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THE CORRELATION BETWEEN POPULATION GROWTH AND SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION THROUGH URBAN PLANNING IN TÜRKIYE

Abstract

The article examines the relationship between rapid population growth and the formation of systemic corruption in urban planning using the example of the Republic of Turkey. Based on an analysis of the legal and economic processes that have taken place in Turkey since the second half of the 20th century, the author identifies how urbanization caused by internal migration from rural areas to large cities influenced the formation of informal practices in housing construction. The article examines the legal mechanisms governing construction and land use, as well as the specifics of contracts between landowners and construction companies that have become the basis for "shadow" agreements. Attention is paid to the institutional weakness of local authorities and limited public control, which creates conditions for corrupt schemes when issuing construction permits and when putting facilities into operation. The emphasis has placed on the importance of reviewing urban planning policies and the regulatory framework, strengthening the legal responsibility of control subjects and introducing transparency tools.

Key words: corruption, urbanization, urban planning, housing construction, building permits, public control, legal regulation.

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ТҮРКИЯДАҒЫ ҚАЛА ҚҰРЫЛЫСЫН ЖОСПАРЛАУ АРҚЫЛЫ ХАЛЫҚ САНЫНЫҢ ӨСУІ МЕН ЖҮЙЕЛІ СЫБАЙЛАС ЖЕМҚОРЛЫҚ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ БАЙЛАНЫС

Аңдамна

Бұл мақалада Түркия Республикасының мысалында халық санының қазіргі уақыттағы жедел өсуі мен қала құрылысын жоспарлау саласындағы жүйелі түрдегі сыбайлас жемқорлықтың өзара байланысы қарастырылады. Автор ХХ ғасырдың екінші жартысынан бастап Түркияда орын алған құқықтық және экономикалық үдерістерге кеңінен талдау жасай отырып, ауылдық жерлерден ірі қалаларға ішкі көші-қон нәтижесінде туындаған урбанизацияның тұрғын үй құрылысы саласындағы бейресми тәжірибелердің қалыптасуына қалай әсер еткенін нақтылап анықтайды. Мақалада құрылыс салу мен жер пайдалануды реттейтін құқықтық тетіктер, сондай-ақ жер иелері мен құрылыс компаниялары арасындағы келісімшарттар, олардың «көлеңкелі» келісімдерге негіз болған ерекшеліктері қарастырылады. Құрылысқа рұқсат беру және нысандарды пайдалануға қабылдау кезінде сыбайлас жемқорлық схемаларына жол ашатын жергілікті билік органдарының институционалдық әлсіздігі мен қоғамдық бақылаудың шектеулілігіне ерекше назар аударылады. Қалалық жоспарлау саясатын және нормативтік базаны қайта қарау, бақылаушы субъектілердің құқықтық жауапкершілігін күшейту және ашықтық құралдарын енгізу қажеттігіне баса мән беріледі.

Түйін сөздер: сыбайлас жемқорлық, урбанизация, қала құрылысын жоспарлау, тұрғын үй құрылысы, құрылысқа рұқсат беру, қоғамдық бақылау, құқықтық реттеу.

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КОРРЕЛЯЦИЯ МЕЖДУ РОСТОМ ЧИСЛЕННОСТИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ И СИСТЕМНОЙ КОРРУПЦИЕЙ ЧЕРЕЗ ПРИЗМУ ГРАДОСТРОИТЕЛЬНОГО ПЛАНИРОВАНИЯ В ТУРЦИИ

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается взаимосвязь между стремительным ростом численности населения и формированием системной коррупции в сфере градостроительного планирования на примере Турецкой Республики. Основываясь на анализе правовых и экономических процессов, происходивших в Турции со второй половины XX века, автор выявляет, как урбанизация, вызванная внутренней миграцией из сельской местности в крупные города, повлияла на формирование неформальных практик в жилищном строительстве. Рассматриваются правовые механизмы, регулирующие строительство и землепользование, а также особенности договоров между владельцами земель и строительными компаниями, ставшие основой для «теневых» соглашений. Внимание уделяется институциональной слабости местных органов власти и ограниченному общественному контролю, что создает условия для коррупционных схем при выдаче разрешений на строительство и при принятии объектов в эксплуатацию. Делается акцент на важности пересмотра градостроительных политик и нормативной базы, усиления юридической ответственности субъектов контроля и внедрения инструментов прозрачности.

Ключевые слова: коррупция, урбанизация, градостроительное планирование, жилищное строительство, разрешение на строительство, общественный контроль, правовое регулирование.

Introduction

During the XX-XXI centuries, the population of Turkey increased almost sevenfold, which caused large-scale internal migration to large cities. This demographic process has become one of the key factors that determined the country's urban development and generated institutional challenges, including corrupt practices in the field of construction and planning.

The massive development of outlying territories without permits led to the emergence of informal settlements - *gecekonda*, which has subsequently legalized by the state, which gave rise to precedents of institutionalized corruption in the field of urban planning regulation.

Population growth and intensive urbanization, accompanied by institutional weakness, have created conditions for systemic corruption in urban development in Turkey. An integrated approach, including both legislative and organizational measures, can help overcome these challenges.

With the proliferation of construction contracts in exchange for a share in real estate, corruption has become a part of construction practice. Representatives of local authorities, having discretionary powers to issue building permits, received illegal benefits for exceeding the permitted building parameters [1, p. 112-114].

Technical, design and production supervision in construction in Turkey has often carried out by persons interested in the outcome of the project, which reduces the effectiveness of control and creates conditions for corruption [2, p. 57-58].

The existing legislation does not provide for sufficient liability for violations in the implementation of urban development projects.

The United States, the Czech Republic, and the Philippines have mechanisms for public oversight and independent oversight, including the participation of trade unions, non-governmental organizations, and civil society institutions [2, p. 100-103; 6, p. 89-91]. These practices demonstrate high potential in preventing corruption in urban planning.

The authors of a number of studies propose to strengthen the legal responsibility of control subjects, expand the powers of public institutions, introduce digital platforms for monitoring costs, ensure transparency of project approval procedures and improve the qualification requirements for experts [4, p. 219-221; 5, c. 135-137].

The purpose of the article is to identify and analyze the relationship between population growth and systemic corruption in urban planning in Turkey, as well as to propose legal and organizational measures to reduce corruption risks in housing construction.

Materials and methods

The study uses a variety of sources and methods typical of legal science and interdisciplinary analysis. The main materials were regulatory legal acts of the Republic of Turkey, scientific publications from international databases, official reports of government agencies and the results of comparative legal analysis.

The following methods of legal science were used in the research:

Analysis of legislation and law enforcement practice – the study of current norms governing urban planning and housing construction in Turkey, as well as the identification of legal gaps and corruption risks.

The historical and legal method is the study of the dynamics of legal and social changes affecting the formation of corrupt practices in urban planning during the XX–XXI centuries.

The comparative legal method is a comparison of domestic legal norms and practices with foreign models of anti-corruption regulation and urban planning control (using the example of the USA, the Czech Republic and the Philippines).

The system method is a comprehensive consideration of the processes of urbanization, legal regulation and corruption as interrelated elements of a single system.

The method of legal modeling is the development of recommendations for improving legislative and organizational mechanisms in order to reduce corruption risks.

Content analysis is the analysis of scientific publications and public opinion to identify trends and key issues in housing construction and urban planning regulation.

This set of methods has made it possible to comprehensively study the relationship between population growth, urbanization and corruption in urban planning in Turkey, as well as suggest ways to improve the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

Results and discussion

Although it may not be possible to describe the development of the Turkish economy over the past century as one of the world's most successful, it would still be accurate to describe it as a significant success story.

As of 2024, Türkiye is the 17th largest economy in the world. Moreover, what is particularly striking is that, alongside this economic success, Türkiye has increased its population nearly sevenfold over the past hundred years. During the same period, there was not a single country in Europe that had even doubled its population. Even China...

Today, China has a population of 1.4 billion, but back in 1925, its population had already exceeded 450 million—meaning that its growth over this period was roughly 3.5 times.

Yes, Türkiye has increased its population nearly sevenfold over the last century, and it has done so despite not having abundant natural resources or experiencing a big industrial revolution. So, how did we achieve this? Of course, this success cannot be attributed to a single factor; many elements contributed. Particularly with the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, a significant development drive began, and substantial industrial investments were made.

However, we believe that one particular phenomenon observed after World War II and the domino effects it triggered have often been overlooked and insufficiently examined to date.

Indeed, following World War II – especially from the 1950s onward—there was a massive wave of migration in Türkiye from rural areas to all major cities, especially Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir. So where did these people find shelter in the big cities? How did they meet their housing needs? Well, they occupied treasury lands, the lands that belonged to the state, in other words to no one, on the outskirts of these cities. On these lands, they built poor and shabby houses—known in Turkish as "gecekondu," which can literally be translated as "built overnight." In a very short time, the surroundings of large cities were encircled by gecekondu neighborhoods.

However, the story did not end there. By 1950, the one-party rule in Türkiye had ended, and a multi-party period had begun, leading to a fierce political competition. As part of this competition, local governments were the first to start providing services to these neighborhoods, such as roads, water and electricity. Soon, politicians seeking votes began promising these squatters that if elected, they would grant them the title of the land they had occupied. After the elections, governments fulfilled these promises and transferred ownership of these public lands - lands not previously subject to private ownership—to the very individuals who had occupied them.

Thus, these individuals, who had virtually no assets, suddenly became owners of valuable properties surrounding major urban centers. Now, of course, they no longer wanted to live in their makeshift, substandard homes – they wanted proper buildings. However, they did not have the financial means to construct them. So, a new type of contract emerged between landowners and contractors: What we call, "construction contract in return of a land share".

In return for constructing the buildings, the landowners would not pay money but instead promise to transfer the ownership of some of the apartments (independent units) to the contractors.

For example, if a contractor built a 10-flat building, 5 flats would go to the contractor and 5 to the landowner. The more floors the contractor could build, the more flats there would be to share between the parties. The greater the construction permit that could be obtained, the greater the profit. Therefore, contractors had to secure the necessary building permits from local authorities. Naturally, these authorities expected something in return for their "favor."

Since then, it has become a widespread public belief in Türkiye that the most significant, fundamental, and systematic form of corruption in the country occurs through the granting of building permits. It is even thought that this method essentially finances politics in Türkiye.

We must emphasize that these observations are not provable facts. There are no official or unofficial statistics available on this matter. However, this is the prevailing public opinion, and it is quite difficult to live in Türkiye and not to share this view. Yet, who knows – perhaps it is precisely because of this, I mean because the primary method of corruption in Türkiye has revolved around the practice of grabbing a share from the profits generated through building permits that corrupt politicians have felt less compelled to siphon off the already limited public resources and that this might have also played a role in the economic development of Türkiye in the last century.

Urbanization, legal uncertainty and institutionalization of corruption in urban development in Turkey.

The rapid population growth of Turkey in the XX–XXI centuries was accompanied by mass migration from rural areas to large cities, which led to the spontaneous settlement of the outskirts of Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. The state lands occupied by squatters were legalized in conditions of political competition, especially since the 1950s, when the multiparty period began [6, p. 442; 7, p. 6]. Local authorities, seeking electoral support, began to provide basic services (water, electricity, roads), and then ownership of these lands, without providing adequate control over the legality of such acts. This created legal uncertainty in the field of land use regulation, where the state itself initiated the transfer of unaccounted-for territories into private hands without a full-fledged institutional study.

This process not only undermined the rule of law in the field of land relations, but also marked the beginning of systemic corruption, in which political power became a direct beneficiary. The literature emphasizes that such legalization of illegal buildings and the transfer of land without market valuation creates structural violence and increases inequality in access to urban benefits. [8; 9, p. 150].

Construction contracts in exchange for a share in real estate: the mechanism of institutionalized corruption. The legal legalization of previously illegally occupied land plots was not accompanied by an increase in the well-being of their new owners. Limited financial resources prompted them to sign contracts with private construction companies, according to which contractors received the right to erect apartment buildings in exchange for a share in new apartments. This form of transaction – "construction in exchange for a land share" - has become the dominant model of urban development in Turkey. [7, p. 173].

The main incentive for the contractors was to maximize the number of floors and the total building area, which required coordination with local municipalities with exclusive authority in issuing building permits. Under these conditions, the licensing system began to be considered not as a mechanism for ensuring compliance with the norms of urban planning legislation, but as a resource for distributing corrupt rents. A number of studies that analyze how clientelism and informal relationships between contractors and officials affect the vertical growth of cities and the degradation of urban space confirms this. [9, p. 1172].

Local authorities play a key role in determining the fate of urban space, but with limited legal control and lack of accountability mechanisms, they often become a source of abuse [7, p. 134]. The problem is particularly acute when conducting technical and author's expertise of project documentation, where corrupt practices take the form of "legalized" violations of safety standards and urban planning regulations.

As Gulöksüz and other researchers emphasize, the transfer of powers into the hands of politically dependent structures without the creation of independent control mechanisms contributes to "authoritarian urbanism," in which corruption becomes a stable element of the system [2, p. 1190; 10, p.145].

At the international level, there are successful examples of the integration of civil control into the process of issuing building permits. For example, in the Czech Republic, the Philippines and South Korea, legal mechanisms have been developed that allow non-governmental organizations and specialized independent experts to participate in acceptance commissions and issue urban planning opinions [9].

Unlike Turkey, where expert opinions are often not legally binding, in these countries the decisions of such bodies are subject to mandatory accounting and can be challenged in the courts. This reduces the risks of arbitrary interference by politicians in the processes of zoning and building height regulation.

Despite a number of government initiatives to digitalize cadastral systems, introduce electronic tenders and disclose information about project development, a fragmented approach to combating corruption remains in Turkey [6, p. 348; 10, p. 149]. Draft laws aimed at strengthening the accountability of contractors and officials, including those providing for the mandatory publication of reports on urban development changes, are facing institutional resistance.

Research shows that sustainable legal progress is possible only with political will, the creation of independent oversight structures, and increased involvement of civil society in the decision-making process [6, p.349].

Conclusion

The analysis makes it possible to conclude that there is a stable and deeply rooted relationship between demographic growth and the spread of systemic corruption in urban planning in Turkey. Rapid urbanization, which began in the second half of the 20th century, was accompanied by the formation of shadow practices in housing construction, which were based on weak control over the allocation of public lands, insufficient transparency of building permit procedures and politicization of local authorities.

One of the key sources of corruption schemes in Turkey is the mechanism of concluding contracts "construction in exchange for a share of land", where municipal permits for increasing the number of floors or changing the purpose of the land become the subject of bargaining between contractors and

officials. This has created an economically beneficial, but legally and ethically vulnerable environment in which corruption not only hinders the implementation of the principles of legality, but also contributes to inequality, violations of urban planning standards and deterioration of the quality of the urban environment.

In addition, the lack of effective public control, weak law enforcement mechanisms and a low level of institutional responsibility for violations of urban planning regulations exacerbate the situation. Despite the existence of administrative and criminal liability for violations in the field of technical supervision and construction expertise, the measures applied are often disproportionate to the scale of damage caused by corrupt actions.

International experience (for example, the USA, the Czech Republic, and the Philippines) shows that the involvement of civil society, the creation of independent oversight structures, transparency in project financing, and encouragement of bona fide contractors can significantly reduce corruption in construction.

Thus, in order to form an effective anti-corruption policy in the field of housing construction in Turkey, it is necessary:

strengthen the legal mechanism for regulating urban planning processes;

ensure transparency of all stages of urban planning decision-making;

strengthen control by civil institutions;

review the system of administrative and criminal liability, taking into account preventive and compensatory mechanisms;

implement digital tools for monitoring budget expenditures and the implementation of construction projects.

The implementation of these recommendations will contribute to not only reducing the level of corruption in housing construction, but also to the overall improvement of the legal culture, strengthening trust in public institutions and ensuring the sustainable development of the urban environment in Turkey in the context of continued demographic growth.

Thus, the population growth of Turkey, accompanied by disordered urbanization and weak legal control, has become the basis for the formation of systemic corruption in the housing sector. Solving the problem requires a comprehensive approach: reforming legislation, increasing transparency of procedures, and creating conditions for independent public oversight.

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