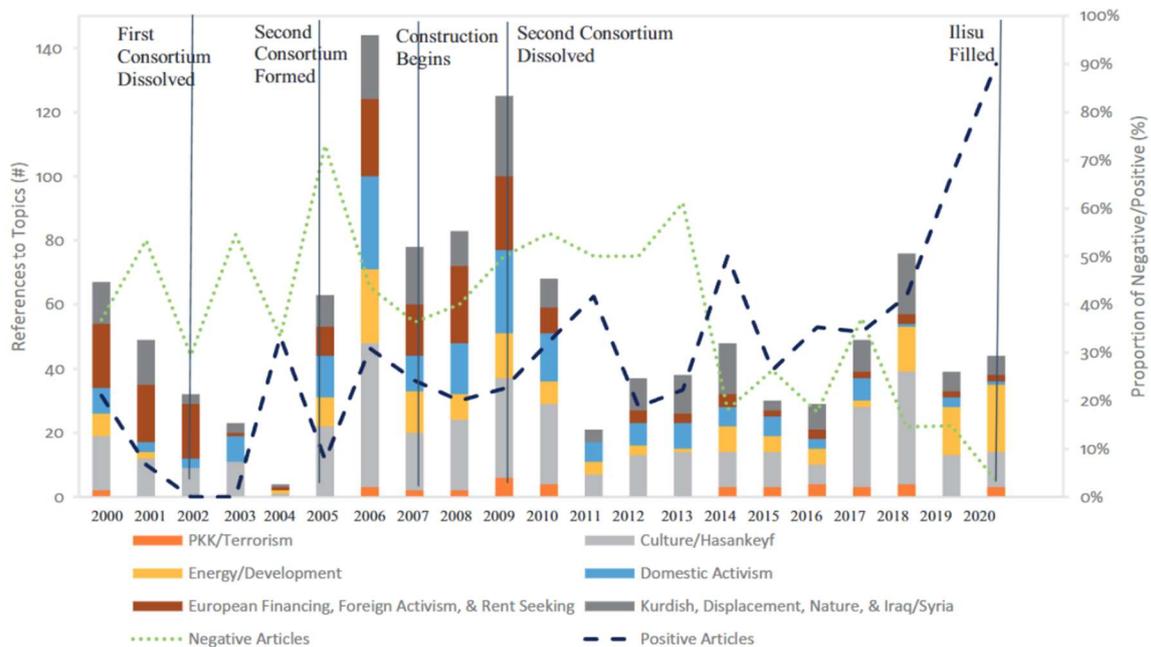


Figure 5: Content analysis domestic Turkish-language news 2000-2020. From “The effectiveness of harnessing human rights: The struggle over the Ilisu Dam in Türkiye” (2021) by Tezcür G. M. et al.

Tezcür (2021) researched Turkish-language news on critical voices towards the Ilisu dam between 2000-2020. *Hürriyet*, which used to publish more critical perspectives on the GAP, was purchased by a pro-government business conglomerate in 2018. The findings of Tezcür (2021, Figure 1) pointed out that negative coverage of the dam declined significantly in 2018, disappearing by 2020, while positive news saw a slight increase. These findings suggest that media coverage in Turkish news was affected by the political climate, also in regard to the building of dams and the GAP.

The broader environment of restricted free expression also affected accountability mechanisms. Media outlets and NGOs, previously capable of scrutinizing GAP management and advocating for change, were constrained by media purges and self-censorship. As a result, critical voices that could have served as checks on governmental decision-making were significantly weakened, reflecting the broader trend of democratic backsliding and limitations on civil liberties during this period (European Commission, 2016).

Accountability challenges are particularly evident in relation to the resettlement and compensation of communities affected by GAP infrastructure projects. Using the example of Hasankeyf, Academic 1 notes: “when it comes to things like the resettlement or the compensation, I cannot say that things got worse when it comes to this example, for instance. But still, I don't think the things are quite transparent in terms of the account but I don't think nobody pays if they screw up, basically.”

Kornfeld (2020, p. 135) confirms the observation of a lack of accountability, describing the challenges faced by residents displaced by the Ilisu Dam:

“The residents of old Ilisu discovered that the houses built for them in New Ilisu were of inadequate and inferior quality and they were prevented from cultivating food and rearing livestock and therefore, they were without any prospects for suitable or sustainable income opportunities.”

These accounts illustrate how compensation and resettlement efforts often fell short of guaranteeing equitable outcomes for affected populations, just as the archeological considerations were set aside. Despite the GAP Action Plans’ stated objectives of reducing economic disparities (GAP-RDP, 2014), approximately 78,000 local residents appear to have been disproportionately disadvantaged, with limited avenues to hold implementing authorities accountable (Kornfeld, 2020, p. 132).

In combination, concerns about statistical reliability, restricted media oversight, and inadequate resettlement measures suggest structural weaknesses in GAP accountability mechanisms. While formal reporting mechanisms continued, the broader political and institutional environment limited the effectiveness of accountability processes, highlighting the challenges of accountable governance under conditions of constrained civil and political freedoms.

The discursive dimension

Despite the restrictions on criticism and local opposition to the Ilisu Dam, between 2016 and 2022 the Turkish state continued to present the project as a symbol of national pride and strong political leadership (GAP-RDP, 2021). The GAP Regional Development plan of 2021 portrayed GAP as a flagship modernization success story, positioned as evidence of Türkiye’s progress and President Erdoğan’s visionary leadership. Second, the modernization narrative continued to reproduce long-standing stereotypes of the southeast as underdeveloped, backward, or tribal, implicitly authorizing state intervention rather than local empowerment (Akıncı, 2020).

Within this framing, GAP’s scale and planning were increasingly used to justify a model of centralized, top-down governance in which only the state, and particularly its executive leadership, possessed the necessary expertise and authority to manage the project (Dogan, 2021). This discourse carried a growing populist undertone: it presented Erdoğan as the indispensable figure capable of delivering modernization to the southeast, elevating the project to a symbolic affirmation of the state’s strength, competence, and mission (Dogan, 2021).

Furthermore, the GAP was increasingly articulated through a securitized lens. This framed infrastructure investment, industrialization, and economic integration as mechanisms for countering insurgency in the southeast (Dinc & Ozduzen, 2023). These concerns were not necessarily unfounded; PKK militants did stage attacks throughout the years to obstruct the construction of the Ilisu dam (Tezcür, 2021). On the other hand, Erdoğan framed all

opponents to the inundation of Hasankeyf as terrorists in his speech in February 2018, not only the PKK militants:

“Terrorists did not want the construction of the Hasankeyf Dam. Why? Because the Hasankeyf Dam was a very important project blocking their terrorist struggle. We spent lots of funds on the Hasankeyf Dam. Now Hasankeyf is not becoming a dam. There is a formation of sea, the Hasankeyf Sea We work hard; we never stop; we do not sit back. Terrorists are on a different path; they block the future of our country; we are in the path of service” (Tezcür, 2018, p. 18).

Either way, this justification shaped development as an extension of national security policy, implicitly legitimizing state and military presence and executive control in the region.

Simultaneously, critical perspectives on displacement, unequal benefit distribution, human rights violations, and environmental impacts were largely absent from media due to post-2016 constraints on press freedom, emergency rule, and widespread self-censorship (Tezcür, 2021; Dinc & Ozduzen, 2023). As a result, GAP discourse in public media became depoliticized, with coverage predominantly framed in terms of securitization or technical development (Bilgen, 2019). This framing downplayed political demands of Kurdish communities advocating for greater autonomy by framing them as a security threat (Bilgen, 2019). The depoliticization of GAP narratives reflects the broader crackdown on political pluralism following the post-coup emergency state, and these justifications simultaneously reinforce the overarching pattern of democratic backsliding in Türkiye between 2016 and 2022.

This dual framing can be understood as a *carrot and stick* approach, as mentioned in the prior chapters. On the one hand, GAP is presented as a vehicle for modernization, economic progress, and regional development; on the other hand, dissent is addressed through hard-power security measures and counterterrorism narratives. By championing either development or security, the political nature of GAP is effectively obscured, while competing discourses are marginalized or criminalized (Warner, 2012; Bilgen et al., 2021).

In conclusion, between 2016 and 2022, state justifications for the GAP framed it simultaneously as a symbol of national pride, modernization, and executive leadership, while also securitizing development in the southeast. This *carrot and stick* approach promoted top-down governance, marginalized local voices, and obscured the project’s political implications. Media depoliticization and repression of dissent further reinforced executive control, highlighting how GAP narratives during this period reflected broader patterns of democratic backsliding in Türkiye.

The regional dimension

Türkiye’s post-2016 water cooperation with Syria and Iraq unfolded in a context of prolonged political instability, armed conflict, and securitization in both neighboring

countries. A substantial body of scholarship argues that Türkiye has increasingly treated transboundary water governance in the Euphrates–Tigris basin as part of a broader foreign policy and security strategy, rather than as a purely cooperative issue (Kibaroglu, 2019; Warner & Zawahri, 2012). Just as in the last chapter, water functioned as a form of political leverage between 2016-2022, implicitly linked to negotiations surrounding regional security concerns (Kibaroglu & Maden, 2014).

Just as with domestic justifications for the GAP, Türkiye has consistently framed GAP-related cooperation with Iraq and Syria in technocratic and depoliticized terms, emphasizing technical expertise, hydrological efficiency, flow management, and sustainable development (Bilgen, 2019; Kibaroglu, 2019). For example, in official discourse, water scarcity downstream is often attributed to mismanagement, inefficient irrigation, and infrastructure losses in Syria and Iraq, rather than upstream withdrawals associated with GAP (Bilgen, 2019), while the dams are expected to intensify water scarcity in Iraq, with far-reaching consequences for biodiversity, irrigation, fisheries, access to drinking water, public health, and river-based transportation (Hockenos, 2019). In parallel, water infrastructure has also been approached through a security lens, with official narratives highlighting the vulnerability of dams and canals to terrorism or sabotage by DAESH or Kurdish militant groups (Warner, 2012; Bilgen, 2019).

This strategy aligns with broader analyses of depoliticization in development governance, where technical and security frames are used to narrow the scope of legitimate political debate (Bilgen et al., 2021). Türkiye's stance on water sharing with Syria and Iraq has consistently rejected binding allocation agreements, instead framing the Euphrates and Tigris as "transboundary rivers" subject to national sovereignty rather than international water law (Kibaroglu, 2015, p. 2).

An increasing issue in transboundary water negotiations during this period has been data sharing, as emphasized by both Academic 2 and the Water Expert:

"The big question that we also see in the base in the data sharing of course. That's not only in this river basin. Data sharing is always a big risk. At the same time we in a way that you share too much of your data. It is also a risk that data does not mean, I mean everyone is always requesting more data, also external actors. But yeah, different interpretation of data, different data, wrong data. There's a lot of, particularly in the last 15 years or 10–15 years, more and more manipulation of, yeah, creating numbers."

Academic 2 further explains that riparian states are often reluctant to disclose hydrological measurements or financial data, fearing that transparency could weaken their negotiating position. This concern is well documented in the literature on transboundary water politics, which shows that data asymmetries and selective disclosure are common strategic tools in interstate negotiations (Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008; Warner & Zawahri, 2012). Academic 2 links this hesitation directly to wider political trends, including declining transparency and increased manipulation of statistics, a

pattern that scholars have also identified within Türkiye's domestic governance since the post-2016 democratic crackdown (Tezcür, 2021).

Taken together, these dynamics position GAP within a regional political economy of water characterized by securitization, technocratic depoliticization, and strategic opacity. Rather than fostering inclusive cooperation, transboundary water governance during this period signal broader trends of centralization, reduced transparency, and democratic backsliding in Türkiye between 2016 and 2022.

The economic dimension

From around 2018, the Turkish lira entered a period of sharp depreciation. Despite rising inflation, the Central Bank intervened extensively while policy interest rates were kept low under strong presidential influence. These unorthodox monetary policies led commentators and the media to describe Türkiye's economic approach as "Erdoğanomics" (The Economist, 2016). In 2021, President Erdoğan dismissed the central bank governor and appointed Şahap Kavcıoğlu, further undermining perceptions of institutional independence. Inflation accelerated, the cost of living increased substantially, and household purchasing power declined. At the same time, Türkiye remained heavily dependent on external capital inflows, increasing its macroeconomic fragility (Yalçiner, 2024).

Economic volatility, combined with institutional erosion, particularly the weakening of judicial and central bank autonomy, contributed to a deterioration of the investment climate (Yalçiner, 2024). Capital outflows and declining foreign direct investment were driven by political instability, currency depreciation, high inflation, and unorthodox monetary policy. These dynamics reinforced one another, producing a self-perpetuating cycle in which capital flight fueled further lira depreciation and inflation, eroding reserves and investor confidence (Yalçiner, 2024).

Despite this broader economic downturn, GAP energy projects continued. The Ilisu Dam was completed in 2019, alongside the commissioning of additional dams. Although the project had initially relied in part on foreign financing, international opposition, particularly over the flooding of Hasankeyf, led foreign investors to withdraw (Tezcür, 2021). The Turkish government replaced these funds with domestic financing, underscoring the political importance attached to the project. As a result, Ilisu symbolized national sovereignty and economic self-reliance, reinforcing broader political narratives of Turkish nationalism and populism (Tezcür, 2021). The decision to proceed despite sustained social, ecological, and international criticism also reflected the increasingly authoritarian character of state decision-making.

At the same time, privatization deepened the dominance of private electricity generation firms nationwide, while the state retained strategic control through licensing and regulation (Bridge et al., 2018). Media reports suggest that presidential decrees issued

during the state of emergency frequently favored politically connected companies. Clientelism and patronage thus remained central features of the Turkish political economy between 2016 and 2022, signaling an intensification of authoritarian economic governance during and after the emergency rule (Erensü, 2018).

This pattern was further reinforced by the appointment of state trustees in southeastern provinces, which extended networks of crony capitalism and paralleled the appointment of a loyalist central bank governor (Baudner, 2025). Public procurement processes also remained opaque (Erensü, 2018). In this context, GAP came to exemplify authoritarian developmentalist neoliberalism: a tightly controlled, state-directed form of market expansion serving a centralized political order.

Conclusion

Between 2016 and 2022, the GAP illustrates the entanglement of development with the rise of authoritarianism in Türkiye. Despite political upheaval and ongoing economic volatility, internal decision-making processes remained largely continuously centralized, while local participation, accountability, and equitable benefit distribution were increasingly constrained. State narratives continued framing the GAP as both a symbol of national pride and modernization and simultaneously its opponents as terrorists, criminalizing alternative understandings. Regional water cooperation was similarly hardened and approached from an entry point of development or security, rejecting alternative understandings of equitable basin-water sharing. Lastly, privatization of water infrastructure deepened, while clientelism and the replacement of elected mayors in the GAP region with state trustees slowly continued. Overall, the period reflects how GAP functioned less as a vehicle for inclusive regional development and more as an instrument consolidating political, economic, and social control under a centralized state. These GAP developments reflect the broader political developments of democratic backsliding under AK Party rule after 2016.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the evolution of the GAP between 2002–2022 and assesses whether, and to what extent, patterns in its implementation reflect broader political trends in Türkiye.

The findings suggest that the GAP has reflected some of the broader political trends in Türkiye, as it reveals institutional centralization, a lack of meaningful civil participation, deficient accountability frameworks and an economic system of patronage networks and clientelism. Furthermore, the Turkish unwillingness to cooperate meaningfully on water and dams with other riparian states was already apparent but increasingly came to be steered by prioritizing its own needs instead of recognizing a shared responsibility. Lastly, the justifications for the GAP project, such as decreasing economic disparities and bringing modernization, were increasingly mismatched with the reception of the public, of whom some perceived it as a sign of state legitimacy, asserting security and pursuing an agenda of assimilation. In sum, the GAP's trajectory did reflect the broader political trends of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism between 2002-2022.

In assessing the four guiding propositions advanced in this thesis, the findings collectively point to a clear development in the governance, discourse, regional positioning, and economic integration of the GAP between 2002 and 2022. First, the analysis demonstrates that the governance of the GAP increasingly aligns with patterns of democratic backsliding marked by executive centralization, weakened accountability mechanisms, and the marginalization of participatory processes. Second, the study shows that the discursive framing of the GAP has become progressively more securitized, reflecting broader shifts in state priorities. Third, Türkiye's regional water diplomacy vis-à-vis Iraq and Syria has evolved toward a more unilateral approach, closely mirroring the thickening of domestic authoritarian governance. Finally, the GAP's economic integration primarily benefits state-aligned actors and patronage networks, reinforcing clientelist connections between political and economic elites instead of supporting inclusive development.

Taken together, these findings largely support the guiding propositions and underscore the value of large-scale infrastructure projects as analytical entry points into broader political transformations.

Furthermore, this thesis aligns with Tansel's (2018) argument that Türkiye did not undergo a sudden 'authoritarian turn,' but rather a process of gradual, legally mediated democratic backsliding. There was no clear 'peak democratic moment' during the early years of the AK Party, even when EU accession talks facilitated democratic reforms. Evidence from the GAP reflects this pattern: although policy documents emphasized a "human-based approach," the reduction of economic disparities, and the strengthening of formal accountability mechanisms, these goals were not consistently implemented in practice

and largely remained paper promises. Consequently, the GAP's trajectory does not indicate a sharp authoritarian shift, but rather illustrates the uneven nature of Türkiye's democratic backsliding.

Subsequently, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while the GAP provides a useful lens for examining state-led development, it may not fully capture broader political trends in Türkiye, such as changes in judiciary independence or national-level electoral processes. Second, the analysis relies in part on expert interviews and secondary sources, which can be subject to bias. Third, establishing causal links between GAP implementation and democratic backsliding is challenging, as multiple political, economic, and regional factors intersect over the 2002–2022 period. As a result, the transferability of the findings to other cases is limited. Consequently, this study cannot conclusively determine whether water infrastructure can function as a standalone indicator of democratic change. Finally, the focus on a single development project limits the generalizability of findings to other sectors or policies, though it provides a detailed case study of authoritarian developmentalist dynamics in practice.

Despite the study's limitations, extensive academic research demonstrates that large-scale water infrastructure projects are both agents and products of political processes and offer valuable insights into a country's political organization, revealing how power is structured, who benefits, and who bears the costs. Starting from the premise that infrastructure is inherently political, this study triangulates multiple data sources and examines the project across several dimensions, including governance and economics. The findings of this study have revealed significant GAP developments over time, of which most signal authoritarian tendencies. Consequently, notwithstanding its limitations, this study demonstrates that the GAP provides a valuable lens through which to assess Türkiye's democratic trajectory between 2002 and 2022.

In sum, this research highlights in which ways large-scale development projects like the GAP can reflect broader political patterns. Understanding these dynamics is helpful for policymakers, civil society, and scholars seeking to assess the intersection of development and political authority and to be warned about signs of authoritarianism in their surroundings and worldwide.

20524 words.

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