

## **The struggle for “life”: Anti-mining mobilization in Turkey**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, people across the globe unite against the neoliberal agenda of relentless commodification of commons. In the different parts of the world, from the Global South to Western Europe, people are united around the aim of protecting living spaces in an ecologically encompassing way against the rent-seeking policies of neoliberalism, including Turkey. Many different ecological movements have been rising that oppose the enclosure of commons and extensive environmental degradation despite the repressive practices of the government party in Turkey. The anti-mining movement in Artvin, in the Northeast part of Turkey, is one of the long-lasting environmental movements in Turkey. The movement achieved an extensive mobilization of the local population comprising a cross-section of different ages, genders, class and political opinions to defend the local ecosystem, which is part of the wider Black Sea and Caucasus ecosystem, against the government-supported mining project. This study examines the environmental conflicts in Turkey by looking at dynamics of mobilization with a particular focus on Artvin.*

**Keywords:** anti-mining mobilization, environmental movements, neoliberalism, mining, Turkey

### **Introduction**

Global investment flows in mining have surged since the 1980s in countries around the world. The neoliberal transformation of economic policies, which entailed opening resources to private and international companies, has significantly influenced the mining industry. During the 1980s and 1990s, developing countries embraced neoliberal reforms that enabled investors to bypass national regulations, thereby accelerating the expansion of multinational mining capital (Özkaynak & Rodriguez-Labajos, 2017). This transformation has also had a direct impact on mining policies in Turkey. Before the 1980s, the Turkish state had control over and coordinated the mining sector, predominantly conducting activities through state institutions (Uncu, 2012). Part of Turkey's neoliberal agenda since the 1980s has been to encourage foreign investment, especially in gold mining, as a strategy for attracting capital to fuel economic growth and societal welfare (Çoban, 2004). One significant area affected by these changes is Artvin, a city in the northeastern corner of Turkey, bordering Georgia and situated near the Çoruh River.

The attempt to construct gold and copper mines in Artvin dated back to the end of 1980. However, thanks to the opposition of local people and lawsuits against

mining, these attempts have failed until the rule of the current government party, the Justice, and Development Party (AKP). In 2012, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Sources announced new 1344 mining licenses, and 325 of them are located in Cerattepe, Artvin. This has been the turning point for the mining activities in the region. Today the city is full of mining licenses. Through this study, my aim is to present the long-lasting environmental activism in Turkey, even if the government violently repressed their struggle.

As the inertia prevails over almost all oppositional movements due to heavy political oppression of the government, environmental movements have mushroomed in different localities to protect the living spaces, livelihood, water, water resources, forests, and environmental commons<sup>1</sup> in Turkey. Surprisingly, they also find themselves a space to manoeuvre even in the localities where AKP gets high vote rates (Binbuga, 2020). Many different ecological movements that oppose the enclosure of commons and extensive environmental degradation have been rising. These resistances are booming against the government's ecologically destructive projects. The anti-mining movement in Artvin is Turkey's longest-running environmental movement, with ups and downs. The struggle has seen the most dynamic phase in terms of the extensive mobilization of local people against the attempts of a Turkish mining company, Cengiz Company, to open a mine in collaboration with the ruling party in 2015. To prevent the mining company from reaching the mining site in the city, a 245-day watch was started by the collective participation of local people, NGOs, unions, political parties, and other associations in the city. This watch was repressed by the violence of security forces. Then, mining companies started to operate since that time. This peaceful protest was met with violence from security forces, and subsequently, the mining company commenced operations. While the movement's current phase is less active, it still offers valuable insights into the potential of environmental activism to challenge neoliberal authoritarian regimes like Turkey's. For this purpose, this study discusses the actors (social basis) and organizational structure of the movement as well as the motivations behind their actions.

The empirical basis of this research is based on the fieldwork conducted in Artvin between June and September 2017. During this period, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 27 activists and actively participated in their

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<sup>1</sup> Following David Harvey's (2012) conceptualization of the commons, I use the term 'commons' to describe a form of social relations and social practices that are collectively produced and non-commodified, existing relatively independently from market relations. Specifically, when discussing nature as the common, I'm referring to nature not merely as a collection of individual trees, animals, and other entities, but rather as a collective set of social relations. This conceptualization views nature as belonging to no single individual but simultaneously to everyone. It is accessible and usable by all, enriched and sustained by collective emotions and experiences. In this framework, nature is understood not just as a physical entity but as a communal resource imbued with shared value and significance.

meetings, forums, demonstrations, and press releases. All interviewees have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

## Artvin



Artvin on the map of Turkey, available from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/86809>

Artvin is located in the north-eastern corner of Turkey, on the border with Georgia, near the Çoruh River. According to the statistics of the Eastern Black Sea Development Agency, the population of the city is approximately 170,000. Artvin's primary income sources are agriculture (including tea, hazelnuts, kiwis, and olives), farming, beekeeping, and mining. Agriculture in the province is dominated by small family farms that rely entirely on human labour and are not mechanised<sup>2</sup>. The city is Turkey's leading producer of honey<sup>3</sup>.

Artvin has a distinct ecosystem surrounded by high mountains and forests with national parks, including Borçka Valley National Park, Karagöl Sahara National Park, and Hatilla Valley National Park. 59 percent of the city is forests, 8 percent is agricultural lands, and 13 percent is meadow and lea. The town consists of 1900 plant species, including 200 endemic ones<sup>4</sup>.

Cerattepe is the region's name in Kafkasör Plateau, located just above the city center of Artvin. It is the region where conflicting mining activities are located. Cerattepe region has a unique ecosystem of fauna and flora, the only extension of the Caucasian ecosystem in Turkey, hosting the migration routes of migratory birds and many endemic species. This region is just 8km away from the city center

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz\\_Artvin-EN.html](https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz_Artvin-EN.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz\\_Artvin-EN.html](https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz_Artvin-EN.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://yesilartvndernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/>

of Artvin, and its environment has rich and abundant vegetation and clean and fresh air. It also provides the sources of water supply for the town. The region bears the most significant old growth forest, the forests with great age without considerable destruction and having unique ecological features in Europe and Middle Asia<sup>5</sup>. It is also rich in reserves of gold and copper, as well as zinc and similar mines<sup>6</sup>. However, it is risky in terms of geographical conditions. The area consists of volcanic sedimentary rocks and presents a high risk of landslides<sup>7</sup>. Ecologically destructive projects in Artvin are not limited to mining. Over one hundred hydroelectric power plants were constructed above Çoruh River. Due to the construction of hydroelectric power plants and dams, the region's ecosystem has been irreversibly damaged, and many people have been displaced through compulsory expropriation.

### **Social basis of the movement**

The social basis of the anti-mining movement in Artvin is a diverse coalition encompassing both organized and unorganized sections of society, led by the Green Artvin Association (YAD) under the slogan 'No to the mine in Cerattepe'. Green Artvin Association was established in 1995 to inform people about the effects of mining and to unite people against mining. It became the platform that united the broad sections, organized and non-organized parts of the society opposing the mining, namely locals, unions, political parties, chambers, cooperatives, associations, Artvin bar, and NGOs in the city. YAD has a formalized institutional structure with its president and vice presidents; however, it is much more appropriate to regard YAD as a network that can get in touch with all sections of the oppositional sections of Artvin. Although it does not maintain personal contact with every individual, its network, facilitated through local authorities and neighborhood connections, effectively reaches all those opposed to the mining project. Pre-existing interpersonal networks and trust relationships have been instrumental in engaging different parts of society.

Women have been at the forefront of the movement. For example, after the police attack on 15 February 2016 that ended the watch in Cerattepe, women organized a march to check the situation of the mine site on 17 February 2016, which was suppressed again very violently by the police. During my fieldwork, I observed women playing an active role in disseminating information about YAD's press releases and meetings, and visiting shops, houses, and coffeehouses in the city. Despite variations in gender, age, class, and political beliefs, the movement has successfully united locals around the anti-mining discourse, with slogans such as

<sup>5</sup> <http://yesilartvindernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.mta.gov.tr/v3.0/sayfalar/bilgi-merkezi/maden\\_potansiyel\\_2010/Artvin\\_Madenler.pdf](http://www.mta.gov.tr/v3.0/sayfalar/bilgi-merkezi/maden_potansiyel_2010/Artvin_Madenler.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://yesilartvindernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/>

'Killer company, leave Artvin,' 'We won't surrender Cerattepe,' 'Cerattepe cannot be overrun, Artvin's people cannot be defeated,' and 'What's above ground is more precious than what's below.' These slogans reflect a collective identity among activists who view themselves as Artvin locals defending their living space, city, nature, and environment against the mining company.

Artvin's unique social dynamics have also facilitated the movement's collective identity. For instance, the city transcends extreme social divides. As numerous interviewees indicated, significant class disparities are not prevalent in Artvin's city center, which is primarily inhabited by civil servants and artisans. Even though political preferences may differ, kinship ties and close acquaintanceships mitigate potential polarization or hostility between various political groups. This phenomenon was exemplified when a member of the leftist Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖDP) introduced me to the former leader of the right-wing nationalist Grey Wolves. Such interpersonal bonds at the local level have been crucial in fostering a collective identity, a key element in the formation and success of a movement (Rootes, 2004; Benford, 2004). The movement's focus on 'living space' has unified people across social classes and political affiliations, creating a hegemonic discourse centered around defending life in the local community's eyes. This approach has enabled the formation of a 'resistance identity,' as described by Castells (2010), which constructs collective resistance against oppression and defines the boundaries of the struggle.

The identification of the 'other' is also a key aspect of building a collective identity. In this case, the mining company, particularly its owner 'Cengiz', has been positioned as the concrete adversary. This negative identification is critical to the movement's identity construction. Daily conversations and interviews frequently referenced the company's attempts to 'conquer Artvin from the inside', referring to efforts by Cengiz Company to collaborate with locals. For instance, the establishment of the 'Our Artvin Association' by mining proponents and the government was seen as an attempt to sway local opinion in favor of mining. The mining company attempted to convince people that the mining in the region would benefit the city and region. The company also indicated that mining would provide employment opportunities in the city. Although the company promoted mining to provide employment and boost local welfare, the movement countered this narrative by emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature over profit.

In summary, the movement's actors are the local people of Artvin, who are directly affected by the mining activities and projects in the region. The movement's heterogeneous social base includes individuals of various ages, genders, political affiliations, and classes, from teachers and civil servants to artisans, farmers, beekeepers, union members, and people with diverse political leanings. This broad participation aligns with the views of della Porta and Piazza (2008), who argue that community-based collective identities often transcend cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity, or religion.

## **Organizational characteristics of the movement**

The anti-mining movement in Artvin is organized as a flexible network characterized by horizontal, participatory, and non-hierarchical structures. Neşe Karahan is the leading name as the president of YAD. However, it should be stressed that she is not regarded as “the leader” of the movement. She is perceived more as a spokesperson than a formal leader, embodying the movement’s preference for horizontal grassroots representation over hierarchical leadership.

A common rhetoric among environmental movements is the notion of being ‘above politics.’ This was repeatedly emphasized during the fieldwork, as the movement’s broad social mobilization is attributed to its stance above institutional politics. This approach is essential, as maintaining such a broad coalition requires independence from any political party, facilitating the participation of people with diverse political orientations, as observed in Artvin.

To indicate this nonpartisan characteristic of the movement, many interviewees give the example of watches organized and led by the leftist and rightist organizations together. One member of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), an extreme right party, stated this aspect that “We were nervous when we met up with *Halkevleri* (leftist organization), but we came together in troubled times. For example, we had trouble, but we stay together in police intervention”. When I saw the watch list for Cerattepe in YAD, I was impressed by the diversity of groups, in terms of not only different political parties but different parts of the society, such as unions, women, peasants, families, neighborhoods, football fans, and artisans. Melek (27/W) explained the diversity and collectivity of the movement with reference to the watches; “We kept 24-hour watch; sometimes with our family, sometimes with organizations. Sometimes we keep watch with MHP supporters, the left-wing people keep watch along with the right-wing people”.

It is important to note that activists refer to the discourse of “being above politics” to show that they are not part of the partisan struggles among contending political parties. It is crucial to note that this discourse is not peculiar to the anti-mining movement in Artvin; instead, it is common among environmental movements that put a distance from institutional politics based on the struggle for political power between political parties.

Another essential characteristic of the movement is transparency and accountability. It was stressed that every participant in the movement is a volunteer, and none is paid; therefore, YAD is constituted by voluntary people instead of professionals. All meetings of YAD are open to the public. It was emphasized that all sections of society are encouraged to participate in the discussions. The decisions are taken in these public meetings by consensus through deliberation, persuasion and common sense, which represent a collective and democratic decision-making process. For example, in the fieldwork, a French journalist visited YAD, and at the end of the interview, he asked about the plans of YAD under the prevailing state of emergency. They replied that we would hold a public meeting and act according to the decisions taken in the meeting. The terms “cooperation”, “collective reasoning”, “shared decision making”, and

“creating common sense” are commonly used to describe the decision-making process by interviewees.

Castell connects communication technologies and organizational characteristics of the movement that the more interactive communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization, and the more participatory is the movement. (2012, p.15). In the case of the anti-mining movement in Artvin, it is plausible to suggest that there is interactive communication between activists. During the interviews, they frequently stated that they use social media such as Facebook or Twitter to announce events and share the news. They have a communication network through YAD, which has a message system that was created during watches. According to interviewees, thanks to this message system, people could mobilize at any time of day to prevent intervention to Cerattepe. They also indicated that they have a WhatsApp group that enables interactive and effective communication between actors. In this respect, the movement uses the communication technologies that make “networked movements” possible.

Anti-mining movement in Artvin shares the common organizational structure with new social movements such as horizontality, rejecting leadership, heterogeneous social base, using communication technologies, collective and participatory decision-making, and transparency and accessibility (della Porta, 2015; Castells, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2005). It is a grassroots environmental movement rejecting the hierarchical way of organization and leadership. In this respect, the organizational structure of the anti-mine movement overlaps with Rootes's definition of the environmental movement as “a loose, noninstitutionalized network, of informal interactions that may include, as well as individuals and groups who have no organizational affiliation, organizations of varying degrees of formality, that are engaged in collective action motivated by shared identity or concern about environmental issues” (2004, p. 610). The movement uses communication technologies, which is a unique characteristic of network movements. Transparency and accessibility, key features of social movements, are also noticeable characteristics of the anti-mining movement. The movement also complies with the description of grassroots movements combining voluntary participation and a heterogeneous social basis that rely on shared concerns in specific issues instead of a strong ideological attachment (Diani & della Porta, 2006, p. 149).

## **The motivations of actors**

The question of why people participate in social movements, in other words, what are the underlying motivations of the actors to participate in social movements, has attracted scholars' attention working on social movements for a long time. During the interviews, I aimed to understand why people participated in the protests against mining and opposed mining activities in Artvin.

Long-running opposition against mining has created an awareness among local people in Artvin, especially thanks to the activities carried out by YAD. During the field study in Artvin, I realized that many people are aware of the effects of

the mine from a scientific viewpoint, because they have listened to many academics and engineers about the impacts of the mine in the region. The interviewees repeatedly noted environmental risks associated with the mine.

When asked about the potential effects of mine, almost all interviewees referred to the mine's long-term possible effects on the city. The most apparent effect of the mine seems that it is going to destroy the Artvin city center, which would make life in Artvin unbearable because the mine site in Cerattepe is located above and on top of the city. The most obvious danger of the mine to the town is the landslide risk. Artvin is constructed between the mountains with a highly steep wooded slope. Consequently, the destruction of the forests in this area would increase the landslide risk in Artvin city center, as expressed by many interviewees. In this respect, “to defend the city where we live” is one of the common discourses among the activists. The discourse on the defense of the city enables actors from different and opposing political identities to act together. A member of the *Grey Wolves*, an extreme far-right organization, Utku (23/M) stated, “The only hesitation that our friends have is that we don't compromise with the left; however, we are struggling for Artvin. The struggle that we were engaged was only for Artvin”. He added, “I am participating in this struggle to save Artvin. Artvin will get worse. The next generation will not enjoy living Artvin. We were born here, and we want to stay here”. One of the main themes among interviewees was that mining activities would force local people to migrate from their city, and it was claimed that their resistance was for the sake of continuing to stay and live in Artvin, as Utku pointed out. Ayten (66/W) explained why she opposes as:

The mine will directly affect our life, it will restrict our life space. It will contaminate our water, and lead to landslides when trees are cut. Our homes are in a landslide site. When mine is extracted, we have to migrate, but there is nowhere to go. We want to continue living here. You cannot find this nature in another place, we don't pay for the water, we drink tap water.

As Ayten pointed out, leaving Artvin and migrating to other places was evaluated as one of the most serious long-term consequences of the mine. Selma (63/W) explained why she opposed the mine in a similar way: “The mine means the disappearance of Artvin. If Artvin disappears, we lose. We are used to live here; we cannot live somewhere else; how we can get used to after this age”. Many interviewees indicated that migration would lead to the disappearance of the identity of being from Artvin”, which is referred to being “rootlessness”. During the interviews, I tried to understand the meaning of “from Artvin” or living in Artvin for local people; in other words, why they insist living in this city. During the field study, I met with many people who are happy to live in Artvin. Some of them had the opportunity to live in another city but chose to live in Artvin. I realized that people have connections with the city in many various ways. Most people feel strong emotional connections with the city, and their defense of their city also means resisting the loss of emotional ties to their city. The 26 years -old

Ali explained his emotional tie with the city in the following way:

There we have a moral responsibility in the first place. I cannot resign myself to the destruction of the lands where I was born and grew up. Therefore, it is very precious to me. We would definitely oppose it if it were somewhere else, too, but you have a different perspective when it comes to your own homeland. We cannot resign ourselves to the destruction of the city where we were born and grew up, home to our memories and ancestors, the lands of our grandfathers and grandmothers. That's why I am against the mines.

For local people living in Artvin, the mobilization against mine is also regarded as the defense of those values represented by their city, like solidarity, friendship, trust, social ties, the culture of mutual cooperation, and ties with the ancestors. Because Artvin is a small city, many people get to know each other. Hence, people could form close personal connections with each other, and living in Artvin enables bonds of solidarity, trust, and support between people. This creates a solidarity culture in the city. Defining the city as “socialist Artvin in capitalist Turkey”, Melek (27/W) explained this culture:

We establish our own communes, and we support each other when necessary. That is to say, here we can create an off-the-system life for ourselves and, therefore, we cannot sacrifice. Besides, as Artvin is a city identified with its culture, here we can actualize ourselves off the system. There is not too much class discrimination here, and as we are natives with our own lands and capable of sustaining a life isolated from the state and the system, no alternative location or financial means would satisfy us. Assuming that all these lands have been expropriated, settling for a new life in somewhere else does not make sense to us. We would like to stay here and maintain our culture, grow our solidarity, and live together with our forests and animals.

Living in Artvin provides women with an environment without social pressures indicated by some female interviewees. Artvin has a social democrat background, and a conservative lifestyle does not dominate the city center. Forty-one years old, Sakine said, “I don't want to leave Artvin. I cannot live anywhere else, I cannot find such a safe environment outside, you cannot trust people, I have a life and friends here, I don't want to live nervously, I go home at noon here, we stay outside with women”.

Significantly different from other parts of the Black Sea region, leftist organizations and political parties have survived in Artvin and have been influential in the politics in the city. Most leftist interviewees paid attention to this point. They indicated that they felt responsible for a leftist culture in the city inherited from the past, especially after the 12 September coup, which suppressed leftist movements and organizations in the country. Artvin was known as one of

the castles of the left before the military coup in 1980. The interviewees considered resistance to the mining company as their political and moral responsibility and also as something that represents the tradition, or the culture of resistance historically represented by the leftist activism in Artvin. As Ali (30/M) stated:

We feel responsible, Artvin has a tradition of struggle, Artvin is not an ordinary city; Cerattepe and Genya are the mountains where people resisted the 12 September military coup. We can't let these lands be plundered by the capital, Cengiz company. We also have such a moral responsibility, and we have had a culture of resistance since the 1970s. We have to continue this legacy.

Many interviewees defined Artvin as a “paradise”, a “life-affirming city”, and a “beautiful city with its nature and people”. Nature is an important complement to the city from the viewpoint of local people. When asked what Artvin meant, another respondent Emre (29/M), said “The most important feature is nature, rather than city. Nature comes to our mind when we think Artvin”, whereas Derya (34/W) defined Artvin as “Our peak is the sky, Artvin means freedom for me, all forests are mine, this is my heaven”. Because the city is mainly associated with its nature and natural beauty, the destruction of the city is equalized with the destruction of nature by the interviewees. It was commonly stated that mine would inevitably destroy the forests in Cerattepe and the national valleys near Cerattepe, and the city would turn into a desert after the destruction of the forests. Actually, the trees were already cut down at the mine site, which can be seen in the distance during my stay. In that respect, protecting nature is one of the underlying motivations of the actors stressed by many interviewees. Because the interviewees repeatedly emphasize the protection of nature, I intended to understand the meaning of nature for local people and how they connect with nature during the fieldwork. Nature has various means for people; it is mainly associated with life, living space, childhood, the homeland with good memories, and the place to relax, enjoy and have fun with family members or friends. Many interviewees stated that they don't go to the seaside for vacations. Instead, they prefer to go to Hatilla Valley for swimming and relaxation. The interviewees' statements on nature mainly concerned how they enjoy and relax in nature. Sakine (75/W) said that:

We relax when we go to Cerattepe, it is the picnic, rest, and leisure area, we don't want to go to the sea in the holidays, going to the forest is much more relaxing for us. However, when this place is destroyed, we cannot find any place to go. These places will be dispossessed.

During the interviews and daily conversations, people became highly emotional when they talked about Cerattepe and expressed the meaning of nature for themselves, as Sakine (75/W) put it:

When the court expert came for the first time, we went to Cerattepe, but I didn't feel cold because I was in my nature. There were two or three children having three or four leaves; what happened to them now?

However, I should add that this is not romanticizing nature; instead, those people possess a material/practical relationship with nature, as Melek (27/W) stated:

Like the offices and residences of people in metropolitan cities, we have our nature here in Artvin and the Black Sea region. When we go to the forest, we pick up our mastic, mushrooms, nuts, and cones. We meet a variety of our houses' needs with these forest products.

Therefore, the protection of nature relates to both emotional and material relationships of the people with nature from the viewpoint of the interviewees. The other aspect of nature is its identification with health and remedy. Older people commonly emphasize this aspect. For example, 93 an old woman named Esma stated how living in the green area helped her feel healthy and younger “The nature here is green, water is clean, the mountains have various kinds of medicine warehouse. The flowers in the mountains are medicine warehouses. The flowers in the mountains were used as medicine in the past. Our ancestors used to live in such a green area. I am 93 years old, and I owe it to this weather. I am coming here, and I can breathe. Thanks to this weather, I feel like I am 15 years old”. Hasan (65/M) also explained how his wife recovered thanks to nature:

Your aunt felt sick, I rented a house in the forests, and she recovered. People in Artvin prefer Kafkasör to go to sea. Longevity, strength...The weather I breathe is healthy. This is our life; we lived here and will die here.

The notion of “living space” was commonly used by interviewees when describing nature. Many interviewees interchangeably referred to nature, Cerattepe, forests, and living space in daily conversations and interviews. This concept refers to the close relationship with nature; nature as a living space refers to the place to live, breathe, and enjoy, as a space that supplies water and livelihood, and indicates the feeling of being part of nature. When I asked Sezen (50/W) “why this nature is so important for you,” she impressively explained:

We have no other place to breathe, no other sea but only this nature. We have

nowhere to go; we all belong here, and it is our only living space. Cerattepe is not far from here. You will get to my place in ten minutes just below there. We eat, drink, and continue with our daily lives while they drain out our brains out there. It is our living space, and, therefore, we greatly care about it. It is not a place far away from here that we try to defend. We do not fight against the state and the people or something beneficial to all. All that we do is to protect our living space. This is my living space where I breathe, eat, and drink. This is where I live. I have no chance of surviving here without them. As I said, this is our living space. If it were a place far from the Artvin region, you could say “it is none of your business.” But it is our mountain that they excavate. All our food and water come from there, our lands lie there, and our animals graze there. It is all the same for us; we have no other area but Kafkasör, Cerattepe, and Merzifon. We go to these places for leisure; we say, “let’s go to Kafkasör.”

The identification of Cerattepe with the living space was common among the interviewees, so the struggle for Cerattepe against mine is evaluated as the defense of living space. Umut (29/M) defined the anti-mine struggle as a struggle for existence to defend their living space, which is conceptualized as the homeland, feelings, and memories belonging to the past:

We fight for our survival now. The corporation, the government, or the state attacks the living space where we were born and grew up, and they care only for money without any concerns for the people living there. They neglect not just the people but also the trees, animals, and cultural heritage. It means the destruction of the place where I was born and grew up, where I had my first contact with the people, the streets I walked down, and my early memories and feelings in my life.

In addition to the motivation of defense of living space, the defense of life is another common theme used by the activists to indicate their motivations behind mobilization. As one of the interviews (68/W) puts it; “This is a matter of existence or non-existence for Artvin. We are protecting our lives... This is a struggle for the life, rather than being a political struggle”. Similarly, 75 years old Sakine (W) replies to the question “Why you are opposing mine in Artvin” by answering, “Firstly health. Wellness, greens, water, and life. One single word, life. I am opposing due to my life. Of course, I want to live a healthy life in old ages”.

This is not only peculiar to the struggle in Cerattepe; ecology activists have defined themselves as “life defender” for a long time across the world and Turkey. Identifying nature with living space or life enables activists to refer to universal values, cutting across social, economic, and political differences. The theme of life defense in Artvin's case is applied to show this characteristic of the struggle. Conceptualizing struggle as a life defense or life space defense refers to the characteristics of the struggle above politics and enables people with different political views to act together.

Approaching nature as a heritage that should be passed on to future generations was another common rhetoric concerning nature. This is not only about material aspects of nature; of course, they refer to protecting the trees, but sometimes, this heritage refers to the sense that you live when you are in nature or emotions and experiences lived in nature, as Sırma (54/W) expressed that “Our fathers took us to picnic, we lived our happiest moments there. We ate food, played, enjoyed. I hope I can create such an environment for my grandchildren. I can share this environment and smell this air”. As Sırma pointed out, the destruction of nature blocks future generations from enjoying nature, as previous generations did. This is often seen as the damage of the mine to the children and future generations, as Derya (34/W) stated: “I enjoyed this nature, and I became happy. The next generation should experience this”. Women interviewees especially express this aspect. 65 years old Ayşe said that she is struggling for future generations and added that “Mine will destroy us, it will destroy the future of our children. We came and we are going, but it is awful for our children,” while 54 years old Sırma indicated that:

I have lived and passed half of the way; now my child is 27 years old; what is the sin of my grandchildren who have not been born yet? How can I explain this irresponsibility to my grandchildren in the future?

In this respect, protecting children and future generations and leaving nature as a heritage to children and future generations is another primary motivation of the actors to participate in the movement. Turning now to the impact of mining on nature, it is important to remember that nature includes natural water resources and animals. Interviewees often emphasized the effects of the mine on nature concerning natural water resources and animals. The mining activity directly affects water pollution in the region because tap water in Artvin comes from spring water in the mountains, which is very close to the mine site in Cerattepe. People do not buy bottled water, as is the case in big cities, and they get used to drinking tap water. Since mine began in Cerattepe, tap water pollution has already started. When I was in Artvin in the summer, I got sick and went to the hospital, and the doctor in the hospital told me that these medical cases were commonly encountered because of the pollution in tap water. In the interview with Neşe Karahan, she underlined the complaints of the villagers about the polluted spring water, which starts from the mine site and passes across mine villages, including beekeeping sites. The villagers informed YAD about the water pollution in the town near the mine site. They went to the village, took a sample of the water, and made a denunciation, Karahan stated. In the video taken during this investigation, it is seen how spring water is muddied<sup>8</sup>. In this video, the villager/beekeeper said that it is the first time that water has become dirty; even previous mining activities did not create such water pollution. In the video, the villagers' cultivated lands are seen, and it indicates that they have to irrigate their

<sup>8</sup> The relevant video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UkDabU1Its>

lands with this water<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, one of the villagers asserted that because of the infusion of chemicals and oils into the spring water, butterflies, insects, ants, and bees will die if they drink this water<sup>10</sup>.

In this regard, water pollution affects not only people but also animals. In the interviews, it was commonly stated that the world does not only belong to humans; animals are part of this nature. Sırma noted that the mine will harm not only humans but also animals living in nature: "I am not worried about only humans. I do not want animals to be hurt, the nature has a balance, and I do not want this balance to be destroyed". Through the destruction of forests where wild animals live and the pollution of water, mine will harm the animals. In the same video, the beekeeper adds that bees, the "source of our life," drink this water and "our life totally depends on this water<sup>11</sup>". By this statement, he refers to the effects of the mine on the livelihoods. In July 2017, it was reported that 27 cows were poisoned. The owner of the poisoned cows related intoxication to the mining activity because the cows drank muddy spring water. He stated that cattle farming is their only means of livelihood<sup>12</sup>. Beekeeping is another necessary means of livelihood in the city. Hatilla Valley and Macahel region are known for honey produced locally. According to Artvin Governorship, in Artvin, 1 million 150 thousand tone honey is made in a year<sup>13</sup>. Beekeeper Mehmet (64/M) stated that bees are susceptible animals, therefore, they can die quickly because of the pollution in nature. Another beekeeper, Ayten (66/W) indicated that it will be the last year we produce qualified honey (in 2017) if the mining activity in Cerattepe continues. She added that if the mining activity continues, most of the bees will die, and the quality of the honey will decrease sharply because of the water pollution and pollution of the flowers that bees pollinate. Moreover, when the cyanide mixes in water, the honey we produce will be toxic, as she indicated. Therefore, they believe that mine will directly affect the means of production and livelihood.

Another primary motivation of the actors to participate in the movement is the adverse effects of the prior experience mining in the region and its lived impacts to nature and human health. Utku (23/M) expressed the potential impact of the mine on nature by stating that "Many trees will be cut; it will turn to Murgul or like the other place mine is extracted. It will be moorland, even a grass will not grow". Many interviewees referred to Murgul, one of the districts of Artvin, to exemplify the region where the effects of mining activities can be seen clearly. The statement of Sırma (54/W), "The people in Artvin did not learn mine from TV shows, they lived, people know from Murgul," indicated such an experience of the local people in the region. During the field study, many people said that Murgul

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fHDvE3bl\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fHDvE3bl_Y)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UkDabU1Its>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUkDabU1Its>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/cerattepe-korkulan-oldu?page=5>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.artvin.gov.tr/artvin-ormanlari-ballaniyor>

was a lively, colorful, and green town before the mine operated, and it turned into a “ghost” town after the mine. They had relatives who died young because of occupational illness related to working in the mine. During the interview, I was very impressed by the statements of a 75-year-old mineworker woman, Sakine, who retired from the sales unit of a copper operation in Murgul. She lost her brother and father at an early age working in the mine because of an occupational illness. She recounted her living and working experience in Murgul in the following way:

If a bird were to drink from the waters of the mine, that bird would die instantly. I witnessed it. Murgul River used to flow black. If a living creature were to drink from that water, that animal would perish...We could not go to the office with a pair of socks; it would be riddled. My heart is torn apart; I cried a lot in the morning. Murgul Copper Factory was established in 1950. I worked there for 16 years in the sales department. The people woke up, and they started to revolt. Because they had no single bunch of parsley as the SO<sub>2</sub> gas from the mine burnt them completely, and now that region is a valley... A kind of vapor would arise when it melted. That was a colored vapor that burns your skin. My father used to work. He died at the age of 50. We had nothing, we had our jobs, but my father and brother lost their health. It affects your life one way or another. My friends died of cirrhosis, and all those days are like a dream now.

Another main reason articulated by interviewees pertains to political concerns. The struggle for Cerattepe is evaluated as hope and destiny for other ecology struggles in Artvin, the Black Sea region, and Turkey. As mentioned earlier, Cerattepe is only one of the mining sites; there are 325 mining licenses in Artvin, in addition to many hydroelectric power plants, dams, and stone quarry projects. People regarded Cerattepe as a symbol of the struggle against environmentally destructive projects in Artvin, and it is believed that giving up the struggle for Cerattepe means the loss of the struggle in all parts of Artvin.

The statement that “our nature will be destroyed for the sake of profit of Mehmet Cengiz” is stressed by many people during the field study. Against the discourse of the government and mine company that the mining will offer an employment opportunity for local people and contribute to the wealth of the city, people indicate that there is no benefit for the local people in Artvin, and they also stressed that even the state has no benefit from mining in the region. Many interviewees stated that the state would receive 2% of the profit. There was no general homogenous and uniform discourse on mining; some interviewees said they don't oppose mining, but they underlined that they are against mining in Cerattepe. All interviewees of different ages and political views agreed that the only one that benefits from mining in Cerattepe is Cengiz Company - the mining company. However, there is a consensus about what will be the case if the mine is extracted by the state, not a private company. Right-wing interviewees

indicated that Artvin could be sacrificed for the sake of the state- especially if the state has benefited from the mining. 65 years old ex-president of *Grey Wolves* Hasan argued that:

If they were to say we remove Artvin completely, but we must extract this mine here, and the money will go to the treasury of the Republic of Turkey, then we would sacrifice. It would be for the benefit of the state, at least. Just think of Gallipoli, where we had 250 thousand martyrs, and there were people from Artvin among them. No worries if we are to save our state... All our efforts are for the Turkish nation and Turkey. If it were the Republic of Turkey that extracted this mine here and it would benefit our state, then we would sacrifice not only Artvin but ourselves as well. But it is not the case as they grant it to Mehmet Cengiz who swears to me and my family blatantly. So, what is in it for us?

In all interviews, the name of Mehmet Cengiz – the mining company owner- was pronounced. When asked why they are against mining in Cerattepe, most people indicate that they don't want their nature to be destroyed for the sake of the profit of Mehmet Cengiz. It is also important to note that this rhetoric is not peculiar to left-wing people. People of different ages and different political views made the same point without exception. For example, 75 years old conservative woman Sakine said that:

We don't want to get poisoned for the sake of Mehmet Cengiz. For the profit of one person, even if it is for the profit of ten people, it doesn't make sense. They should not plunder my nature; I don't care about the profit. The water will come from Çekirge and I will drink water here. Why: for the profit of Cengiz. There is nothing else. I don't want this; they should leave nature alone; I am so sad.

During daily conservations, people often stated that the government discards citizens in Artvin and Artvin City for the welfare of Mehmet Cengiz. Sixty-three-year-old MHP supporter Selma said this opinion in the interview: "They ignore 30.000 people for one person: Mehmet Cengiz". Duygu (45/W) agreed with Selma by saying, "They will force people to leave their homes, why, just for Cengiz and his followers. They will ignore Artvin and the people in Artvin for the sake of two people". At this point, the interviewees repeatedly stressed the role of the government and its collaboration with the private company. By stating that local people are the actual owners of Artvin, Sırma (54/W) argued that:

We are the owners of these lands in Artvin. We have protected all these lands and mountains for centuries. We have not cut down a single tree as we strictly

implement the forestry laws here. However, someone else cuts them down and contaminates nature blatantly—no fines or punishments when it comes to the corporation. A choice must be made between the people and the corporation. You cannot govern a state like a corporation. You cannot make benefits available to certain people from the state sources.

In this respect, the ruling party's role in the mine project in Cerattepe is pointed out by many interviewees. This may be an anti-government stand rather than an anti-state. There is a dissent to government policies and collaboration of the government with the private company. However, this discontent does not direct the state. In this respect, the state and government do not correspond to the same unity from the viewpoint of the interviewees. The collaboration between the Cengiz construction company and the ruling party has been emphasized by many interviewees, and mining in Cerattepe was evaluated as a government project. All interviewees indicated that the government directly supported this project. The collaboration between the ruling party and Cengiz Company is also connected to the security forces' attack on 15 February 2016 to enable the company to carry its heavy equipment to the Cerattepe mine site. Many interviewees stated that state security forces, paid by citizens' taxes, worked for Cengiz company<sup>14</sup>. 64 years old, Mehmet expressed this aspect;

Does the constabulary protect private companies? It does here. The constabulary came outside, but the constabulary did not protect the private sector. We are occupied by our state, soldiers, and police. The state revealed its nature. It was understood that the security forces served Cengiz.

During the interviews and daily conversations, people emotionally expressed how they felt disappointed and lost their trust and faith in the state when the police attacked. Another respondent, a 34 years-old teacher, Derya, explained that moment regarding the role of government and her disappointment:

What is the role of the state; it should be between people and the company. However, they acted with the company, they opened a road for the company, and then the company's cars and containers went under our eyes. I was always afraid of this moment. I didn't want to see this moment. That is the ruling party's role; it took the people on to make one person rich. These people lost their trust in the state.

In the interviews, many activists drew attention to rising repression in recent

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<sup>14</sup> In Cerattepe near to mine site, police soldiers were still waiting for mine site when I was in Artvin.

years. They explained how the Artvin governorship benefits from a state of emergency to repress political opposition in the city. After the 15 July coup attempt, the Artvin governorship has banned any public activities such as press statements, meetings, and demonstrations since July 2016, which was evaluated as a sign of collaboration between the government and Cengiz company by many interviewees. In the interview, Emre (29/M) equalized government, state, and private companies and stressed the cooperation concerning the bans of governorship:

The government is directly included in this project. I think Cengiz's construction governs this process. The state is Mehmet Cengiz, the state in Artvin is Mehmet Cengiz, and the governor is Mehmet Cengiz because the governor obeys Mehmet Cengiz; he approves everything. It has been 1 year since 15 July. The state of emergency was extended 12 times in Artvin; there is a state of emergency in Turkey and a double state of emergency in Artvin. They don't intervene in other districts except for Artvin city center. There is no state, governor, or district governor; the state is Cengiz construction now, and what Cengiz says is the rule. That is to say, the state and the governor do not let the activities of the Green Arvin Association relate to Cerattepe. This means that they are the political partner of Cengiz Construction. The governor acts as a representative of Cengiz Construction rather than the representative of the state and the people.

The discourse “the governor of Artvin is Mehmet Cengiz” was stated by many interviewees during daily life and interviews. They stressed the close relationship between the company and the government. They mentioned that bureaucrats appointed by the government party were not working for the people but for private companies. The “secret” partnership between the leading figures of AKP and the company was also stressed by many interviewees. In addition to the idea that mining in Cerattepe was a project of the government party AKP, the role of personal interests was also emphasized. Ali (27/M) described this as; This is the project of the ruling party as a family and business partnership, the project that the ruling party directly supports. The state uses every means available since it is a matter of excessive surplus”. By referring to the fact that the state does not derive a profit from mining, Başak (41/W) explained why the government insistently supports this project despite powerful local opposition:

If the state does not profit, it will get a 2 percent share. Why does the state support this project? Cengiz is responsible for the project. Another ruling party does not stand behind this project. This insistence is due to the ruling party's profit; they will earn billions. The ruling party supports them. If it does not, the company will give up to now.

The government plays a role in supporting the mine project in Cerattepe in different ways. Interviewees underlined the part of the government by intervening in courts' decisions, changing regulations and EIA on mines by simplifying EIA procedures, and providing the mining company with the services of the municipality. The decision of EIA, a positive report by the local court, and approval of this decision by the Council of State are evaluated as the government's interference to support mining activity, as stated by Selma: "Actually, I don't believe in courts and justice. We won lawsuits 30 times. We cannot this time. The judges changed when we won lawsuits, they added fake documents, and they filled a new suit, and then this happened", while Ayten indicated that "The previous process was different, there was a judicial process. The company started its activities before the court decision. This is the role of the ruling party".

The government evaluated the municipality's role in providing infrastructure and human capital to support mining activity. The AKP won the last municipal elections after CHP's three terms in power. Many interviewees indicated negative reflections on this change. They explained how the municipality used every available means to help the mining company by providing equipment and workers and blazing trails or extensions of the roads. Melek (27/W) emphasized the role of the local government:

The atmosphere in the city has changed through the changes in local government; we lost our most important support. We were very powerful in the period of Emin Özgün, our previous mayor. We could do whatever we wanted; he gave every kind of support in the demonstrations; we could organize demonstrations and express our demands. The struggle is much more than reading press releases; instead, it has material and moral aspects. It is difficult to achieve in the conditions that the atmosphere of the city is not on your side.

In this respect, the role of government through repression of the mobilization by a police attack on 16 February 2016, governor's ban, and mobilization of municipality resources for the mining company is evaluated as the role of the government in terms of supporting mining in Artvin. Neşe Karahan referred to the role of government in terms of protecting the private company through political and legal means as follows:

State security forces swear to protect the homeland, country, and future of the country. Unfortunately, they work for a private company. Since February, the constabulary waited for the company at the mining site. The company has personal security, and the constabulary still waits to protect them. There are still prohibitions; Artvin's governor extended prohibitions automatically since 19 September. For whom these prohibitions are just for one company. To torture the people in Artvin, press releases are prohibited, demonstrations are prohibited, and everything is not permitted. In the meantime, many people

have put on trails, including us. The company tried to place a charge, blaming me for being a German spy.

As indicated the interviewees indicated their opposition to the mining regarding the discourse that the nature/Cerattepe/their living space is plundered by Cengiz company with the help of the government to make a profit-making. They did not apply the words of capitalism or neoliberalism. Still, they referred to the peculiar dimension of neoliberalism, such as the plunder of nature and living space for the private company's interests or “small and privileged groups.” It is crucial to remember that the rapid ecological degradation that goes hand in hand with state-capital partnership is an inherent part of the historically specific accumulation process that defines capitalist society (Foster, 2002, p. 104); in other words, commodification and privatization of the nature and natural resources is an integral part of the contemporary capitalism (Harvey, 2004; Werlhof, 2007; Castree, 2010). Because neoliberalism recognizes nature only as a resource that must be exploited (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001, p. 1117), and be transformed into commodity/ capital (Werlhof, 2007), neoliberalism involves enclosure, dispossession and commodification process of nature, natural resources, and commons.

By defining nature as a living space and defending living space as the common of the local community, the anti-mining movement in Artvin represents collective resistance against the commodification of commons, which is evaluated as one of the critical features of contemporary neo-liberal social movements (Klein, 2004; della Porta, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Defending the nature of their region as the common belonging to all is the common goal of activists, which brings together various people in Artvin. They conceptualize nature as their living space that should not be plundered by the private company because it belongs to everyone and belongs to the local people of Artvin. From the perspective of people living in Artvin, nature is about their past, experiences, and emotions; in other words, it is about people's social relations and social networks. Therefore, they resist privatization and commodification of what is essential to their life. This reminds us the argument of Klein that “The defense of their living spaces against the interest/profit of private company at the same time indicates the defense of the common, which is “the radical spirit of new social movements” (Klein, 2004) . While anti-neoliberal social movements defend commons as decommodifying what is essential to life (della Porta, 2015, p. 140), activists in Artvin defend Cerattepe as the environmental commons as an inseparable part of their life.

## **Conclusion**

Neoliberalism harbors various societal conflicts. Far from being limited to the economic sphere, societal conflicts emerging from neoliberalism can also be observed in the political and social spheres. The environmental conflicts are no exception to such societal conflicts caused by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism goes

hand in hand with the enclosure of commons, including ecological commons such as land, water, and forests.

In recent years, people globally have united against the neoliberal agenda of relentless commodification of commons. In different parts of the world, from the Global South to Western Europe, people are united around the aim of protecting living spaces in an ecologically encompassing way against the rent-seeking policies of neoliberalism. Turkey is no exception in this respect. Although authoritarian policies repress oppositional movements, environmental movements continue to sustain in different localities.

The anti-mining struggle in Artvin has lasted almost 30 years with ups and downs. The movement is characterized by a heterogenous social basis due to the participation of people from different age, gender, political affiliations, and class. The movement's actors are local people of Artvin who are directly affected by mining in the region. This movement is composed of a broad coalition of local people exceeding political, ideological, and class differences with the slogan “no to mine” in Cerattepe. The movement creates a collective identity that activists define themselves as the local people of Artvin whose living space is threatened by the mining company and who defend their life, city, nature, and environment. The movement is organized as a flexible network in a horizontal, participatory, and non-hierarchical way.

Motivations of the actors to oppose the mining and participate in the movement display diversity; however, to defend the city and nature and to oppose the plunder of nature for the profit of private companies are the main motivations underlined by the interviewees. It was repeatedly argued that mining would destroy Artvin and turn it into a desert, forcing them to immigrate with the consequent loss of the city culture identified with social ties, solidarity, trust, and friendship. People have emotional and material attachments to nature. It mainly refers to where they grow up, live, relax, and enjoy. This is the reason why they call it “living space.” Nature is about their past, experiences, and emotions; in other words, it is about people's social relations and social networks. Therefore, they resist privatization and commodification of what is essential to their life.

Even though activists do not explain their motivations by referring to words such as capitalism and neoliberalism, they mentioned specific characteristics of neoliberalism, such as plundering nature for the interest of the private company and private company-government partnership. Interviewees repeatedly noted that they oppose this project because it will lead to the plunder of their nature for the sake of the profit of one private company. The government's role was to support the private company by intervening in law, changing regulations and procedures, providing infrastructure through municipalities, and creating a repressive environment for the opposition in the city through governorship bans. The anti-mining movement in Artvin shows strong resistance to neoliberal authoritarianism that goes hand in hand with state and private company partnerships in the Turkish case. Although activists locate their struggle “above politics,” they distance themselves from institutional politics and perform anti-neoliberal politics by protecting their nature, as the living space and the commons

belong to everyone instead of the private company, which gives important clues about the potential of environmental movements in terms of political and social opposition to contemporary neoliberalism.

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