

# Contextualising the housing problem of the Roma community in relation to counterurbanisation in Urla, İzmir

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the housing problem of the Roma people, living already under severe socio-spatial circumstances, has been exacerbated by counterurbanisation over recent decades in the resort town of Urla, İzmir. Based on empirical socio-spatial research adopting methodological pluralism integrating qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the study uses in-depth interviews and secondary data (e.g., real-estate web data, official statistics, and local media) as well as spatial analysis of satellite images. We limited our study to the proximity of the town center of Urla, considering the Roma community's 'right to the city', ensuring their right not to be exiled to the spaces of discrimination, and not to be exempted from their right to appear and co-exist in the town center. As Urla became a prominent and attractive destination of counterurbanisation in Turkey, its growth was intensified by high-end housing production. Coming to 2000s, its urban-rural texture remained, at least physically, 'rural', but it had undergone significant transformation. And while this recent higher-end development accompanied by counterurbanisation is sanctioned by local authorities, the public and property owners, it leaves no room for the Roma people to find decent housing. An inquiry on the housing problem of the Roma people in Urla in relation to counterurbanisation and accompanying housing production contributes to understanding the dialectics between deregulated housing market, commodification and uneven distribution of treasury lands, neoliberal regulations, and fragmented development plans implemented in highly "path-dependent" ways.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how exclusive housing production, coinciding with counterurbanisation, contributes to the housing problem of the Roma community in the case of the Sıra Neighborhood in Urla, a rapidly gentrifying resort town on the Aegean coast of Turkey. As Urla has become a highly appealing location for high-income, white-collar urbanites, and elites looking to "live in the countryside," housing production has surged at an unprecedented pace. This expansion has encompassed all "habitable" lands, including fertile agricultural lands and state-owned lands,<sup>1</sup> all of which were previously subject to environmental protection regulations. Concurrently, the Roma residents of

Urla have remained trapped in extremely deprived housing conditions on a small parcel of public land, where they were originally settled temporarily.

In recent decades, exurban mobilities have proliferated globally, driven by agricultural restructuring and neoliberalisation. While once "attractive" rural areas have become new frontiers for residential real estate investments, often propelled by re-regulations and spatial policies, they have also transformed into new arenas for counterurbanisation and rural gentrification. The more agricultural lands and state properties are developed for high-end housing, the more the housing problems of lower-income individuals worsen in rural areas (McCarthy, 2008a, 2008b; Tonts & Horsley, 2019; Woods, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> In Turkey, there are three types of state-owned lands: i) "Public lands," which are owned by local and central state institutions; ii) "Treasury lands," registered as the property of the state treasury in the cadastral system; and iii) "Lands under the decree and at the disposal of the state (*cebel arazi*)," which includes uncultivable and uninhabitable lands such as forests, valleys, mountains, lakes, wetlands, plateaus, and coasts. These lands are subject to various natural protection regulations. The first two categories of land can be sold to individuals or private firms. As for the third type of land, unless it's registered in the cadastral system as state treasury property, private property rights cannot be established on it. Instead, they can be commodified through long-term allocation or leasing to private individuals or corporations. In this paper, we collectively refer to all three types as 'state lands'.

Housing insecurity and the risk of displacement are particularly acute when counterurbanisation is accompanied by rural gentrification (Galient & Scott, 2019; Gkartzios & Scott, 2012; Heaphy & Scott, 2021; Hines, 2012; López-Morales, 2018; Lorenzen, 2021; Nelson & Hines, 2018; Phillips, 2005; Phillips et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2011). As Sherman (2023) points out, this disproportionately affects the poorest ethnic and racial immigrants in rural areas.

In this study, we delineate how counterurbanisation and rural gentrification disproportionately impact the Roma community in Urla. As Galient and Scott (2019, p. 262) emphasize, “rural housing poverty is a mirror to new wealth in the countryside, reinforced by inequalities centered on property and the shifting function of housing in the wider economy.” Following the 2001 crisis in Turkey, especially with the enactment of the mortgage law in 2007, the state initiated an unrestricted commodification of state-owned lands for housing production. This was accomplished through numerous new regulations and re-regulations in laws related to natural protection, forests, agricultural lands, pastures, and coastal areas. Therefore, the commodification of state-owned lands and housing production, while serving as a significant means to address the accumulation crisis, became pivotal elements of neoliberalisation in Turkey. The consequences of these processes have had profound impacts on the spatial development of Urla, along with the housing problems of disadvantaged populations, including the Roma community. This is because all lands, whether privately or state-owned, were exclusively developed for high-end housing.

Our research distinguishes itself from other studies on the housing issues faced by Roma communities, which often analyse these problems in terms of socio-cultural exclusion, symbolic violence, and poverty. We acknowledge that, in Turkey as in other countries, the Roma people suffer from stigmatizing representations and socio-spatial marginalization (Cox & Uştuk, 2019; Powell & Lever, 2015), experiencing multi-dimensional poverty more intensely than other impoverished segments of society (Yılmaz & Kılıç, 2021). Many studies highlight that symbolic violence against the Roma people leads to their exclusion from the labour market, resulting in poverty and housing problems (Kaya & Zengel, 2005; Powell, 2008; Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014; Özateşler, 2017). Other studies, such as Teodorescu and Molina (2020) and Lancione (2019), investigate the housing issues of the Roma people in the context of racialized and exclusionary housing policies that condemn them to extremely precarious housing conditions. In our study, drawing on Madden and Marcuse’s (2016) analysis, we perceive the housing problem of the Roma people as a ‘socio-material reality’ that appears as an articulation of their daily practices and wider socio-political and economic processes in which hypercommodified housing production becomes the norm. Thus, we shift the focus from symbolic violence to examining how broader socio-spatial and political-economic processes manifest in the lived experiences of housing problems among the poorest and most marginalized people, for whom commodified housing has never been a viable option since they have never been involved even in the lowest segments of the housing market.

Urla offers a unique case in which the unrestricted commodification of state-owned lands and the unbridled development of agricultural lands for housing production have paved the way for counterurbanisation and rural gentrification. Simultaneously, these have pushed marginalized and impoverished communities into extreme housing precarity and constant displacement risks. Exposing the spatial development policies and planning practices of both central and local governments, as well as the housing conditions of the Roma community in Urla, we aim to address the question of how specific spatial strategies have facilitated counterurbanisation and exclusive housing development while rendering the housing problems of the poorest and most marginalized individuals invisible. Therefore, our study seeks to make an empirical contribution to the field of “counterurbanisation-led rural gentrification” research (see Phillips & Smith, 2018; Scott et al., 2011) by examining the ways in which socio-spatial processes unfold in the lived experiences of housing issues within a different socio-spatial and

political-economic context, where commodification of state lands and housing production form a specific articulation of neoliberalization, focusing on the poorest and most underrepresented communities.

In the next section, we will delve into counterurbanisation, rural gentrification, and the production of exclusive housing landscapes. Following that, in the third section, we will introduce Urla and the Sira neighborhood, which is the Roma settlement in Urla, and explain the research method employed in this study. The fourth section will scrutinize the spatial development in Urla, with a focus on spatial policies and zoning practices aligned with neoliberalisation in Turkey. It is important to note that our analysis is confined to the countryside near the town center. This limitation is rooted in our central concern, which revolves around the concept of the “right to the city,” as articulated by “the right to the center” (Lefebvre, 1996), which ensures the right not to be exiled to the spaces of discrimination, and not to be exempted from the right to appear and encounter with others in the center (see also Schmid, 2012). In the fifth section, we will delve deeper into the housing problem faced by the Roma community. The paper concludes that their housing problem is exacerbated by recent political-economic and spatial practices of both central and local governments, which also lay the groundwork for counterurbanisation and rural gentrification.

## 2. Counterurbanisation and production of exclusive housing landscapes

Counterurbanisation and rural gentrification are two distinct yet closely related processes that shape part of rural landscapes. Counterurbanisation research initially emerged and developed within the fields of population geography, anthropology, and sociology, while research on rural gentrification draws from urban gentrification studies within rural geography and planning. Counterurbanisation primarily focuses on urban-to-rural residential mobilities. It examines how middle- and middle-upper class urbanites seek an amenity-rich, tranquil, and idyllic rural living in areas that have experienced depopulation due to agricultural restructuring and de-industrialization. In contrast, rural gentrification differs from counterurbanisation as it refers to the influx of more affluent urbanites into rural areas, bringing with them their lifestyles, tastes, and values. This concept often highlights the displacement of existing, poorer rural residents (Nelson & Hines, 2018; Phillips, 2005, 2010).

Counterurbanisation literature has benefited from empirical research conducted in various geographical and political-economic contexts. The related research has been accompanied by vigorous theoretical, conceptual, and methodological debates. However, some scholars have pointed out the elusive and reductionist nature of the concept of counterurbanisation. Halfacree, for instance, observes that counterurbanisation is a “strongly constructed” concept (2012, p. 209), which cannot fully capture the complexity of multi-scalar, multi-directional rural-urban mobilities or the intricacies of “heterolocal, relational places” and identities. Counterurbanisation represents just one type of rural-urban mobility among many others, and conceptually, it offers only one “storyline” (Halfacree, 2008, 2012). Or as it is emphasized in the editorial (Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023), its exposition requires many stories from global south and global north. Furthermore, counterurbanisation does not unfold in compatible or commensurable ways, or always down from the urban to the rural hierarchies. Population movements from urban to rural areas encompass not only counterurbanizers or gentrifiers but also non-counterurbanizers (Bjarnason et al., 2021; Dilley et al., 2022; Phillips, 2004; Remoundou et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in this study we use the concept of counterurbanisation in its broadest definition, as it is underlined in the editorial for the special issue (Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023), encompassing various socio-spatial and rural-urban mobilities to mitigate ambiguities and reductionist representations associated with the concept (Halfacree, 1994, see; Phillips, 2010). Indeed, following Gkartzios and Scott (2012) and Scott et al. (2011), we consider the

increase in the migrant population and the emergence of exclusive housing developments in rural areas as primary evidence of both counterurbanisation and rural gentrification.

Counterurbanisation research is inherently linked to debates on rural gentrification. Over the past few decades, they have drawn closer, and the issues they address have increasingly overlapped (Phillips, 2010). In fact, studies on counterurbanisation often explore rural gentrification, especially when it is defined as the migration of wealthier, highly educated, and prosperous urbanites to idyllic rural regions (Stockdale, 2010). Both counterurbanisation and rural gentrification research revolve around the “immigration of middle-class urbanites into rural areas,” drawn by the allure of the idyllic countryside. Additionally, they delve into the creation of exclusive housing landscapes and the displacement of poorer and marginalized populations. Consequently, scholars have introduced the term “counterurbanisation-led rural gentrification” (Phillips et al., 2020; Phillips & Smith, 2018; Scott et al., 2011).

Rural gentrification takes various forms across the world, but one consistent factor is displacement, often brought about by the arrival of more affluent counterurbanisers. In the UK, for instance, Smith et al. (2021) suggest that many factors such as the types and prices of refurbished or newly constructed upscale residences, as well as the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the gentrifiers lead to different forms of gentrification and displacement. For instance, ‘super-gentrification’ describes the migration of relatively small numbers of the super-rich to already gentrified rural areas. In contrast, the ‘urban exile’ form of gentrification refers to young professional urbanites who, due to limited affordable housing options, settle in renovated old social housing. Both forms of gentrification, albeit on different scales, lead to displacement. Phillips et al. (2020) elaborate on various manifestations of displacement building on Peter Marcuse’s (1985) insights into the displacement of working-class communities due to gentrification in urban spaces. These include disinvestment displacement, reinvestment displacement, direct displacement, chain displacement, exclusionary displacement, and material and experiential displacement.

Both counterurbanisation and rural gentrification research can be approached from either a demand (or consumption)-side perspective or a supply (or production)-side perspective. The consumption-side focuses on the desires of middle- and upper-class individuals to reside in rural areas, as well as the socio-spatial changes that occur following their arrival in the countryside. In contrast, researchers following the production-side approach explain these processes by examining the roles of the state, capital, market, spatial policies, and planning. They delve into the causes and drivers that create the conditions for rural gentrification and that guide counterurbanisation to specific rural locations. These processes often result in changes such as the upgrading of the class profile due to the arrival of newcomers, alterations in the landscape, and both direct and indirect displacement of lower-income groups and the working class in the area (Gkartzios & Scott, 2012; Nelson & Hines, 2018; Phillips, 2005, 2010; Phillips et al., 2020; Phillips & Smith, 2018; Scott et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2021). As Dilley et al. (2022) assert, counterurbanisation is not solely a matter of “personal choice” but an “issue of policy.” Therefore, our research strategy adopts a supply-side perspective (see Gallent & Scott, 2019; Gkartzios & Scott, 2012, 2014; Heaphy & Scott, 2021; Scott et al., 2011). It emphasizes the role of the state, spatial policies, and planning practices in shaping the conditions for both counterurbanisation and housing production, often at the expense of the housing needs of the poor and marginalized in *Urla*.

Taking a supply-side perspective, Nelson & Hines (2018) discuss the phenomenon of rural gentrification in the context of agricultural restructuring and the shift of capital to post-industrial rural areas where agricultural decline and depopulation created an undervalued supply of land and buildings. Nelson and Dwight-Hines base their analysis on concepts such as the “rent gap” and the production of rural spaces as “spatial fixes” for surplus mobile capital. As mobile capital is directed

toward these undervalued locations, where the potential for higher rents exists, the post-industrial countryside undergoes transformation into high-end residential areas. This conditioned form of rural gentrification turns the post-industrial countryside into what Nelson & Hines (2018) describe as “a new geography of global capital accumulation.”

State regulations, spatial policies, a deregulated housing market, and flexible planning systems play a pivotal role in creating the conditions for counterurbanisation and rural gentrification. They can either facilitate exclusive developments, as observed in Ireland (Gkartzios & Scott, 2012), or restrict them, as is the case in the UK (Scott et al., 2011). In the UK, regulations aimed at urban containment and the protection of the countryside act as barriers to new developments in rural areas. The demand fuelled by retirees, second-home owners, and commuters often outpaces the existing housing supply, leading to significant increases in housing prices (Gallent & Tewdwr-Jones, 2007; Scott et al., 2011). Furthermore, the planning ideology embraced by UK planners promotes urban containment and environmental protection, with a particular emphasis on preserving the idyllic countryside, as explained by Shucksmith (2011). In contrast, Ireland features a deregulated and highly dynamic housing market, along with a flexible planning system. These conditions encourage uncontrolled housing production in the countryside, primarily aimed at attracting middle- and upper-class individuals, thereby creating the conditions for rural gentrification (Gkartzios & Scott, 2012, 2014).

In southern European countries, characterized by strict environmental protection regulations, cultural tendencies often fuel illegal and irregular housing development. This, in turn, contributes to rural gentrification and is associated with widening wealth inequality and an increase in home values over time (Gallent & Tewdwr-Jones, 2007; Golding, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Solana-Solana, 2010). In the global south, rural gentrification occurs in tandem with excessive metropolitan growth and the commodification of state-owned lands driven by real estate capital. This process involves informal and even illegal land ownership and housing production, often leading to the eventual displacement of rural populations. Additionally, conservation practices that make heritage-rich and amenity-filled rural areas attractive to middle- and upper-class individuals, as well as the tourism sector, can act as drivers of rural gentrification (Kocabyik & Loopmans, 2021; López-Morales, 2018; Lorenzen, 2021).

According to Tonts and Horsley (2019) and Woods (2019), two major driving forces behind the transformations in rural geographies, both in the Global North and the Global South, are neoliberalisation and globalization. Neoliberalisation, often considered the “key driver of globalization,” subjects rural areas to capital accumulation and intertwines them with local and global production and consumption networks (Hines, 2012; Nelson & Hines, 2018; Tonts & Horsley, 2019). When capital accumulation, primarily driven by land speculation, intersects with counterurbanisation to facilitate rural gentrification, it is often the most marginalized and invisible members of society who are hit first by housing insecurity and precarity (Sherman, 2023; Tonts & Horsley, 2019; Woods, 2019).

With the backing of state regulations and a deregulated and fragmented planning system, the non-urban landscapes of *Urla* have been exclusively designated for high-end housing developments, which is accompanied by counterurbanisation and rural gentrification, all at the expense of the right to housing and the right to the city of all disadvantaged groups, including and more so of the Roma people. Furthermore, the housing problem facing the Roma people is deeply intertwined with “path-dependencies” (Heaphy & Scott, 2021), which are entangled with fast-track and exceptional legal and planning procedures that promote highly uncontrolled housing production. Given the desire to maximize the rent potential of lands adjacent to the Roma community’s settlement in *Urla*, along with the reluctance of local and central governments to provide safe and decent housing in their current location, displacement and increasing housing precarity loom as ongoing

challenges for the Roma community.

Having laid the theoretical position of the study, the next section first introduces Urla and the Sıra neighborhood where the Roma people in Urla live, then details the research method of the study.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Study area

Urla is a district of İzmir province, situated 32 km to the west of downtown İzmir. It covers a total surface area of 704 km<sup>2</sup>, with 66% classified as forest, 0.29% as rural settlements, 5.92% as urban settlements, 22.31% as agricultural land, 0.13% as pasture, and 0.04% as ponds. A significant portion of Urla (66.6%) falls under the category of registered protected land. Within this category, 60% is designated as forest and protected under the Forest Law (No. 6831, enacted in 1956), while 6% comprises archaeological sites safeguarded by the Law on Natural and Cultural Assets (No. 2863, enacted in 1983). Agricultural lands, olive groves, and pastures also enjoy legal protection, with many falling within natural protection areas. The district boasts a rich cultural heritage, including the remnants of Klazomenai, an Ionian city dating back to 900–200 BCE (Sonmez, 2009). Additionally, Urla is home to ruins dating back to prehistoric times. Geographically, it is located on a peninsula often referred to as the Urla Peninsula (Fig. 1).

Its allure, initially as a destination for secondary housing, later as a permanent residence, and most recently as a center for counter-urbanisation, can be attributed to several factors. These include its natural richness with pristine beaches and untouched forests to the south and north, its proximity to the metropolitan center of İzmir, and its cultural amenities. It is important to note that Urla cannot be strictly defined as a rural setting. Instead, it is a district with a separate municipality within the İzmir Metropolitan Area, encompassing urbanized, semi-urbanized, and non-urbanized natural areas. Its transformation began in the 1950s when it initially developed as a destination for secondary housing. By the 1970s, suburbanisation increased due to its proximity to the metropolitan center. Consequently, Urla evolved from a small agricultural and trade town into a favored weekend destination for upper- and middle-class İzmir residents. As the 2000s unfolded, while its urban-rural character remained, at least physically rural, the town center and its surrounding countryside, including protected natural areas and first-degree agricultural lands, experienced intensive housing development.

Urla has a population of approximately 74,000, and it experiences an annual growth rate of 2.74%, in contrast to İzmir's growth rate of 0.82% in 2022 (source: [www.tuik.org.tr](http://www.tuik.org.tr), 2022). The local economy in Urla is predominantly agriculture-based, with 9421 ha of agricultural land, accounting for 13.4% of the district's total area. Major agricultural products include olives, grapes, and artichokes. The distribution of employment is as follows: 35.0% in agriculture, 27.6% in services, and 13.3% in tourism and trade (IZKA, 2014).

In 2004, following the enactment of the Law on Metropolitan Municipalities (Law No: 5216), Urla, along with all its villages, became part of the İzmir metropolitan area (Fig. 2). This legislative change transferred the authority to make, approve, and implement master zoning plans at scales ranging from 1/5000 to 1/25,000 within the boundaries of the metropolitan municipality. This shift signalled that Urla, like many other regions in Turkey, had relinquished some of its local administrative autonomy.

The Roma population in Urla resides in the Sıra Neighborhood, situated on the southern outskirts of the town center, covering a small area of 7500 m<sup>2</sup>. This settlement is characterized by extreme poverty and is, in part, considered 'illegal' and highly segregated within the broader community. Initially constructed far from public view and pushed to the outskirts of the town, close to the city's outskirts, the settlement now finds itself surrounded by 'legal' housing developments. The Sıra Neighborhood not only represents the most underprivileged segment of

Urla but also stands as the most deprived Roma settlement in İzmir (interview, December 07, 2013).<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the registered population was 299. However, this number has exhibited significant variability over time. At certain points, it doubled due to a constant influx of relatives and other Roma communities from different districts of İzmir. Conversely, it has also decreased to three-quarters of its previous size due to migrations from the settlement, often resulting from violent clashes within the community.

The Roma community in Urla faces significant barriers to accessing the labour market. Out of all the Roma residents, only eight individuals are employed as permanent cleaning workers within the municipality. Some men engage in drumming during Ramadan, while others play music at various ceremonies and on the streets. However, most Roma households are involved in recycling activities, which includes collecting garbage and scrap materials from the streets. They collect and sell what is left after the harvest in olive groves and agricultural lands whenever possible. A small number of Roma community members work as street vendors. Overall, their livelihood is heavily reliant on assistance from non-governmental organizations, the municipality, or the district governorship.

#### 3.2. Research design

This paper employs a two-stage exploratory research design that embraces "critical methodological pluralism" (Sayer, 2010). This approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. Additionally, a spatial analysis was conducted to track housing developments from 2002 onward. To support our spatial analysis, we thoroughly examined zoning plans and planning policy documents. Regarding data pertaining to the real estate market, we supplemented official sources such as the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) with information from real estate agency websites and local media. This was necessary because official data often did not align with actual market prices. Furthermore, obtaining precise data on the size, value, and actors involved in land transactions proved challenging. Legal restrictions and enduring socio-cultural values that encourage secrecy in such transactions partly contributed to these difficulties.

The initial phase of our research took place between October 2012 and September 2013, as an essential component of a housing and settlement design project commissioned by the municipality. During this stage, we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with the heads of Roma clans and organized four focus group interviews with women, single young women, young men, and children from the Roma community. These interviews delved into various aspects, including household composition, residential history, migration and immigration histories, access to services such as education and health, social interactions with mainstream society, daily life practices, and the challenges they encountered in these areas. Furthermore, we held eight face-to-face interviews with key government officials responsible for education, social welfare, and health, including the district governor and district attorneys, municipal bureaucrats, and conducted three in-depth interviews with representatives from non-governmental organizations actively engaged with the Roma population in Urla and Turkey. The findings from this research, coupled with the proposed housing project, were presented to the public and policy administrators (Şimşir et al., 2013). Regrettably, despite these efforts, the housing issues faced by the Roma community remained unresolved. Over time, as our visits to the Roma settlement continued intermittently, so did our involvement with the life of the neighborhood.

Starting from the initial stage of the research, we began to observe the exacerbation of the housing problem faced by the Roma community. Notably, we witnessed a rapid acceleration in both the real estate market

<sup>2</sup> Interview with NGO members working on the Roma communities in İzmir and Turkey.



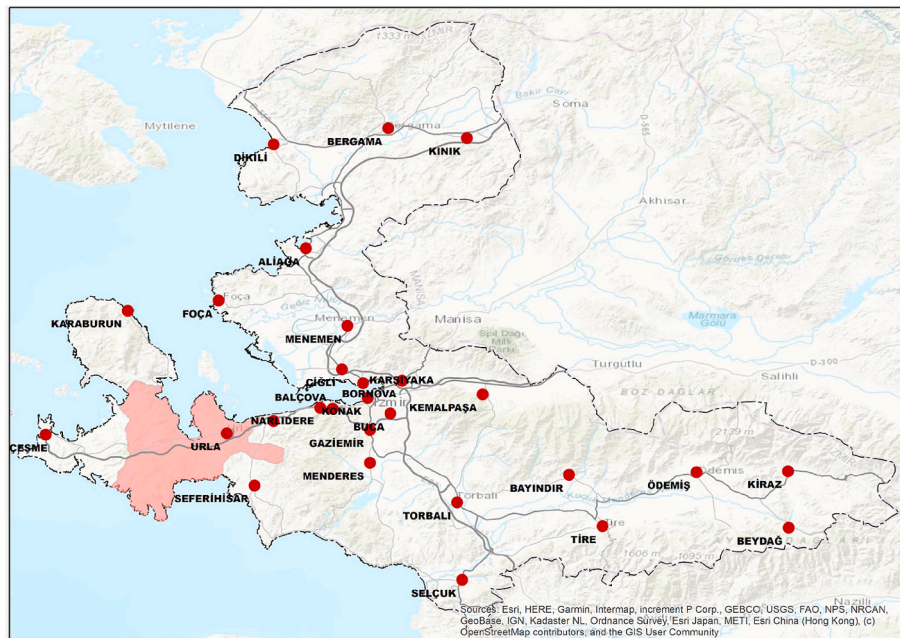


Fig. 1. Geographical location of Urla in İzmir.



Fig. 2. The boundaries of Urla and its "villages".

and the population growth of Urla following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we embarked on a second phase of research spanning from November 2022 to February 2023. This phase aimed to investigate the impacts of these socio-spatial changes on the already dire housing conditions of the Roma population in Urla.

In the second phase of our research, we conducted eight face-to-face interviews and four focus group interviews with residents of the Roma

community. Additionally, we conducted 44 interviews with a diverse range of informants, including urban planners, architects, contractors, local landowners, real estate brokers, counterurbanizers, hotel and restaurant proprietors, and bureaucrats from the Urla Municipality and the City Council.

We conducted the spatial analysis using the Google Earth Engine platform to primarily track settlement sprawl over time. Our analysis

began in 2002, as there were no available satellite images from earlier years. The first step involved land use classification, which was carried out by compiling and analysing Landsat-5 data for the periods of 2002–2003 and 2011–2012, as well as Landsat-8 data (surface reflectance images) for 2022–2023. Classes (feature collections) were determined based on the specific characteristics of the study area. To detect land use changes, we collected sample data (training data) for each type of land use class. This data was used as input for the algorithm, and it allowed us to compare older satellite images to identify changes over time. For reference, we projected the spatial analysis outputs onto the 2005 satellite image, as the 2002 images were not sufficient for our purposes.

#### 4. Planning and local development policies in Urla: from the seaside town of the middle classes to iconic destination of counterurbanizers

In this section, we portray how Urla have been continuously reworked through spatial policies and zoning changes under the auspices of institutional and spatial rescaling, deregulation, and fragmentation of planning system in line with neoliberal restructuring in Turkey. As [Tonts and Horsley \(2019\)](#) and [Woods \(2019\)](#) reveal, neoliberalism exerts similar forces in the countryside across the globe. It is an ongoing, continuously evolving, and adaptive restructuring process. Hence, [Brenner and Theodore \(2002\)](#) propose the concept “neoliberalisation” instead of “neoliberalism”. Neoliberalisation appears with highly varied, uneven, spatially selective features, and in politically contested ways, since it articulates historical, geographical and inherited political features, and thus creates “path-dependent outcomes” ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002, 2005](#)). Its key mechanisms, i.e., deregulation, reregulation, commodification, privatization, and marketization, promote the expansion of capital into different geographies by cutting across, or down to, the spatial scales from international, regional to local geographies. Neoliberal countryside across the globe appears as a culmination of agricultural restructuring along with removal of state subsidies and protection for agricultural production, deregulation of agricultural markets, and increasing commodification of state-owned lands ([Tonts & Horsley, 2019; Woods, 2019](#)). At the local spatial scale, these practices have been promoted through deregulated and fragmented spatial policies and planning lined up with unfettered market logic. Hence, we elaborate on the spatial development of Urla in relation to the structural deregulation and re-regulations relevant to spatial policies and planning in Turkey.

Housing development in Urla, as well as across the entire country, has primarily evolved by circumventing zoning regulations and planning boundaries. In Turkey, and particularly in Urla, urban development and housing production often exhibit “path-dependent processes” ([Heaphy & Scott, 2021](#)), stemming from specific economic, political, and social conditions not dissimilar to the rural planning practices described in southern Europe by [Gallent et al. \(2003\)](#). After the initial zoning plan for Urla was implemented in the 1960s, secondary housing production shifted towards informal squatter settlements. These weren’t constructed by the impoverished seeking shelter but rather by the middle-class residents of İzmir on state-owned lands, agricultural fields, forests, and olive groves. In 1973, Urla’s development took a different trajectory due to the implementation of the İzmir Tourism Development Plan, which incorporated Urla into the tourism development zone. Despite the regulations introduced in the 1978 plan to address irregular developments, illegal housing construction persisted in subsequent years. Amnesty laws in the 1970s and 1980s legalized previously illegal developments, further fuelling unregulated housing development in Urla ([Goksu & DEU City Planning Department, 1992](#)). These regulations and practices also played a crucial role in transferring land ownership to individuals who constructed illegally on state-owned lands, resulting in an uneven and sometimes selective distribution of benefits.

Since the 1980s, the eastern regions of Urla had witnessed rapid

development driven by metropolitan growth and suburbanisation. This development gained momentum with the onset of neoliberal structural reforms initiated in response to structural adjustment programs mandated by the IMF and the World Bank in the early 1980s. In line with neoliberal deregulation, a series of significant reregulations were introduced during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> These reforms had a profound impact on the accelerated spatial development of Urla, particularly in terms of privatizing and commodifying state-owned lands. These regulations not only permitted the use of state lands in the countryside for mass housing production but also encouraged incremental zoning plans at the parcel level within agricultural lands. This led to the expansion of zoning rights, irrespective of their alignment with larger-scale plans ([Velibeyoğlu, 2004; Özdemir, 1995](#)). Subsequently, the municipality implemented a pivotal plan in 1984 that significantly contributed to the rapid spatial development and population growth of Urla. This plan notably increased zoning rights and expanded development areas, effectively doubling the existing settlement with a population projection anticipating an additional 17,033 residents to the existing population of 10,987 at the time. Moreover, between 1986 and 1999, a series of plan revisions were introduced, allowing increased zoning rights in agricultural lands and olive groves, often reaching up to 12%. The opening of the Urla section of the İzmir-Çeşme Highway in 1992, reducing travel time to İzmir by 20 min, further fuelled the accelerated and uncontrolled development in Urla. Simultaneously, some gated communities, authorized through incremental local zoning plans, emerged within protected natural areas. These constructions frequently clashed with regulations and higher-scale plans ([Akyol Altun, 2012; Altun, 2018; Can et al., 2018; Emekli, 2004; Ozbek Sonmez, 2009; Velibeyoğlu, 2004](#)). These gated communities attracted upper-middle-class residents from İzmir seeking an “ideal home” in a natural setting close to the city ([Datta, 2014](#)).

As emphasized by [Eraydın \(2012\)](#), the deregulation and subsequent reregulation in spatial policy and planning, particularly expanding since the 1990s, provide a compelling illustration of how neoliberal restructuring and the pursuit of capital accumulation have influenced both urban and non-urban spaces. These transformations have been intricately linked to the recurrent deficits and accumulation crises that have beset Turkey. The deregulation of the housing and land markets, in turn, facilitated the construction industry’s ascendancy as the primary of capital accumulation, driven by alterations in urban policies and incentivisation strategies ([Altinörs & Akçay, 2022; Kuyucu, 2017](#)). Moreover, the 1990s witnessed a suite of regulations introduced in line with the Local Government Reform, leading to the decentralization of administrative powers from the central government to local authorities and special provincial administrations. However, the central government maintained and, in some cases, expanded its control, particularly in regions of national economic significance that attracted substantial population movements. Despite the oscillations between decentralization and recentralization of planning authority, as well as the inconsistencies and conflicts between central and local governments, a constant theme prevailed—the pursuit of larger shares of land profits and the use of planning authority and mechanisms to unevenly distribute benefits tied to land ([Eraydın, 2012; Özatağan and Eraydın, 2021](#)). The pursuit seems to be shared by both central and local governments, regardless of conflicts in other areas as discussed by [Genç et al. \(2021\)](#).

Particularly through new structural reforms in the 1990s, neoliberalisation gained traction within the agricultural sector. As the countryside underwent more radical transformations, putting small farmers at risk and rendering them unable to sustain their agricultural

<sup>3</sup> The following ones appear as the most outstanding ones: the Tourism Incentive Law (no. 17635), Mass Housing Law (no. 2985), the Zoning Amnesty Law (no. 2981), and the Metropolitan Municipality Law (no. 3030), the Mass Housing Law, the Law on Land Development Planning and Control (no. 3194), Privatization Law and Zoning Law (no. 3194).



production, their lands became attractive targets for new agricultural entrepreneurs (İslamoğlu, 2017) and real estate investors. Similarly in the 1990s, some entrepreneurs acquired substantial tracts of land for vineyards and leased expansive forest areas for agricultural purposes from the treasury in Urla (interviews, January 04, 2023; January 05, 2023). Others purchased extensive agricultural holdings in Kuşçular, İçmeler, and Torasan, partly from treasury sales and partly from local farmers at favorable prices during the 1990s. These buyers had already secured incremental zoning and development plans but held onto these lands with speculative intentions until the 2000s. “Those with the means created incremental site development plans in 1994 and 1995 and patiently awaited greater land profits. Some are still awaiting the new master plan of Urla, which will align with the 1/100,000 Environmental Development Plan, granting housing development rights for such lands” (interviews, January 03, 2021; January 04, 2023; January 06, 2023). The lands developed in the 2000s were primarily those acquired between 1994 and 1995 (interviews, January 03, 2021; January 04, 2023; January 06, 2023).<sup>4</sup> As one of our planner informants pointed out, “The locals may not have been aware of the profit potential of their agricultural land, but speculative developers from other cities or even abroad, keen on land investments with high returns, were in the know. They were the first to arrive and secure large land parcels” (interview; January 03, 2023).

Of relevance to our study are the recurring re-regulations pertaining to the direct sale (privatization) of state lands, the first of which was the law on the regulation of privatization practices and privatization administration (no. 4046, enacted in 1994). The privatization of state land for purposes ranging from housing development to food production and renewable energy infrastructures has been a defining mechanism of neoliberal restructuring in both urban and rural spaces worldwide since the 1980s. It has manifested as the “new enclosure” in urban and non-urban areas in the UK (Christophers, 2018) and as “land grabbing” in the global south (White et al., 2012). The rapid and widespread commodification of state-owned lands strongly echoes what Marx once termed “primitive accumulation,” a process integral to the dispossession and displacement of peasants and working classes (Christophers, 2018, pp. 11–12).

As observed in Urla, when such privatizations serve to convert state lands into residential developments within idyllic countryside settings, counterurbanisation and rural gentrification become increasingly detrimental, often resulting in the displacement of disadvantaged populations (Lawson et al., 2010; López-Morales, 2018; McCarthy, 2008b; Tonts & Horsley, 2019; Woods, 2019; Yang & Loopmans, 2023). In Urla, state lands where the Roma people had established their squatter houses were sold to private investors in 1994 and 1995. As demonstrated by Özdemir (1995), during this same period, 127 parcels of treasury land in Urla were sold “at the price of a newspaper.” In the subsequent years, residential developments, many lacking approved zoning plans, proliferated across these lands, regardless of whether they were situated within natural protection areas.

Nonetheless, during the 2000s, in the wake of recurring economic crises that gave new impetus into neoliberalisation, the commodification of state lands expanded rapidly, propelled by numerous legal regulations and exceptional procedures. State lands began to be commodified at an astonishing pace, essentially without restraint. Consequently, the commodification of state lands for housing development and the deregulated energy and mining sectors marked a unique conjuncture of neoliberalisation in Turkey by the 2000s (Mutioğlu Özkesen, 2022).

It’s worth noting that the direct sale of treasury lands is a procedure in the privatization or commodification of state lands. This directly aligns with Türem’s characterization (Türem, 2017) of Turkey as “the

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with a planner who has been working in Urla for 5 years; and, with an ex-member of the City Council.

state of property,” primarily due to the enormous size of state-controlled land in comparison to private ownership. For instance, in the UK, where public lands were not centrally owned but rather autonomously managed by numerous public institutions, this process involved overcoming significant challenges such as securing consensus among different public institutions, complying with laws, and obtaining public consent (Christophers, 2018). Similarly, Smith (2013) demonstrates that resistance from settled gentrifiers posed an obstacle to the reclamation of public land in the countryside for sale to the private sector for new housing development. In the global south, land grabbing may also take the form of “green grabbing.” In this context, land is commodified under the pretext of “environmental concerns,” sometimes necessitating the preservation of certain natural attributes, albeit to some extent, to sustain capital accumulation. In such cases, international regulations pertaining to natural reserve areas are rarely violated (Fairhead et al., 2012; White et al., 2012).

What we observe in Turkey is that the primary regulatory power of the state swiftly removes all constraints through repeated re-regulations across various zoning and environmental protection laws, coupled with rescaling practices designed to facilitate accumulation. This process appears to unfold with greater ease compared to many other countries. On one hand, new laws and amendments introduced in 2003 and 2005 expanded the authority of the Privatization High Council and Privatization Administration, simultaneously strengthening the planning power of central state institutions with regard to state lands.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, central state planning authority in rural areas was augmented and reinforced through a rescaling of provincial and municipal boundaries. As Macdonald and Keil (2011) aptly emphasize, rescaling functions as a “state-spatial” strategy, regulating the interplay between space, society, and capital. Two laws, enacted in 2004 and 2012, serve as prime examples of this strategy. The first law incorporated Urla and its villages into the Izmir Metropolitan area, while the second law merged the boundaries of the Metropolitan Municipality with those of the province. Consequently, all villages in Urla were reclassified as “rural neighborhoods” (IZKA, 2014; Urla Belediyesi, 2012).

In tandem with these regulations, numerous amendments to the Law on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (No. 2863, enacted in 1983) have been introduced since the 1990s. These amendments have consistently reduced the level of protection and scaled down the boundaries of natural and archaeological sites. A broad spectrum of construction activities, previously prohibited within first and second-degree protection zones, have been gradually permitted. Subsequently, the principles of “protection and use” have paved the way for incremental developments focused on “tourism, trade, and housing,” even within the natural and archaeological protection areas of Urla. Additionally, the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality has consistently enacted master plans, incremental development plans, and plan revisions, all of which grant zoning rights and incorporate protected areas into the settlement boundaries for housing development. These initiatives have been carried out with the approval of central state institutions (source: <https://www.spo.org.tr>).

During the 2000s, the Urla Municipality introduced a new vision centered around “equitry, viticulture, and yachting.” As part of this vision, plans were announced for the development of a vineyard route and a bike route in and around Urla. Starting in 2008, the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality and the Izmir Development Agency (IZKA)

<sup>5</sup> The most outstanding ones were the Law on Arranging Privatization Implementations and Amendments to Several Laws (No.5398); the Law on Organizational Structure and Duties of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2003; no. 4562); The Law on the Amendment of the Tourism Encouragement Law (no. 4957); The Law on Organizational Structure and Duties of The Ministry of Environment and Forestry (2003; No. 4856) ([www.mevzuat.gov.tr](http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr); <http://tvk.csb.gov.tr>).

provided funding for studies on local development strategies in Urla and Karaburun, launching the Sustainable Urla project. These strategies were rooted in the preservation of natural and cultural assets, with the aim of producing world-renowned wines and olive oils, promoting agrotourism, gastronomy tourism, ecotourism, and fostering an alternative urban lifestyle (IZKA, 2014). The 1/25,000 İzmir Metropolitan Region Master Development Plan, approved in 2012, was significantly influenced by these decisions. The Metropolitan Municipality advocated for local development policies based on the "İzmir Model," incorporating terms from the neoliberal lexicon such as "proactive municipalism," "entrepreneurship," "innovation," and "local capacity development," along with corresponding practices (source: <https://www.izmir.bel.tr>). Consequently, vineyards and wine routes, as well as olive routes, were established and widely promoted. This initiative led to the opening of luxurious wineries, restaurants, and countryside hotels, which became the pillars of the 'new' Urla. Additionally, major seasonal festivals were organized to promote local products. As revealed by Gücü (2022), starting in the 2000s, 31 new enterprises were established in Urla, with 26 of them operating in sectors related to wineries, gastronomy, accommodation, event organization, equestrian, art, and design. According to our interviewees, some of these new winehouses, production facilities, countryside hotels, or restaurants were repurposed from old agricultural production workshops, often without proper construction and operation permits (interviews, January 04, 2023; January 05, 2023; January 25, 2023).

This marked the beginning of a massive influx into Urla, after which, not only did housing and land prices surge significantly, but housing production also saw a remarkable acceleration. In the following section, we will delve into recent housing production in Urla, particularly in connection with counterurbanisation.

## 5. Recent housing production and counterurbanisation in Urla

Over the last two decades, the spatial development of Urla has been closely linked to the influx of upper-middle-class counterurbanizers from İzmir. Many of them are white-collar professionals and commuters. They follow in the footsteps of the white-collar "urbanite villagers" (Yucel Young, 2007) of the early 1990s, who were among the first to settle on the peninsula. These pioneers restored derelict or vacant old houses, some of which were later transformed into boutique hotels and winehouses. Their move to the Urla countryside did not involve displacement but rather marked the initial phase of rural gentrification, which would later intersect with the broader trend of counterurbanisation in Urla.

The early counterurbanizers' efforts contributed significantly to Urla's growing popularity among more recent upper-middle-class urbanites from İstanbul and Ankara. Thus, Urla attracted famous personalities who not only relocated there but also invested in high-end tourist and cultural establishments. For instance, two such figures recently acquired an old barn and its surrounding property, transforming them into an upscale hub for art, gastronomy, and accommodation. According to them (interview, March 12, 2023), their motivation was to collaborate with the local community while respecting their daily lives and cultural traditions.<sup>6</sup> Apart from these entrepreneurs, other counterurbanizers, primarily from İstanbul, chose Urla as their escape from city life. They sought a place and lifestyle "of their own" in the countryside. These individuals, often referred to as "city escapees," didn't necessarily seek extensive interaction with the local peasants. The reasons cited by these entrepreneurs and counterurbanizers for their move to Urla often revolved around recurring themes, such as "metropolitan life is stressful

<sup>6</sup> Our interviewees here are boutique hotel proprietors in the town center. One is a retired army pilot, the second an engineer whose family has been based in Urla, and, the third a retired CEO of an international finance agency, and his partner a textile designer.

and challenging"; "the countryside is beautiful and spacious"; "we have our own time and daily rhythm"; "it [Urla] is similar to the Tuscan Valley"; "it is much more tranquil than Bodrum and Çeşme or Alaçatı [other preferred resort towns of the upper classes]"; "it is close to the city center and the airport and the transportation to the village is easy" (interviews, December 03, 2022; January 04, 2023; January 06, 2023; February 15, 2023).

The influx of these newcomers corresponds to a significant surge in land and housing prices, which were already higher than those in most districts and neighborhoods of İzmir. This recent escalation in housing and land costs in Urla compounds an already established, thriving, and deregulated housing market, coupled with a highly deregulated and fragmented spatial planning system. The researchers consider these as pivotal factors preconditioning the phenomenon of counterurbanisation and resulting in exclusive housing outcomes, akin to situations observed in Ireland (Gkartziou & Scott, 2012; Heaphy & Scott, 2021). When considering how the idealized notion of the idyllic countryside aligns with tangible spatial processes, the experiences of these counterurbanizers closely parallel residential mobility trends seen in various geographical contexts. Alongside these trends, rural gentrification, and the displacement of the less affluent have also unfolded (Gkartziou & Scott, 2012; Heaphy & Scott, 2021; Hines, 2012; Kocabyik & Loopmans, 2021; Lorenzen, 2021; Phillips, 2005; Phillips et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2011).

The rapid development of Urla began to flourish notably on the south side of the İzmir-Çeşme Highway in the 2000s. This growth was significantly spurred by the expansion of the village settlement area of Kuşçular in 2007 and 2008, orchestrated by the Ministry of Urbanisation and Environment along with new cadastral parcel divisions. "Previously, a land plot of 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> could only be subdivided into 10 smaller parcels, with only one house allowed on each subdivision. Without recognizing that they were very valuable farmlands, they were further subdivided by opening access roads to create 30 housing parcels" (interviews, January 03, 2023; January 04, 2023).<sup>7</sup> According to one interviewee, referring to the new parcellation in village settlements, "they [the investors] obtained so many parcels by bulldozing and opening roads from the back and in between. I know 80 farmlands that were divided in this way. Then arrived the big construction firms ... to the villages". More recently, a new wave of newcomers has emerged, including CEOs from İstanbul and approximately 20 families from Germany, France, Switzerland, Norway, among others. These individuals, who initially migrated from Anatolia to foreign countries and achieved affluence there, are often referred to as "late gourmets" due to their newfound interest in Urla (interview; January 25, 2023).<sup>8</sup>

As the population of Urla has steadily increased, the Urla Municipality issued a total of 11,038 new construction licenses between 2011 and 2021 (Table 1). This upsurge in construction approvals closely mirrors the population growth trend (Fig. 3). Simultaneously, there has been a substantial transformation in the peninsula's settled landscape from 2002 to 2022, with an ever-expanding expanse of settlements encompassing the central town, the northern coast of Urla, and a corridor linking the coast to the Kuşçular plain (Fig. 4). While the area designated for settlement has continually expanded, the rate of agricultural land reduction in Urla has reached 31.77% since 2002. In 2002, there were 11,704 ha of agricultural land, which declined to 9421 ha in 2011 and further diminished to 8045 ha by 2022 (data sourced from the İzmir Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry).

Since the early 2010s, Urla has also experienced a phenomenon akin to "super gentrification," as observed by Phillips et al. (2021) in various rural settings in the UK. In addition to the owner of the largest capital group in İzmir, high-profile financiers and political elites from Central

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with two local architect who have been also active in local politics, and with a planner.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with a local architect who is also active in local politics.



**Table 1**

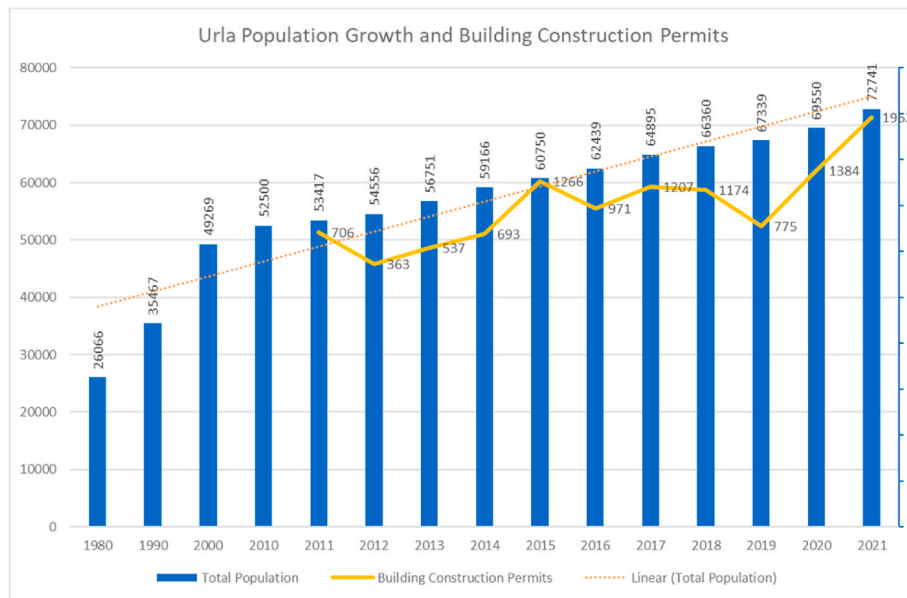
Population growth and the number of issued building construction permits over the last decades. Sources: TURKSTAT (2022); Urla Municipality (2021: 109); Urla Municipality (2022: 111); Urla Municipality (2015: 116).

Years	Total population	Urban population	Rural population	Building construction permits
1980	26,066	14,416	11,650	No data
1990	35,467	25,648	9819	“
2000	49,269	36,579	12,690	“
2010	52,500	45,244	7256	“
2011	53,417	45,034	8383	706
2012	54,556	46,289	8267	363
2013	56,751	56,751	No data	537
2014	59,166	59,166	“	693
2015	60,750	60,750	“	1266
2016	62,439	62,439	“	971
2017	64,895	64,895	“	1207
2018	66,360	66,360	“	1174
2019	67,339	67,339	“	775
2020	69,550	69,550	“	1384
2021	72,741	72,741	“	1962

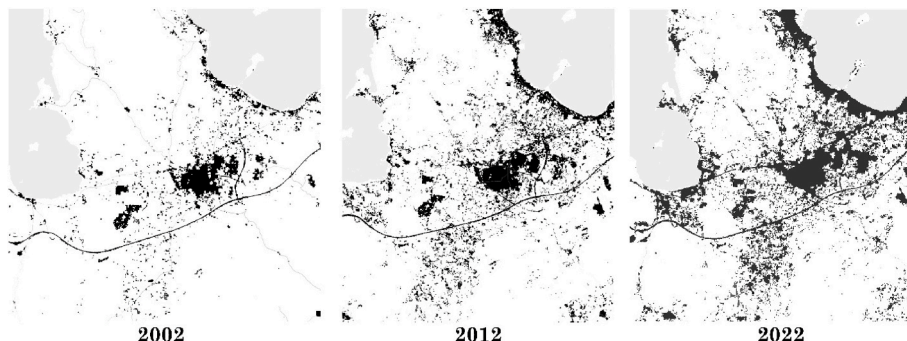
Asia have constructed super-luxurious residences, some as large as 5500 square meters, in Urla and its vicinity. This form of super gentrification, while elevating Urla’s profile among the upper echelons of society and political elites, has given rise to the most opulent housing developments,

often led by major construction conglomerates. An illustrative case is the development of “MESA Urla Evleri,” one of the most luxurious housing projects not only in Urla but also across Turkey. MESA, one of Turkey’s largest construction companies and the initial major developer in Urla, acquired land in 1994 and initiated development in two distinct phases, in 1995 and 2023. The homes were sold so rapidly that “MESA contemplated launching a third phase of housing development. However, suitable land was in short supply, as most available plots had already been purchased by other developers” (interview, January 25, 2023).

Previously, as noted by a local architect involved in local politics, “in the 1990s, housing cooperatives acquired substantial amounts of treasury land in Urla. However, nowadays, such opportunities have dwindled, and only large corporations have the means to acquire land” (interview; January 04, 2023). This shift has marginalized small local companies in the market, leading to a monopoly on high-end housing production by these corporate giants. These corporations, as the architect elaborates, “wield significant influence, obtaining building density permits from the Ministry in Ankara, which are beyond the reach of smaller players.” Their client base primarily comprises individuals from Ankara or Istanbul, who purchase these homes, often sight-unseen, with the aim of securing a residence in Urla. “In their new rural villages,” the architect emphasizes, “they expect all the amenities typically found in urban or city centers,” (interview, January 17, 2023) underscoring the



**Fig. 3.** The comparison between population growth in Urla and the number of issued building construction permits.



**Fig. 4.** Settlement sprawl from 2002 (left) to 2012 (middle) to 2022 (right).

urban aspirations of these counterurbanizers.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, heightened concerns about earthquakes in Turkey and the İzmir region, coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly intensified the trend of urbanites relocating to the countryside in Urla. Real estate brokers are finding it challenging to keep pace with the soaring property prices. One broker aptly states, “Even if the initial asked price appears unrealistic at first glance, it often becomes a reality within a few months” (interview, January 25, 2023). These observations are well-supported by statistical data on the escalating real estate prices. Over the last three years, there has been a staggering 448.4% increase, which surges to an astonishing 593% over the past five years in Urla (source: [www.tuik.gov.tr](http://www.tuik.gov.tr), 2023; [endexa.com](http://endexa.com) accessed on May 15, 2023).

The surge in foreign currency exchange rates, especially prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, triggered a notable shift of speculative capital into the real estate sector. Interestingly, the new clientele of real estate agencies hails from different provinces or even abroad, and they are distinctly from the upper class. One striking observation is that “Indeed, middle classes can no longer afford these prices; they could have bought houses until 2010s. Housing prices in Urla are among the most expensive, within the top 10% in Turkey,” as stressed by several real estate brokers during interviews (interviews, January 25, 2023).

Learning of the substantial profit potential in Urla, new and prospective investors are fervently acquiring land, often disregarding protection status, and seeking ways to alter zoning or request rezoning for future developments. For instance, one unidentified investor is rapidly amassing land in İcmeler at remarkably high prices, prompting local landowners to inquire about the possibility of a new plan that might increase development allowances in agricultural lands and natural protection areas in İcmeler (interviews January 03, 2023 and January 04, 2023).<sup>10</sup> The acquisition of construction permits and expanded zoning privileges frequently hinges on modifications in land protection classifications and certifications obtained from central authorities. Alternatively, investors secure preferential tourism plan approvals originally intended for tourist hotels or facilities but then utilized for housing construction (interview January 25, 2023). As elucidated by a real estate agent representing an international real estate company in Urla, whose branch achieved the highest transaction values in the entire Aegean region for 2022, Urla offers an enormous “development” potential. Surprisingly, only 10% of its total land has been developed thus far, and it harbors the potential to become one of Turkey’s largest districts (interview January 25, 2023). Another agent foresees sustained migration to Urla for at least another decade (interview January 25, 2023).

As to be seen in the following section, local and central government authorities have repeatedly pledged and initiated efforts to provide housing for the Roma population in Urla over the past decade. Unfortunately, these efforts have fallen short of keeping pace with the rapid, upscale housing construction that has been unfolding in rural areas, including on state lands. The authorities have not demonstrated the same level of determination when it comes to allocating state lands for a modest housing project for the Roma community. Having shown that all “inhabitable” lands have been scabbled by more powerful ones, in the next section, we will delve into the housing conditions of the Roma residents.

## 6. Housing problem of the Roma in Urla

The Roma residents of Urla are descendants of those who arrived

during the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s. They initially settled in Çeşme but gradually moved to Urla in the 1960s. At first, they established temporary camps, but they faced constant eviction from these settlements. They were relocated to various marginal areas across Urla that were initially considered worthless. After several unsuccessful attempts to secure permanent and more habitable housing, some of them resorted to building makeshift squatter houses on state-owned lands in the Altıntaş Neighborhood during the 1970s. In 1995 when the state lands where their squatter houses stood were privatized, they were settled in very modest municipality-built housing. Since then, these modest structures were subdivided, and were added on to accommodate newlywed family members and newcomers, resulting in an overcrowded settlement that was nearly uninhabitable. This left Urla’s Roma community in an increasingly precarious housing condition, caught between the commodification of state lands for luxury housing and a rapidly rising housing market in which they had no participation. As Madden and Marcuse aptly note, when the logic of commodification takes hold in housing production, “some people will always be forced into uninhabitable dwelling spaces” (2016, p. 51).

The housing predicament faced by the Roma people in Urla has been marked by a series of successive evictions. Each time they appeared to have found a place to settle, they were confronted with multi-dimensional and multi-temporal (Lorenzen, 2021; Smith et al., 2021) displacement pressures, dating back to their initial eviction from state lands in 1995. This displacement pressure has intensified as Urla has become increasingly attractive, drawing in even the “super gentrifiers” beyond the counterurbanisation observed in the late 1990s. As Sherman (2023) argues, it is particularly apparent that in rural areas characterized by significant inequality driven by counterurbanisation and rural gentrification, socially marginalized residents face a range of challenges that foster exclusion and worsens housing precarity.

Before the widespread trend of counterurbanisation and rural gentrification in the 2010s, back in 1995, the mayor at the time took the initiative to construct 21 temporary dwellings, referred to as *Baratalı Houses*, on a public land. These houses were intended for the 21 Roma households who had been displaced from the treasury land where they had been squatting, albeit objections from non-Roma residents living nearby. One resident recalls, “The mayor settled them in the area, which was delineated as a park for our neighborhood in the master plan” (interview, January 24, 2023). While these efforts to provide housing for the Roma people, though limited in offering a sustainable solution, were conceivable at that time, they would become increasingly implausible with the full impact of neoliberalisation. Over the years, these houses were subdivided, expanded, and significantly modified, eventually reaching a total of 86 units by 2013 (Şimşir et al., 2013). These units were constructed with only basic infrastructure, namely electricity and running water. Those who arrived later constructed makeshift brick houses, barracks, and tents, reminiscent of the conditions that existed prior to 1995. Consequently, the settlement expanded and encroached upon privately owned plots in the vicinity expanding an area of 7500 m<sup>2</sup>. Presently, this settlement finds itself surrounded by a dense and “legal” housing development (Fig. 5). The Urla Roma communities’ housing conditions create at least a similar, if not worse, environment as portrayed in the physical and social analysis of Ocak (2007).

Starting from 1995, the transformation of agricultural land into residential areas and the commodification of state lands, even those designated as protected areas, have played a decisive role in the housing predicament faced by the Roma community in Urla. As the 1990s progressed and state lands became the primary vehicle for capital accumulation, squatting (known as *gecekondu* in Turkish) on state-owned land began to be criminalized. Squatting had previously functioned as a unique form of wealth redistribution in Turkey, representing the only recourse for the housing needs of the poor, for whom social housing had never been systematically considered as a policy option. Moreover, as the state abdicated its responsibility for addressing the housing

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a constructor architect who is also involved in local politics.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a planner. The same was declared by two ex-members of the Municipal Council, and a planner from the municipality (04.01.2023; 06.01.2023; 25.01.2023).

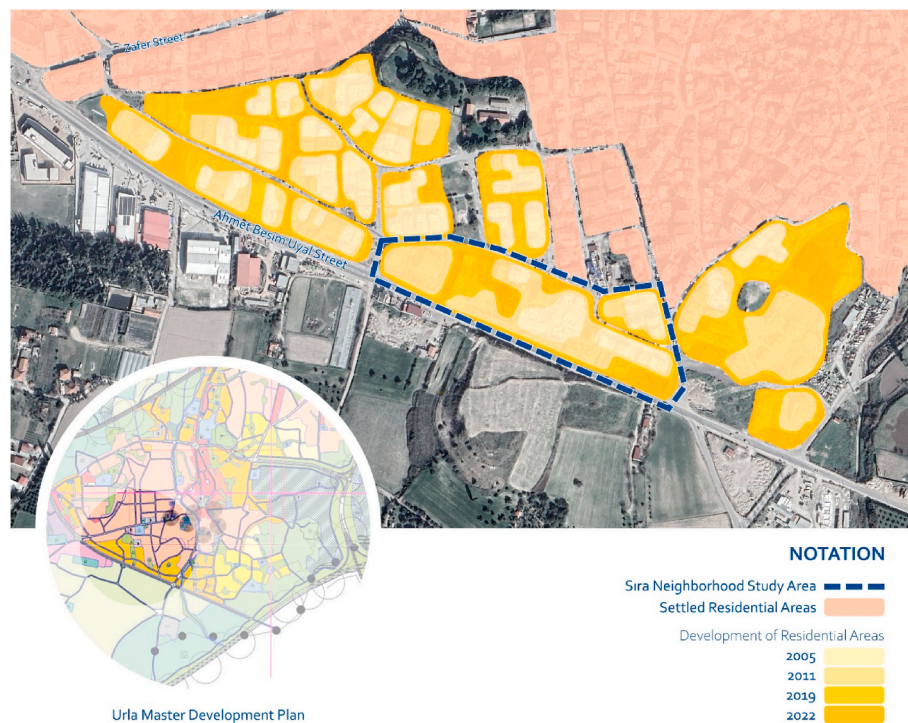


Fig. 5. The Roma settlement and housing development in Sira neighborhood between 2005 and 2022 (prepared by authors).

problems of the poor, it either disregarded squatter housing or employed it as a tool for political mobilization on behalf of the ruling political powers (Demirtas-Milz, 2013).

Current regulations do not establish a right to housing for individuals without property rights to the dwellings they currently occupy, including squatters on public land. Urban renewal initiatives that began in the 2000s in major cities have facilitated the transfer of land to investment capital. Those without property deeds or who were renters were forcibly removed from their homes as part of these projects (Demirtas-Milz, 2013; Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010). For instance, in Sulukule, Istanbul, an urban renewal project resulted in the eviction of the Roma community living there, despite protests, lengthy legal battles, and the resistance of NGOs (Uysal, 2012).

The Roma settlement, once situated on the outskirts of the town, has now become a conspicuous and visible entry point to the “prestigious” Urla (interview, December 2013). Local government authorities and the public openly express the view that “the Roma people living there, and their makeshift settlement do not fit in with Urla” (interview, November 2013). Their presence is also seen as an impediment to the increased wealth of their neighbors: “We, the non-Roma residents of the Sira Neighborhood, strongly opposed the settlement of Roma people there because their presence led to a decrease in the value of our houses and land, causing the Sira neighborhood to become the least desirable place in Urla” (interview, January 23, 2023). The Roma community is acutely aware of such sentiments: “... only when we find decent and secure housing will we be able to avoid eviction,” a Roma woman declares (interview, January 20, 2023).

Efforts to improve the housing conditions of the Roma community and relocate them from one of the prestigious entry points to Urla proved unsuccessful. “In 2013, the former mayor attempted to expropriate 13 parcels of land at a fraction of the fair price under the pretext of building housing for the Roma people, but the true intention was to transfer our lands to a major developer from Izmir,” explained a landowner and builder from the Sira Neighborhood (interview, January 23, 2022). On one hand, land prices were skyrocketing in 2013, and on the other, the owners of adjacent plots vehemently opposed any permanent

settlement plans for the Roma community. As the real estate market rapidly surged, the Metropolitan Municipality abandoned its land purchase plans (interviews, January 11, 2023).<sup>11</sup> However, the rationale behind the former Metropolitan Mayor’s actions was remarkable: “You propose building villas for them ... they are not worthy of owning villas” (meeting with the Metropolitan Mayor, July 2013). During the same period, the district governor considered settling the Roma people in old and affordable houses in the town center but faced resistance from the neighborhood and a shortage of such houses. Indeed, as one informant pointed out, “in those years, it became impossible to even buy a hut in Urla” (interview, December 28, 2022).

In the summer of 2017, after violent conflicts erupted between rival Roma groups in the neighborhood, 40 households were relocated to another district of Izmir. In 2019, some barracks that had expanded onto adjacent private property were demolished, and the households were moved to 16 container houses provided by the Municipality on a public lot near the settlement. However, 75 households remained on the original plot, and in a short time, the settlement expanded once again with the addition of new barracks. The private lot occupied by the Roma residents belonged to a family of developers, whose father had purchased the land in 1989. According to them, their parcels were taken over by the Roma people, and the municipality did not take action to end the unauthorized squatting. Eventually, with the approval of the district governor, the Roma people were evicted from the privately owned occupied plots. As one family member stated, “When my father bought these parcels, a company, a lawyer, and a doctor also bought adjacent large parcels to build country houses. However, they sold their lands and bought other properties in Urla because of the presence of the Roma people here” (interview, November 25, 2022).

In 2020, another eviction occurred, affecting 18 households whose makeshift shelters had spread to another plot owned by the same landowner. They were relocated to container houses on a nearby public land designated as a park. These container houses were placed on the

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with an ex-vice mayor and a bureaucrat of the Municipality.



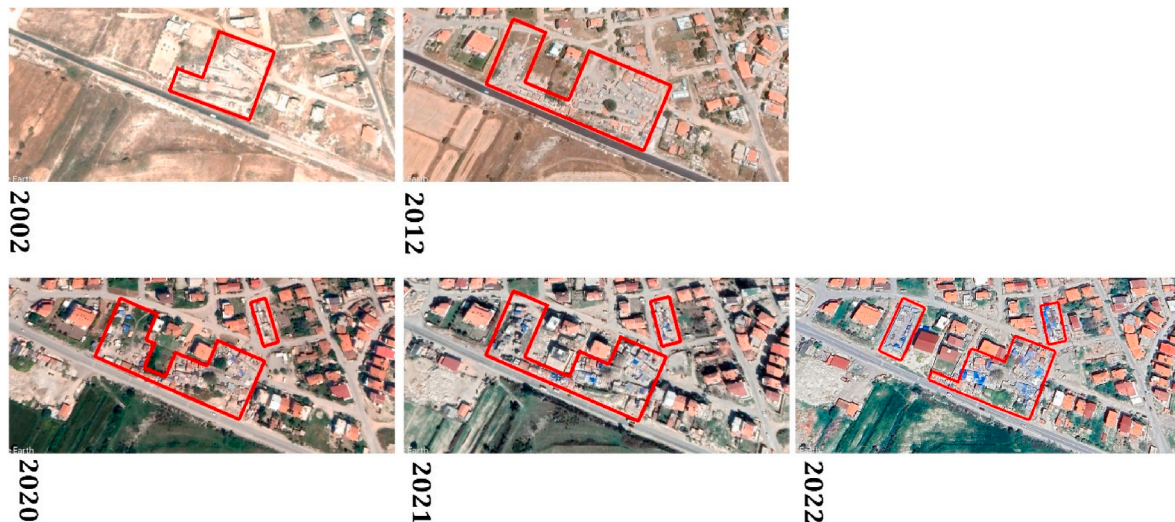


Fig. 6. The change in the Sira Neighborhood from 2002 to 2022 showing the expansion and later fragmentation of the settlement. Red contours indicate the area within which the Roma people reside.

ground haphazardly, without proper infrastructure or soil stabilization. According to a retired bureaucrat from the Municipality, “three places were found for them. One was in the Ovacık village, the other around the State Hospital, and another one in the Devederesi. However, these places needed infrastructure, roads, water, and electricity. The Municipality did not want to spend any money and placed those container houses on that land belonging to the Municipality, which was designated as a green area” (interview, January 05, 2023). On the two plots from which they were removed, two four-storey apartment buildings were constructed by the landowners, each with an additional unlicensed storey. “Our family lives on three floors; we rent the fourth. Since these are adjacent to the Roma houses, we could only rent them for less than the fair price, so we built one more floor illegally to cover our losses,” explained one landowner and constructor. Another group of landowners expressed their concerns, saying, “No one wants the Roma people to settle next to them. Housing and land are very valuable in Urla, and if there are Roma people next to us, the value of our property will decrease” (interview, December 23, 2022).

It is evident that local and central government officials, despite their seeming willingness to address the housing problem of the Roma people, have avoided to fully utilize their political and economic capacities to provide a sustainable solution. Instead, they seem to favor temporary measures like placing the Roma people in unsafe container houses that can be easily removed and relocated, or resorting to eviction when no other alternatives seem available. These actions reflect a lack of long-term planning and a failure to address the root causes of the housing issue facing the Roma community in Urla.

As of November 2022, the Roma settlement has been divided into three fragmented clusters, with two of them consisting of container houses. Official documents from the municipality indicate that there are 68 households and 216 registered individuals still residing in the original settlement of *Baratalı Houses* (Fig. 6). With some Roma residents now housed in modern yet temporary container homes, they demand back their old tents despite the challenges they posed because they could divide and modify them as they wished. Local authorities may assume they have solved the problem, but it seems each improvement has made these people even more insecure, unsafe, and precarious. A young Roma woman voiced her concerns, stating that “They promised us many times; He [a politician] came from Ankara and said ‘our state will build houses for you’. If they had the will, they would. They put us in these closed boxes. This is a designated green area in the plan. It means they will kick us out of here too” (interview, November 13, 2022).

The original settlement’s already deprived conditions have been

further exacerbated. The inner square of the initial settlement, if it ever had one, has lost its former character. While the monumental poplar tree that once provided shade in the square still stands, the square itself has become much smaller and transformed into a mere passageway with the addition of newly built shelters. Even the kiosk that served as a gathering place for the Roma people is now closed. A grocery store, which replaced the kiosk at a later point, also went out of business due to licensing problems. The entrance to the settlement, once a controlled access point, has lost its role as a gateway and is now little more than a transitional area filled with accumulated scrap (interview, November 13, 2022).

During the initial stages of our research, the Roma residents expressed hope and greater confidence in local and central authorities, as well as in the state. However, over the past decade, their hope has waned, and they’ve become more hopeless and insecure. They harbor deep suspicions about the timing of promises made by both local and central state representatives. “They always come to us just before the local or general elections and promise to build houses. However, after the elections, they forget us and leave us to our fate until the next elections. Meanwhile, we get poorer and stuck in deeper problems,” one resident expressed (interview, November 10, 2022). “Are these even homes? In what kind of places do they force us to live?” questioned a young woman. Another woman expressed her frustration, saying, “The state does not consider us as human beings” (interview, November 10, 2022). A young man added, “Yet the Roma people are good people ... Everything that happens to us is because we, the Roma citizens, are unable to unite” (interview, November 13, 2022).

The Roma individuals we interviewed have explained that their hardship deepened, and they became increasingly reliant on aid, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. One resident stated, “We were enclosed in houses. Women could not sell flowers; families could not collect junks. We could not work as street vendors” (interview, 10.12.2023). Another significant difficulty arose due to the extensive development in Urla. As succinctly put by a Roma informant, “The Kuşçular plain where horses grazed once, the groves where we went to harvest olives are now *siteler* [gated communities]” (interview, November 15, 2022). They elaborated on how in the past, they would collect olives left after the harvest in the nearby groves, keep some for themselves, and sell the rest. In the spring, they would gather and sell flowers and herbs from the fields. However, all these lands have now been sold to gated communities, enclosed by walls, and they no longer have access to these areas (interview, December 10, 2022). While these statements might convey a sense of nostalgia for a simpler life in the



countryside, they rather reflect a longing for even the most basic means of livelihoods, compared to their current circumstances. Similarly, in the early 2010s, the Roma community in Urla even yearned for the return of the Urla dump long after it was relocated to a city-wide site, as it had provided their primary source of income.

The recent upscale housing developments, primarily a result of counterurbanisation, were sanctioned by everyone, but it left no room for decent housing for the Roma people. One Roma man expressed his frustration by saying, “When they demolished our slums, all around Urla was treasury land. They sold the place where we lived to the rich. There was so much treasury land that they couldn’t finish selling them all since then. While they were selling them, they stuffed us in a land the size of this walnut shell” (interview, November 10, 2022). This highlights the stark contrast in land allocation and housing opportunities for different socioeconomic groups in Urla.

The sharp contrast between recent housing development and the Roma community’s deprived conditions resonates with “residential alienation,” a concept defined by Madden and Marcuse (2016). It reflects the socio-material reality where housing production serves only capitalist interests, leaving marginalized groups like the Roma people in a state of increasing insecurity, desperation, and powerlessness. This situation aligns with the idea proposed by Gallent and Scott (2019) that highlights the growing wealth disparities and housing poverty in rural areas. For the Roma people, this means they live in a constant state of uncertainty, under the looming threat of eviction. One Roma community member expressed this by saying, “Up to now they have thrown us from there to there. Whenever they promised us that they were going to build houses, they put us instead in temporary containers. Eventually, they are going to kick us out of here too” (interview, November 10, 2022). When asked about the Roma housing problem in Urla, some counterurbanizers from Istanbul commented without hesitation: “in a place like Urla, the Roma people cannot hold on. Eventually, they’re going to have to go” (interviews with four counterurbanizers from Istanbul, February 15, 2023).

In the last decade, every time a potential plot for a Roma settlement was identified, conflicts erupted involving central and local government authorities or between landowners and the municipality. Ultimately, these lands ended up being sold to private companies. One individual noted, “There is no place in Urla to build housing for the Roma people. Treasury lands in İçmeler, Kalabak, Rüstem neighborhoods were sold at such high prices in the last year. We explored two locations, one which was the lot of your housing project, the other was in Özbek. The Roma people have no chance to stay in Urla” (interviews, January 24, 2023; January 09, 2023).<sup>12</sup>

It’s worth noting that, according to the Zoning Law, the Mass Housing Law, and the Municipalities Law, local and central government agencies have the authority to expropriate or request treasury land for the “public good” and “public service” by obtaining special permission from the Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation or central institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. However, the clause of “public interest” has never been effectively used to provide housing for the Roma people. For instance, in 2017, the Municipality of Urla and the Ministry of Family and Social Policies attempted to negotiate with the Mass Housing Administration (TOKI) to build housing for the Roma residents on land near the Urla State Hospital. However, the requested price of 90, 000, 000 TL by TOKI was deemed unaffordable, and these efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful ([www.egedesonsoz.com](http://www.egedesonsoz.com), accessed December 23, 2022).

Subsequent to these events, while authorities remained hesitant to secure an alternative plot for the Roma residents, a 115,000 m<sup>2</sup> piece of land near one of the potential plots for the Roma community was sold to a private company by the Privatization Administration. This transaction

occurred following the development and implementation of a tourism-oriented plan prepared by the ministry, bypassing the municipality. These actions further undermine the possibility of establishing non-profit social housing for the Roma community (interviews with a planner from the Urla Municipality, two members of the City Council, and a high-level bureaucrat, January 09, 2023).

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

This article discusses counterurbanisation with a focus on the supply side, examining how spatial policies have profoundly influenced the housing precarity experienced by Roma residents in Urla. To achieve this, we have identified three lines of discussion. *First*, we explore the state regulations pertinent to the commodification of treasury and state lands, as well as the spatial policies governing their implementation at the local level through planning practices. *Second*, we outline how these policies and plans have redefined both the town itself and its surrounding countryside. The socio-spatial change of Urla spans from a small town to a favored summer destination for Izmir residents, further transforming into a suburban enclave for the middle class by the 1970s. Subsequently, it evolved into a haven of gated communities and country residences for the upper-middle class to enjoy a life closer to nature by the late 1990s. Finally, it has become an investment hotspot characterized by the construction of exclusive housing landscapes since the early 2010s. *Third*, we delve into how these developments have directly impacted the housing predicament faced by Roma residents in Urla. We summarize Urla’s spatial development along the lines in Fig. 7, providing a visual representation of how these factors are interrelated.

When speculative housing production extended into the countryside, neither planning and zoning codes nor regulations regarding natural conservation could impede the rapid pace of construction. This sets Urla apart from other socio-political and geographical contexts where housing unaffordability and the depletion of rural spaces become contentious issues due to deregulated planning systems and housing and land markets (Gkartziou & Scott, 2012, 2014). Unlike countries such as the UK, where rural gentrification and housing unaffordability are often tied to regulations that protect the countryside and deter urban sprawl into rural areas (see Scott et al., 2011), Urla witnesses a distinct approach. In Urla, there has been a consistent absence of concerns about preventing rural development. Instead, legal regulations and spatial development policies are continually adjusted to encourage new developments in rural areas. Both local and central governments, as well as local landlords and landowners, have actively supported housing development, even in forests, olive groves, and fertile agricultural lands, all in anticipation of increased profits.

In Urla, despite its considerable erosion and susceptibility to the relentless capital accumulation, there has been little resistance to municipal planning practices aimed at preserving the natural areas of Urla. Instead, planners, landowners, and the local community have consistently embraced, and at times even conformed to, the unbridled market dynamics without compromise. This contrasts with what Shucksmith (2011) calls the internalized planning ideology adhered by planners and gentrifiers safeguarding picturesque countryside. Furthermore, the drivers of housing production and planning in Urla extend well beyond what Heaphy and Scott (2021) describe as “path dependencies” in rural settings. In Urla, profit maximization from land and housing investments through uncontrolled and deregulated means has been the norm since at least the 1990s.

Furthermore, the commodification of state lands in Urla, characterized by an uneven and unrestricted distribution under the umbrella of state regulations, represents a distinct manifestation of neoliberal deregulation in Turkey. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of “path-dependency” as articulated by Brenner and Theodore (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, 2005), which describes the specificities of neoliberalisation within various geographical and political contexts. It is a process overlapping with the “path-dependency” outlined by Heaphy

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with a local architect also involved in local politics; and with a planner from the Municipality.

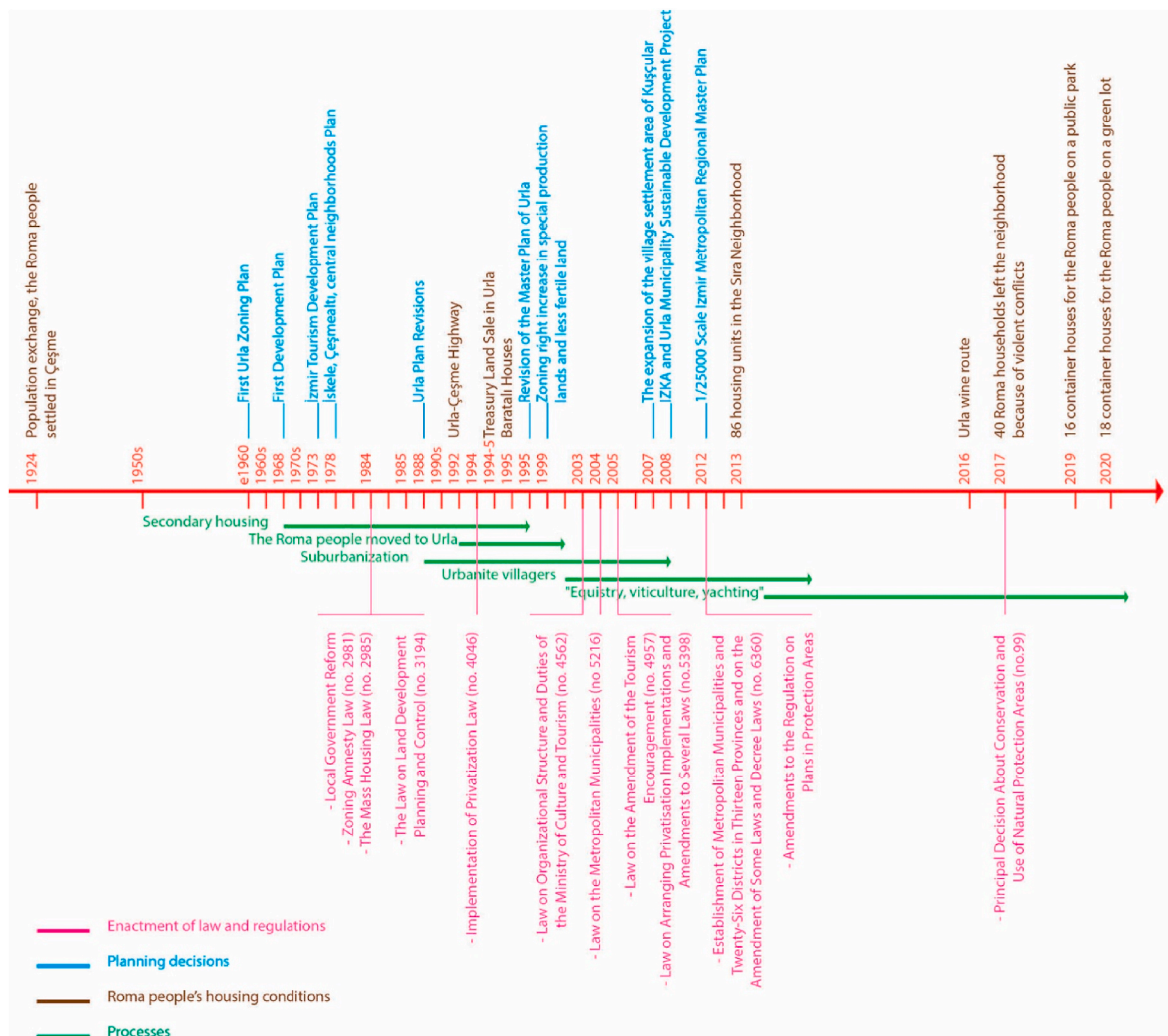


Fig. 7. The developments related to the legal, planning, and physical development of Urla and its Roma residents' housing condition.

and Scott (2021) within the context of spatial processes. Much like in Urla, these processes have unfolded at the expense of the most poor and underrepresented segments of society, echoing similar trends in the “global countryside” (Woods, 2019) and the “neoliberal countryside” (Tonts & Horsley, 2019).

As a result, the Roma people's housing predicament in Urla is primarily aggravated by the commodification and unequal allocation of state lands, predominantly reserved for high-end housing ventures. This situation leads to counterurbanisation-driven rural gentrification, elevating the risk of displacement for the Roma community, pushing them further into invisibility while they already grapple with substandard housing conditions. To borrow the formulation of Clark and Pissin (2020), the conversion of state land, originally protected, into high-end housing zones for profit undermines potential solutions to the immediate needs of the Roma residents. While the non-urban areas of Urla are exclusively earmarked for upscale housing developments, the Roma population in Urla experiences “residential alienation” (Madden & Marcuse, 2016), stemming from a pervasive sense of insecurity. This housing production framework is rooted in urban policies that culminate in exclusive “place-making practices” (de Koning, 2015; Dikeç, 2007) orchestrated by both central state and local authorities. In this context, the central government plays a pivotal role as a “major place maker” through its regulatory influence in planning and its authority in managing and distributing state lands.

Urla, once a haven for upper-middle-class individuals, swiftly

aligned itself with high-end housing production, both materially and discursively. These two facets of development were closely intertwined. Urla, as characterized by a local real estate agent, has now transcended the means of “white-collar urbanites,” let alone the local population, including the Roma community, who can no longer afford homes or land in this area. The housing landscape and market in Urla have unequivocally become exclusive, even for those who share class characteristics associated with “counterurbanisation narratives” (Gkartziou, 2013). By the 2010s, the former counterurbanizers were at times replaced and at times cojoined by upper-class “elites” in the countryside. These late comers are, on one hand, counterurbanizers enjoying all what the country would offer, on the other, urbanite investors who seek high profits together “with everything they would find at a high-end urban environment”. The confluence of counterurbanisation and high-end housing production was often portrayed as a direct cause-and-effect relationship. This narrative not only made influential figures, such as mayors, hesitant to take decisive action in resolving the housing issues of the Roma community but also provided them with a rationale for inaction. Indeed, the storyline of counterurbanisation and the portrayal of an “idyllic rural lifestyle” not only obscure the hardships faced by the poorer and more marginalized populations but also consign them to being “out of place” and invisible (Gallent & Scott, 2019; Lawson et al., 2010; Sherman, 2023; Tonts & Horsley, 2019; Woods, 2019).

For all parties involved, including both central and local governments, landowners, and “counterurbanizers,” counterurbanisation and

its resulting expensive housing market with soaring land prices are regarded as established facts, which, in turn, render the Roma community as “out of place in the countryside” (Woods, 2019, p. 591). Conversely, for the Roma residents of Urla, there has never been a viable option within the commodified housing market, making “affordable housing” an impractical choice for securing shelter. In essence, those grappling with housing precarity and insecurity require a non-commodified housing solution alongside the “right to the city” and the “right to housing.” Policy making should be all inclusive and should implement measures to not only curb speculative housing development but also prevent the overexploitation of natural landscapes.

In conclusion, our study marks why counterurbanisation needs to be considered specifically as a policy issue that is closely linked to neoliberalisation. The case of Urla and Turkey indicate that when deregulation and reregulation, spatial policies and rescaling become the means of unfettered capital accumulation, it only worsens the invisible groups’ housing precarity, especially when and where they find no ways of contributing to policy making.

### Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used [ChatGPT] to improve the language and readability. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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