

**THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION POLICIES ON  
THE ROMA COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY: AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE  
STUDY ON THE ERGENE BASIN**

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the impacts of the tension between industrial development policies and modernization on the Roma living in the Ergene Basin in Edirne. The biographic narratives of Roma people living in the basin, as well as third-generation Roma-Muslim immigrants who arrived in the region in 1924, assist us to develop a regional vocabulary and comprehensive environmental injustice dynamics. Parliamentary racism toward the Roma, which began with the Iskan law, Turkey's modernizing manifesto, has resulted in two social groups (Roma and non-Roma) with unequal social and political status. Roma who are not considered as a modern nation in the basin, endure pollution, unemployment, and identity challenges caused by dirty industry, irresponsible politicians, and non-Roma local elites. Heavy pollution in the Ergene River's basin, which is home to Turkey's largest Roma population, is not an accident. Lack of social justice in the basin leads to environmental injustice toward the Roma, who are socially and economically disadvantaged and more vulnerable to environmental degradation. Segregation —imposed by the state on Roma and Roma-Muslim immigrants under Iskan legislation rendered Roma landscapes and Romani identities invisible in the basin. Politicians have not yet devised any strategized to protect Roma people living nearby Turkey's most polluted river. Considering the findings, Turkey's policies of modernization and neoliberal industrialization have resulted in environmental injustice towards the Roma living in the basin in terms of lacked recognition of environmental risk, and unfair distribution of the environmental harm. Furthermore, these policies failed to recognize the socio-cultural differences and needs of Roma people. This study aims to contribute environmental racism theories by demonstrating how lack of social justice may lead to environmental injustice.

**Key Words:** environmental justice, Roma, modernization, industrialization, marginalization, Ergene River, Ergene Basin

## 1. Introduction

This thesis examines the lack of environmental justice for communities located along the Ergene River crosses the Thracian region in Turkey. Environmental injustice is defined as the exposure of some segments of society to environmental degradation, harm, and risk at a higher rate than others, and is frequently linked to health issues (Maantay,2007). The research focuses on Roma communities in the Ergene basin to determine how Roma have reacted to modernization and industrialization movements through years and how Turkey's industrial

policies have influenced Roma people's socio-spatial relations. By collecting interviews with Roma living in the region, this research contends that modernization, capitalism, and neoliberal industrialization are related to ethnic and environmental justice, as can best be seen in the example of the many issues of environmental inequality in the region's where Roma communities live.

The creation of over 3,000 mainly textile, chemical, and leather factories in Thrace during the 1990s is an example of Turkey's neoliberal industrialization of the Thrace region (Pamuk, 2008). Although environmental regulation was adopted in 1983 and incorporates sustainable development goals for environmental regulation, the monitoring of water pollution in Thrace was delegated to local governments. (Orhan and Scheumann 2011). Due to subsequent privatization and liberalization of water management, the Ergene River has been classified as the river that has the highest degree of water contamination and has been declared “dead river” (Turkish Ministry of Environment,2004). The pollution of the river by the neoliberal industry has resulted in decreased agricultural production, biodiversity loss, ground and tap water contamination, food insecurity, and economic, social, and health issues, while Roma Muslim immigrants have lived there for three generations and many of them work as agricultural workers (Dokmeci, 2017; Arıcı et al. 2000). Previous studies have examined river contamination; however, the problem is not approached from the point of how Roma are affected by pollution in the Ergene Basin.

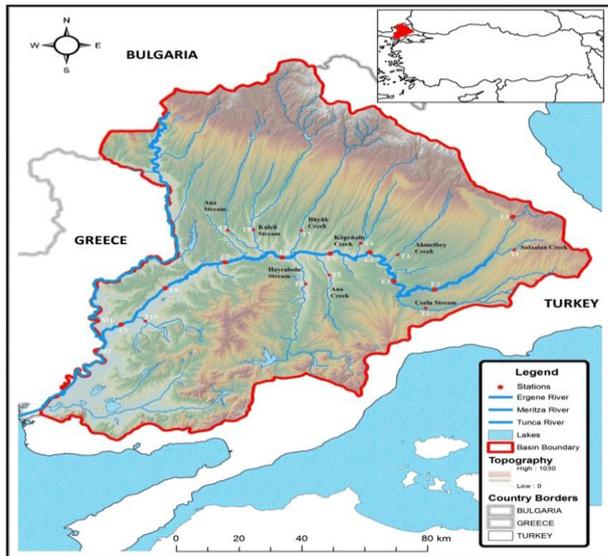


Figure 1 The map of the Ergene Basin

The most important event occurred in 1924 when there was a population exchange between Turkey and Greece (Papadopoulou,2003). As a result, Romani-Muslim immigrants were placed in the basin with the aim to contribute Turkey's agricultural activities (Askin,2011). Turkey was undergoing a modernization process and therefore was not seen as a “modern nation” in 1926, nomadic Roma, along with spies, were labelled as a “non-Turkish culture group” and denied perceiving Turkish citizenship (Ulker, 2008). In 1935, the Turkish resettlement law forbade nomadic Roma to move in large groups and was dispersed to Turkish villages, mostly in the Thrace region. In 1939, the farmland grant program for immigrants marginalized Roma immigrants. With its resettlement program, Turkey has not only marginalized Roma community, but also uncovered socioeconomic and environmental racism and widened the gap between Roma and non-Roma. While all discrimination laws were repealed in 2006, racism is still seen in everyday life (Arayici, 2008). The environmental justice framework is required to evaluate the issues confronting the Roma community, particularly how institutional racist practices turn into environmental racism against Roma communities. To understand the concerns of Roma minority in the Ergene Basin, I use a qualitative method to grasp the collective memory, experiences, and narratives of society.



*Figure 2 The picture of the Muslim-Balkan-Immigrants*

## **2-) Literature Review: Environmental Justice Framework**

Although social justice has been humanity's primary goal since ancient times, the concept of environmental justice has just evolved in the second part of the twenty-century (Hendrics, 2018). Rawls (1971) defined social justice as the equal distribution of society's absolute benefits to all members of society. Schlosberg (2004) used a similar explanation to the notion of social justice to describe environmental justice and defined environmental justice as the equitable distribution of universal benefits and harms. Schlosberg broadened the idea of environmental justice by arguing the active engagement of society in environmental decision-making mechanisms, acceptance of socio-cultural distinctions among social groups, and recognition of their needs. Afterwards, Lashley (2016) classified environmental justice issues into three categories to conduct extensive studies on environmental injustice: (I) assessment of public participation in decision-making processes, (II) historical investigation of the causes of environmental injustice, (III) investigation of the potential effects of race and class studies on environmental injustice.

Lashley's theory is essential for analysing environmental conflicts because environmental harm caused by environmental deterioration and industrial growth is not shared equally by all members of society.

According to Beck (1992), "the fundamental law of environmental risk is that pollution follows the poor." The distribution of environmental dangers is frequently evident in communities of colour who face discrimination and marginalization because of their ethnicity. With Lashley's environmental argument, this research focuses on environmental justice factors of recognition, participation, and discrimination.

### **2.1) Political Ecology and Environmental Justice**

Both political ecology and environmental justice are associated with environmental marginalization and inequality which are closely related to governmental actions and have a negative effect on minorities (Watts and Peet 2004).

Bauman claims that modernity enabled racism to utilize parliamentary legal systems, capitalist businesses, and factories to produce racist ideology toward minorities (Vartija,2019; Lee, 2005). Furthermore, marginated communities are more likely to be negatively influence by industrialization outputs in terms of water pollution and health issues. (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2008; Steger et al. 2007).

Heidegger (2020) argues that Roma people who live in industrial zones or do not have access to clean water have a lower life expectancy than non-Roma people. This research examines how Roma living in the Ergene Basin are marginalized and how the pollution in the region was subsidised by industrialization.

## **2.2. Environmental Refugees because of Unnatural Environmental Degradation**

Environmental refugees are "those who do not have a steady source of income where they had resided due to drought, soil erosion, desertification, or other environmental concerns." (Myers, 1993). The link between gradual environmental change and migration is frequently discussed in the literature, however, cases of migration caused by chemical pollution of chemical waterways are not predominant. In his research of the Mississippi River in Bullard, Louisiana, he discovered that contamination of the riverbed's petrochemical corridor pushed many residents to relocate and that the repercussions of environmental degradation disproportionately harm blacks (Diane, 2002). Furthermore, Gibbs' investigation discovered that chemical hazards forced over a thousand residents in the Love Channel to relocate (Gibbs, 1982). Diane argues that the reduction in soil fertility caused by environmental deterioration has rendered farmers more sensitive to migration (Diane, 2002). This viewpoint is shared by Kocaman's study, which argues that industrial pollution damaged the Ergene River, reducing agricultural activity in the Ergene Basin and causing farmer migration (Kocaman, 2011). With the light of previous studies, this research aims to investigate how the Roma living nearby the Ergene River responds to environmental deterioration and how it contributes migration. People living in communities where society is segregated based on their skin color are sensitive to physical pollutants in the environment because of the deep poverty they experience (Roux, 2015, Kramer and Hogue, 2009).

### **3-) Methodology**

In terms of methodology this research follows three steps: collecting, evaluating, and contextualizing biographical narratives. The public's collective memory, experience, and narratives were required to comprehend the concerns of environmental injustice in the Roma minority in the Ergene Basin. For this reason, I used a qualitative analytic methodology to attract scholars' attention to the issue of environmental injustice in the basin. First, to understand what the real issue is in the field sites of Edirne five interviews were designed. I examine the narrative stories provided by five interviewees who lived by the river more than 20 years. These people have both day-to-day experience with the Ergene River and expert knowledge. In my interviews, I used fictitious names. The first interviewee who is a third generation of Roma-Muslim immigrant and the local politician is sixty years old man and called Ali. The second one referred to as Sercan is an agricultural worker and is thirty years old man. The third one is named Ayse and is a political science expert and is thirty years old woman and the last one is named Selçuk, an expert of Roma, is forty years old man. After choosing the best candidates for the research, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation was prepared. Interview participants were therefore informed of the purpose of this research and that their personal data would be protected.

Lastly, narrative interviews were held with participants and recorded on the Zoom in Turkish and for approximately one hour each throughout the period of April. Throughout my study, I aimed to answer the question of how the Roma of Edirne sees Ergene pollution and how they react to Turkey's industrialization and modernization movement. The richness of these narratives opens us to a new door that allows us to understand the broader picture of the river from both a scientific and political perspective.

## 4. Analysis of Narratives of The Ergene River

### 4.1. From racism to Environmental racism / Where are you from?

The third-generation Roma immigrant who I will refer to as Ali responded to my question where are you from? *“Actually, we are Thessaloniki immigrants,”* the interviewee began with a slightly hesitant tone, and I said, “Can you please continue?” He started the conversation with *“My grandfather was a big farmer in Greece”* and by describing the time of war, he stated that the first place they went when they immigrated was an immigration office in Lüleburgaz. The migration story was an interesting historical motive for my narrative method. Afterward, Ali continued his speech by saying that they treated the Gypsies differently and said the following sentence: *“The people wrote Kipti(Roma) and immigrant on their IDs, so they were never seen as real Turkish citizens.”* Noting that they were discriminated against by the public, he talked about the dream he had when he was a child; *“Actually, I wanted to be a soldier, so I changed my neighbourhood, (angrily) Roma weren't accepted into public affairs at that time!”* said. Ali was an invisible person from an invisible community in the eyes of the state. As a Roma, he had to choose between changing his neighbourhood and pursuing his aim of becoming a public servant; he chose the first one. In conclusion, from Ali's experiences, It can be seen historically that the living spaces and neighbourhoods of the Roma have been marginalized after their identities(saying that *Kipti-Roma*), moreover, it can be deduced that the Roma were not seen as a modern nation and their environment was not seen as a gaco(non-Roma) city in the understanding of the modern nation and modern environment that was tried to be created in the first period of the Republic of Turkey.

### 4.2 Past (Marginalization), Present (Industrial Pollution), and Future (Migration)

Ali's family has been living around the Ergene River for three generations. Ali also has a lot of experience with the river before it was polluted, its pollution process, and its current pollution. To benefit from his testimonies about Ergene, I asked the question that closed our conversation about racism. How was the river before it was polluted? His first words were *“I remembered my father with this question”* (His voice was a little shaky). After this answer that showed how environmental narratives call to the past, as well as how the Ali and Ergene rivers link to each other, the speech continued as follows: *“When I was twelve, my father bought me 20 lambs. After grazing the lambs around the Ergene River, I could swim in the river, catch fish, drink water...”* After a long silence, Ali continued his speech as follows; *“Now, it is not possible to swimming, I close my nose even when crossing the bridge”.*

Succumbing to the natural and romantic beauty of the past, as well as the synthetic and industrial pollution of today, has destroyed the possibility of Ali and Ergene acquiring good memories; in other words, the pollution has deleted Ali's memories of Ergene. Then, Ali said a sentence that surprised me a lot: *"I wish this river had been polluted 100 years ago!"* He said that the Roma could not be adapted to the agricultural society and that when he was a young agricultural worker, people mocked him and spit in his face, he continued: *"As Roma, we learned health insurance, retirement, living like a human being in the industrial society!"*. Since Ali had been living on the Ergene coast for three generations, and because he was not acknowledged as a member of modern society as a Roman farm worker, he wished that the Ergene River, which is the lifeblood for agricultural activities in the Ergene Basin, had been polluted earlier. Because his story started with the Ergene River when he was twelve years old and should have ended with the Ergene River. Moreover, Ali linked the immigration of Roma from Edirne to the pollution of the river. From his point of view, migrating to the polluted river, that is, to the industrial cities, meant the opportunity for the Roma to live humanely. Although the Ergene River reminded him of his father, he was prepared to leave the Ergene coast, where they had lived for three generations.

Ali is not the only one who emphasizes the relationship between Ergene pollution and the immigration of Roma. Apart from Ali, there is Sercan, a thirty-year-old Roman agricultural worker. Sercan stated that the pollution of the Ergene River reduces the productivity of the agricultural products of the Ergene Basin, and therefore Roman agricultural workers must migrate to provinces such as Çerkezköy and Çorlu, becoming unemployed. He then continued to speak as follows: (angry) *"We are losing our population! People become unemployed, they leave their homes and migrate every day!"* He defines what he means by unemployed people as Roma agricultural workers as follows: *"I live in the Roma neighbourhood, –the source of income for almost all of the neighbourhood is an agricultural worker"*. Then he waited a while and continued his speech saying follows: Factories, around the Ergene River, want to produce products cheaply, so they don't think about the environment and human health.

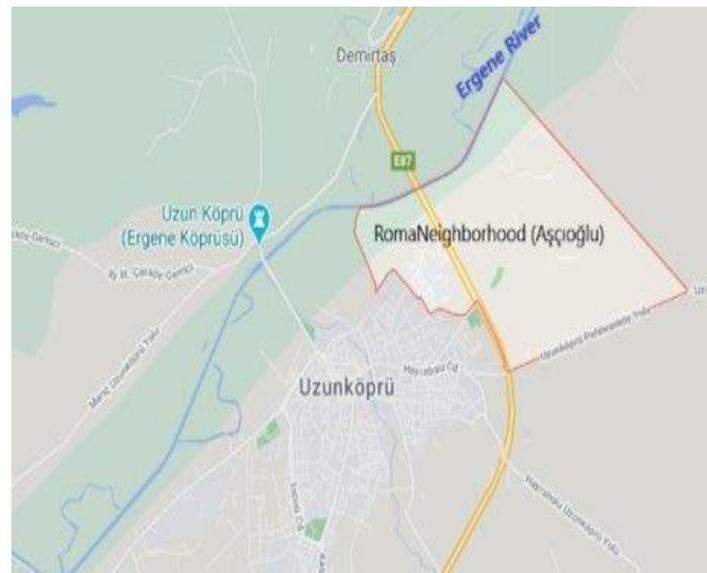
Sercan tells that he has seen many of his friends who work with him become unemployed and that he has witnessed their migration stories. According to Sercan, factory managers and politicians are responsible for pollution and the problems caused by pollution. When it comes to politicians, Sercan's voice was increased, and he gives me a sentence stating that the irresponsibility of the leaders in the Ergene Basin has continued for years: *"They have been saying that we will clean Ergene for thirty years... (crying out) they still have no solution"*.

This explanation brings to my mind the title of Eda Acar's article, "No government as a management tactic in the Ergene Basin" The fact that the state has not been able to find a solution to this problem for thirty years is an indication of the understanding that "pollution is permissible for economic growth" by supporting industrialists. Afterwards, Sercan continued his speech and constructed a sentence that sheds light on Turkey's industrial policy: *"The Ergene River pollution is a summary of industrialization in Turkey"*.

Turkey's industrial policy has been evaluated differently by the two Roma people living in the Ergene Basin. While Ali sees the industry as an opportunity for the Roma community, Sercan sees it as a threat to the income sources of the Roma. However, considering the opinions of Ali and Sercan, it can be interpreted that the agricultural activities in the Ergene Basin have decreased due to the pollution of the Ergene River, and therefore the Roma are faced with unemployment. Pollution of the Ergene River threatens the potential of Roma living in the region to earn income from agricultural activities, and an imbalance occurs in the income distribution in favour of industrial investors and against Roman agricultural workers. It can be understood that inequality in income distribution is the main factor of the migration of Roma. Moreover, it can be deduced that Turkey's industrialization policy and the pollution of the river affect the socio-spatial interaction of the Roma.

#### 4. 3 Becoming Visible with a Chemical River

I met with Romani policy expert, Ayse, to look at how the Roma are marginalized in this Ergene Basin. Ayse is thirty years old, she lived in Edirne until she was twenty-four and worked in rights-based projects related to Roma. From her point of view, the political ecology of the Ergene River has caused a conflict between other ethnic identities and the Roma. In the conflict between pollution and identity, the Roma were known and marginalized as people living on the edge of the polluted Ergene River. Ayse touched upon this subject as follows; *(shaking her head)* "The neighbourhoods where the Roma live have been marginalized by the majority, and if you ask Gacos where is the Roma neighbourhood, they will say, that they (Roma people) live near the polluted river."



**Figure 3** The location of the Ergene River and the Roma Neighbourhood named Aşçıoğlu

According to the problem defined by Ayse, the Roma in the Ergene Basin are marginalized by class and ethnicity (as in the Ali incident). The result of the environmental degradation in the river shows that the pollution intensifies in the Roma neighbourhoods and not everyone is affected by it in the same way. As a result, the Environmental risk is in favour of the Roma while it is against the gacos. (non-Roma)

#### 4. 4 Access to Clean Water and Health Issues

The pollution of the Ergene River entering the underground waters of Edirne was announced by the Edirne Governor in 2011.) Selcuk is a Roma expert living in Edirne and studies how environmental factors affect Roma people in Edirne. The answer he gave to the first question of our meeting, what do you think about Ergene, was "danger". While continuing his speech, he said that people in Edirne were afraid to drink water from the fountain and stated that many of them bought bottled water.



*Figure 4 On the day of Hidrellez, a Roma collects water from the Lüleburgaz Stream, which flowed to the Ergene River.*



*Figure 5 On the day of Hidrellez, the Roma people congregate in the Lüleburgaz Stream, which flowed to the Ergene River.*

Stating that the Roma people do not have the economic power to buy bottled water, he said; "Roma people have to drink the drinking water polluted by Ergene, they have to cook with that water, and they have to bath their children with that water". Then, he said that he encountered diseases related to the use of contaminated drinking water in his studies in Roman areas. "We found respiratory diseases in all children under the age of four and attributed this to two causes: house humidity and drinking water".

According to Selcuk, the Ergene River threatens the access of the Roma in Edirne to clean water and causes serious health problems for the Roma.

As a result, the Roma, who are socio-poor, do not have the means to reduce the impact of environmental degradation and pollution, making them vulnerable to the possible health problems brought by the pollution of the river. While non-Roma use bottled-made water as a method of protection, Roma have to drink the fountain water polluted by the Ergene River. While the Ergene River, polluted by industries, stands as a barrier to accessing clean water in the Roma community in Edirne, Environmental injustice related to water pollution and health risk is more likely to occur in the Roma community.

### **5-) Discussion**

This research demonstrates the lack of a protection strategy for Roma living and working in Turkey's most polluted basin that is a proof of institutional ignorance as well as environmental discrimination. Roma have been marginalized and socially and economically disadvantaged in the Ergene Basin by the state and society, are also vulnerable to the Ergene River's environmental deterioration. All the interviewees agree on the river's pollution and believe that the Roma are the most afflicted by environmental deterioration indicates that the Ergene Basin's environmental benefits and harms are not distributed equally. Participants who believe they are victims of past institutional-based discrimination in the Ergene Basin are aware that both pollution in the river and environmental discrimination in the region are not by accident.

The Ergene River, polluted because of neoliberal industry and lax environmental laws, has threatened the potential of Roma living in the region to earn their living from agricultural activities, generating income imbalance in favour of industrial investors and against Roma. Considering to Myers' definition, Roma who are migrating might be viewed as environmental migrants. (Environmental refugees, according to Myers (1993), are "people who do not have a stable source of income in their area of residence due to drought, soil erosion, desertification, or other environmental concerns.") In this view of point, the river has a crucial role in shaping the socio-spatial relationships of the Roma in the Ergene Basin.

However, pollution in Ergene is not the only reason for Roma's migration in the region. The key causes underpinning Roma migration from the basin are race and social class conflicts, which Lashley (2016) regards as the most crucial aspects in environmental injustice. It is obvious that Roma, who are not recognized as modern civils by the Ergene Basin's society, state, and other social dynamics, wish to leave and seek for a better life in somewhere else.

The argument that parliamentary racism, as discussed by Bauman (2005), leads to a conflict between social justice and environmental justice which might be relevant to the Ergene Basin issue. The major sources of social and environmental discrimination in the basin may be viewed as laws, capitalist companies, and polluting factories that generate racist ideas towards the Roma minority.

Many interviewees feel that they live in segregated neighbourhoods based on their skin colours. The Settlement Law classified Roma as individuals who were not related to Turkish culture due to their association with spies. Later, the state installed Roma in Turkish villages and regarded Roma as agricultural labour, and these arrangements became major sources of social and environmental injustice. The Romani policy scientist, for instance, underlined that the Roma dwells in neighbourhoods near the Ergene River and that the riverfront is known as the Roma location by the gajos (non-Roma). This occurrence might be the result of an intentional, planned segregation project rather than an accident.

If we look at the spatial distribution of pollution in the Thrace area after industrialization, the segregated Roma communities suffer from environmental deterioration. Seven Roma neighbourhoods are known to be in the Ergene River's lake or stream bed in nine provinces where the river passes. In other words, it is possible to argue that chemical contamination does not harm everyone in the society equally, and Beck's remarks on the distribution of environmental risks may come to the mind. "Pollution follows the poor," says the fundamental law of environmental risk (Beck,1992). When we look at the Ergene Basin from this perspective, we see that the distribution of environmental harm is disproportionately concentrated on the Roma group, which is vulnerable to prejudice and marginalization owing to their ethnic origins.

The third aspect of Lashley's theory on environmental discriminatory conflicts, the active engagement of my participants in decision-making, was not answered by the study's respondents. The study's weakness is that it does not provide data on Roma participation in environmental decision-making processes in the Ergene Basin, and different kinds of results can be obtained if the interviewers change. However, since qualitative research allows us to interact with the community and examine previous studies, we may be able to answer specific questions by comparing secondary data from the literature to the primer data. For example, the Turkish Ministry of Environment and Forestry developed an action plan to protect the Meriç-Basin in 2008, but it did not provide any protections for the Roma, one of the most vulnerable communities to environmental degradation.

Possibly, policymakers are either unaware of the potential risk faced by Roma in the Ergene Basin or simply do not read some environmental survey reports. A geotechnical research report belonging to the administrative directorate of mass housing said that Aşçıolu, the greatest Roman neighbourhood of Uzunköprü district, should be opened to settlement by taking safeguards in some locations near to the riverbed. Is institutional irresponsibility a common occurrence when it comes to Roma? Yes, the clearest evidence of environmental discrimination in the Ergene Basin is the policy of not recognizing the environmental hazards that the public is facing rather than involving the people in environmental decisions.

## **6-) Conclusion**

This thesis attempted to illustrate that the environmental justice problem in the Ergene Basin stems from the two major steps of Turkey: The policies of modernization and neoliberal industrialization. The historical and political conditions underlying the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and harms in the basin and the social processes that contributed to it were examined. It was especially important for the narrative methodological approach that participants with daily life experiences and expertise in the basin should build a regional vocabulary since social utility and natural resource control were dominated by non-Roma local elites.

To sum up, Turkey's policies of modernization and neoliberal industrialization have resulted in environmental injustice as Roma living in the Ergene Basin lacks participation, recognition, and fair distribution. In addition, these policies lacked recognition of Roma's socio-cultural differences and recognition of their needs. Roma in the Ergene Basin sees themselves as victims of environmental discrimination, which is a legacy of social discrimination. In this region, where they are not seen as modern people, they are vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation and see migration as a solution to seek a better life. Future studies should investigate Roma health concerns in Roma neighbourhoods along the Ergene Riverbed to answer the question of how Ergene River affect minorities health in Ergene basin. Using quantitative data, policy makers' attention to environmental injustice in the Ergene Basin should be increased. I would also suggest that more research be done on Roma in Turkey.

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