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Structural contradictions in Turkish climate policy

Cem İskender Aydın*

Boğaziçi University, Institute of Environmental Sciences, İstanbul, Türkiye
* Author to whom any correspondence should be addressed.

E-mail: cem.aydin@bogazici.edu.tr

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Abstract

This letter critically examines Turkish climate policy through the lens of structural contradiction and policy incoherence. Rather than viewing the gap between stated climate goals and domestic action as mere implementation failure, I argue that key components of Turkey's climate policy, including its nationally determined contributions, paradoxical energy strategy, and diplomatic positioning, constitute a framework of contradictory commitments. By projecting an image of climate ambition while simultaneously maintaining mechanisms that sustain a fossil fuel-dependent economic model, Turkish climate policy reflects a structural orientation aimed at managing competing domestic economic interests and international pressures. This analysis deconstructs the rhetoric and strategies employed, revealing a fundamental disconnect between stated intentions and tangible outcomes. As Turkey prepares to co-host the COP31 climate summit alongside Australia this year, dissecting and addressing these contradictions is an urgent necessity to foster genuine climate leadership, since such contradictions ultimately delay meaningful decarbonization, lock the country into high-carbon infrastructure, and will make a future just transformation towards sustainability significantly more costly and difficult to achieve.

1. Introduction

The global climate crisis is as much a crisis of political will and communication as it is one of environmental and political science. Despite more than three decades of international negotiations to solve the political problem since the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, global carbon dioxide emissions are now more than 60% higher than they were in 1990 (Stoddard *et al* 2021). The architecture of global climate governance relies inherently on voluntary, self-determined national pledges within a decentralized framework. While this system, operationalized through the Paris Agreement, has successfully generated universal participation, it has also produced persistent implementation gaps. Recognizing the complexities of this gap requires moving beyond the assumptions of outright climate denialism (which is still persisting) to analyse how states navigate the cross-pressures of global environmental norms and domestic carbon-intensive developmentalism (Lamb *et al* 2020, Stoddard *et al* 2021).

Turkey represents a critical case study within this global dynamic. As a major emerging economy, an OECD and G20 member, and a nation situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the country's climate policy trajectory carries significant geopolitical and environmental weight (Cerit Mazlum 2017). Officially, the state has signalled a strong commitment to global climate goals, ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2021 and declaring a long-term target of achieving net-zero emissions by 2053 (Anadolu Agency 2021, MENR 2024, Republic of Türkiye 2025a). These high-level declarations have been accompanied by ambitious capacity expansion targets for renewable energy, culminating in the recent enactment of domestic climate legislation[1] and the formulation of an emissions trading system (MENR 2024, Alparslan 2026).

However, these commitments coexist with policies that heavily subsidize fossil fuel extraction, expand coal-fired power generation, and prioritize rapid industrialization in ecologically sensitive regions (Aydın 2019, Aydın and Turhan 2025). Hence, in this letter, I claim that key elements of

[1] See full law at https://mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=7552&MevzuatTur=1&MevzuatTertip=5

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Turkish climate policy must be understood through the lens of structural contradiction, which reframes the observed inconsistencies not as accidental policy incoherence or purely symbolic deception, but as the outcome of institutional frameworks that are legally and economically mandated to pursue mutually exclusive goals. Turkish climate policy appears to construct a multi-layered public narrative of climate responsibility that often seems at odds with its own internal policy logic and real-world implementation. Functionally, this framing aligns with the expectations of international partners and attracts green finance, thereby managing domestic public opinion without requiring the politically and economically challenging structural changes necessary for genuine decarbonization.

This critical examination is particularly timely and essential, as Turkey is going to co-host the COP31 climate summit alongside Australia in 2026. After laying out the conceptual framework, my analysis proceeds to examine Turkish climate policy in three parts. First, it deconstructs Turkey's nationally determined contributions (NDCs), examining the baseline assumptions that create an illusion of ambition. Second, it analyses the country's paradoxical energy policy, which promotes renewables while aggressively expanding its fossil fuel base. Third, it examines Turkey's strategic, yet contradictory, positioning in international climate negotiations.

2. Conceptual framework: (Re)Naming the implementation gap

A substantial body of scholarship has developed various paradigms to explain the divergence between environmental rhetoric and state action. To accurately diagnose the nature of the implementation gap in Turkish climate policy, it is necessary to distinguish what I mean by structural contradiction from related, yet distinct, concepts such as discourses of climate delay, performative governance, policy incoherence, window dressing, and sustainability spectacles.

According to Stevenson (2021), there is a profound disconnect between rhetoric and reality, which highlights a deficit of ecological integrity in climate governance. And as the scientific consensus has become more and more undeniable, the primary obstacle has shifted from outright denialism to more subtle forms of obstruction. The public discourse is now saturated with arguments that accept the reality of climate change but justify postponing meaningful action, termed as 'discourses of climate delay' (Lamb *et al* 2020).

As Stevenson (2021) argues, the very architecture of global climate governance, particularly under the Paris Agreement, creates fertile ground for such inconsistencies where inadequate policies that repackage failed approaches are celebrated as major breakthroughs, thereby conferring legitimacy on the status quo (Allan 2019). The system relies on voluntary, self-determined national pledges (NDCs) within a framework that lacks strong, centralized enforcement mechanisms. This structure encourages a form of performative governance, characterized by the theatrical deployment of language, symbols, and gestures designed to foster an impression of effective governance before a citizen or international audience (Ding 2020), where countries are incentivized to make ambitious public announcements to secure diplomatic legitimacy, calm down climate activists, and (in the case of developing countries) attract green finance.

As Bridgeman and Sandrik (2008) explore in the context of legal and political rhetoric, certain types of promises are made while the promisor simultaneously creates structural loopholes or reserves the implicit option not to perform. The promise is fundamentally insincere from the start due to a lack of genuine commitment, serving instead as a performative tool. In cultural and public policy, such performative narratives are often deployed to manage public perception rather than to reflect operational realities (Belfiore 2009). The act of pledging with NDCs becomes a goal in itself, detached from the politically costly reality of implementation. While this rhetoric is designed to signal virtue, it can eventually lead to policy incoherence if untethered from concrete, immediate, and internally consistent policy action (Stevenson 2021).

Such policy incoherence occurs when objectives and strategies of different policy domains misalign, undermining a state's overarching goals. This occurs when fragmented bureaucracies and siloed departments pursue narrow sectoral mandates without cross-governmental coordination (Cejudo and Michel 2017, Cairney 2025). In the context of climate policy, this manifests when environmental agencies target emission reductions while energy or transportation ministries independently incentivize fossil fuel consumption (May *et al* 2006, Cejudo and Michel 2017). Such framing often implies an accidental or capacity-constrained coordination failure and typically frames the state as a fragmented entity struggling with administrative complexity (Cejudo and Michel 2017).

While elements of policy incoherence, performative governance, and delay discourses are observable in Turkey, none fully capture the structural depth of the country's climate policy dynamics. I put forward the term structural contradiction, advancing these theories by describing a state where institutions possess substantial bureaucratic capacity, yet actively codify and heavily fund mutually exclusive mandates within their core legal and economic frameworks. Here, the divergence of policy and implementation is not an accident of uncoordinated bureaucrats. The state deploys significant financial resources

to maintain and expand domestic carbon-intensive infrastructure, while simultaneously making new laws and regulations to integrate the country into low-carbon global financial architectures.

Here, the concept (while inclusive) goes beyond a mismatch between discourse and practice, which is a rather global phenomenon. For instance, Russian climate policy has historically been characterized as window dressing (Kokorin and Korppoo 2013, Javeline *et al* 2024). Russia's deep structural reliance on hydrocarbon exports shapes a discourse that minimizes climate threats and emphasizes the potential benefits of global warming, such as expanded agricultural yields, reduced heating costs, and increased access to Arctic shipping routes (Javeline *et al* 2024). Other hydrocarbon-rich states in the Gulf often deploy what may be called green or sustainability spectacles (Koch 2023). These are highly visible, hypermodern renewable energy mega-projects and sustainable city initiatives designed by international architectural firms (Ouis 2002, Koch 2023). These projects project forward-looking modernization and diversify sovereign wealth by attracting international green investment. However, they are funded by massive fossil fuel revenues. The underlying economic foundation remains fundamentally tied to extraction and export. The green spectacle is less a structural contradiction and more a strategy of economic diversification that avoids threatening the state's primary revenue source.

Unlike Russia and the Gulf, Turkey lacks vast exportable hydrocarbons; instead, it suffers an energy trade deficit, relying heavily on oil and gas imports (Özkaynak *et al* 2020, Alparslan 2026). Consequently, Turkey cannot rely on fossil fuel exports as a geopolitical shield or an infinite source of state revenue. Furthermore, Turkey is deeply integrated into Western economic structures, particularly the European Union, which serves as the destination for nearly half of its total exports (Şahin *et al* 2021, Acar *et al* 2022). This integration subjects Turkey to external regulatory pressures that fundamentally alter the cost-benefit analysis of carbon-intensive production in ways Russia and the Gulf states do not experience (Acar *et al* 2022).

Therefore, Turkey's structural contradiction arises from a different driver. The state faces an urgent imperative to signal compliance with international climate norms and decarbonize its export industries to prevent catastrophic economic losses from European carbon tariffs. Simultaneously, it faces domestic pressure to exploit local fossil fuels (such as low-grade lignite coal) in a quest to reduce its high import dependency (Şahin *et al* 2021, MENR 2024). The resulting policy landscape is not a theatre of denial, nor a fossil fuel funded spectacle, but a pursuit of incompatible ends.

As a major emerging economy, an OECD and G20 member, Turkey's climate actions carry significant weight. Officially, the country has embraced the climate challenge, ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2021 and declaring an ambitious long-term goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2053. The official documents speak the language of sustainable development and green transition, albeit always with a caveat for 'special circumstances' or a right to development. For instance, the declaration made upon the ratification of Paris Agreement insists the agreement must not 'prejudice her right to economic and social development'.[2]

This official rhetoric does not reflect the deep and persistent gap between proclaimed ambition and the reality of its domestic policy landscape. At the international level, Turkey has historically cultivated a position of 'precious loneliness' (Cerit Mazlum 2017), leveraging a narrative of 'special circumstances' to minimize its responsibilities. As Türkeş (2017) and Turhan *et al* (2016) detail, this diplomatic posture was initially rooted in a plausible claim of being a developing nation. Over time, however, as Turkey's economy grew, this argument transformed into a strategic narrative maintained to avoid binding commitments and secure favourable negotiation positions.

Domestically, this performance manifests as a process of depoliticization (Yazar *et al* 2023). The state's climate action often manifests through ad hoc coalitions with industries and directing local governments to seek external funding for climate projects. This creates an appearance of progress and engagement that exceeds the changes achieved in practice and serves to stabilize the existing political-economic order, which is fundamentally reliant on fossil fuels. This results in a contradiction where there is a public-facing willingness to align with global climate goals, and a domestic reality of continued investment in coal, a deepening carbon lock-in (Turhan 2017).

Underpinning this entire structure is a strong commitment to a particular model of state-led, carbon-intensive developmentalism (Turhan 2016, Aydın 2019, Özkaynak *et al* 2020). Climate policy is not a standalone priority but is consistently subordinated to, and instrumentalized for, economic growth objectives. The language of sustainability and green transition is adopted, but it is hollowed out, applied to policies and projects that sustain the very fossil fuel dependency they are meant to address. The subsequent analysis examines the resulting policy incoherences, delay discourses, and more importantly structural contradictions by tracing how they are exemplified in the state's recent legislation and in official plans and discourses.

[2] See the full declaration at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-7-d&chapter=27&clang=_en

3. Manifestations of structural contradictions in Turkish climate policy

3.1. Contradictions in NDCs

NDCs are the cornerstone of the Paris Agreement, representing each country's self-defined commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. They are the primary vehicle through which the global community can assess collective progress. An effective NDC typically establishes absolute emission reduction targets based on verifiable historical baselines, thereby providing a clear trajectory for decarbonization. In contrast, the design of Turkey's NDCs accommodates significant, sustained emissions growth under the administrative guise of ambitious percentage reductions.

First of all, the central element of Turkey's NDC is its emissions reduction target, which is framed as a percentage reduction from a projected 'business-as-usual' (BAU) scenario. Turkey's initial NDC, submitted in 2015, pledged a 21% reduction from a BAU scenario by 2030 (Republic of Türkiye 2015). Its updated 2022 NDC increased this target to a 41% reduction from the same BAU scenario (Republic of Türkiye 2025b). On the surface, nearly doubling the percentage target appears to be a significant enhancement of ambition. However, the mathematical foundation of this 41% reduction relies on an inflated baseline.

The official BAU projection, utilizing a historical base year of 2012, estimated that Turkey's emissions would reach 1175 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent (MtCO2e) by 2030 (Republic of Türkiye 2015). This projection assumed an unprecedented and sustained exponential increase in carbon-intensive activities that independent climate analysts and macroeconomic modelers have characterized as highly improbable, given both historical emission trends and current economic growth constraints (Climate Action Tracker 2025).

Applying the 41% reduction to this inflated baseline of 1175 MtCO2e yields a 2030 target of approximately 693 MtCO2e. To contextualize this figure, empirical data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) indicates that national emissions in 2024 were 584.5 MtCO2e (TURKSTAT 2026). Consequently, the pledged 41% 'reduction' actually functions as a policy permission slip that allows national emissions to increase by nearly 20% over 2024 levels by the end of the decade. Here, the contradiction is that the use of a highly inflated BAU baseline produces an ambitious sounding number (41% reduction) that accommodates a domestic policy of continued emissions growth while projecting an image of international climate action.

Second contradiction lies in long-term goals. In 2021, on the eve of the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, Turkey made an announcement that it would target net-zero emissions by 2053. This was a significant move, aligning Turkey with a growing cohort of nations committing to long-term decarbonization. The declaration was instrumental in helping Turkey secure access to billions of dollars in international green finance deals (Anadolu Agency 2021).

However, there is a temporal disconnect between the country's official long-term targets and the pathways described in the NDC documents. The updated NDC, submitted a year after the net-zero pledge, instead of charting a course toward deep decarbonization, allows for a significant rise in emissions through 2030 and states that emissions will 'peak' by 2038 at the latest (Republic of Türkiye 2025b). There are two incompatible official timelines. One that legally allows continuous emissions growth for another 14 years, and another that requires an impossibly rapid 15 year descent to net-zero by 2053. This represents a structural contradiction, where the long-term target can be read as performing a diplomatic function of projecting ambition and securing finance, while the 2038 peak shields the existing domestic fossil fuel economy from immediate regulatory or economic constraints. Furthermore, these timelines are also incompatible with a 2053 net-zero goal. Credible net-zero pathways, as outlined by the IPCC, require steep and immediate emissions cuts, not an increase for the next decade followed by a slow peak (Hoegh-Guldberg *et al* 2018).

3.2. Contradictions in the energy policy

The most tangible and highly controversial manifestation of structural contradictions occurs within Turkey's national energy infrastructure. The country is executing a simultaneous expansion of both renewable energy and coal generation, while also increasing gas explorations efforts in the Black Sea (Dinçer and Ezan 2021). Turkey's installed renewable capacity has indeed grown significantly, and governmental documents and ministerial speeches are filled with impressive statistics about the growth of solar, wind, and geothermal power (Turhan and Aydın 2024). However, the country's energy policy is not a transition *from* fossil fuels *to* renewables, but rather an *all-of-the-above* expansion of both (Turhan and Aydın 2024). This dual-track strategy is a form of contradiction that embodies the state's willingness to hold and promote mutually exclusive positions.

On one track, Turkey's efforts in deploying renewable energy are substantial and materially real. Over the past decade, the country has successfully utilized state mechanisms to heavily incentivize renewable capacity, primarily through the renewable energy resources support mechanism (YEKDEM), which provides feed-in tariffs, and the renewable energy resource areas (YEKA) competitive bidding process (MENR 2024). Between 2011 and 2023, the state facilitated the commissioning of an average of 3.4 GW of new renewable capacity annually (TSKB 2026).

Despite this unprecedented renewable growth, the state continues to actively plan, permit, and subsidize the expansion of fossil fuels on a parallel track. As of 2025, fossil fuels still met 58.1% of Turkey's total electricity supply, with coal accounting for 32.6% of electricity generation (TSKB 2026). While many OECD nations have committed to firm coal phase-out schedules in alignment with the Paris Agreement, the Turkish government has explicitly resisted adopting such timelines, prioritizing maximum utilization of domestic lignite reserves, including major expansions at facilities like Afşin-Elbistan (Global Energy Monitor 2026). The MENR's national energy plan indicates that overall coal capacity is expected to be maintained or increased, projecting additions of 3.2 GW of coal capacity by 2035 (Global Energy Monitor 2026). Furthermore, the state sustains existing, often inefficient lignite and imported coal plants through structural financial mechanisms. The Turkish Electricity Transmission Corporation (TEİAŞ) administers capacity mechanism payments that essentially guarantee baseline revenue to fossil fuel power plants until 2029 (Alparslan 2026), alongside other subsidies like purchase guarantees and subsidized loans from state-owned banks (Acar *et al* 2018, Aydın 2019).

The government justifies this policy with the rhetoric of energy security and the utilization of domestic resources, as Turkey has significant lignite reserves (Özkaynak *et al* 2020). The climate implications are consistently downplayed or framed as a problem to be solved in the distant future with unproven technologies. There is a clear contradiction in advertising a 2053 net-zero target while simultaneously using state funds to lock in carbon-intensive infrastructure intended to operate for the next 40–50 years. Furthermore, the rhetoric regarding energy security is itself contradictory. The global energy market is rapidly shifting away from coal, which is increasingly uncompetitive against renewables (IEA 2024). Locking the Turkish economy into a declining, polluting industry is a precarious long-term strategy, not a secure one. The domestic resources argument ignores the immense domestic potential for solar and wind, which are now often cheaper than new coal. The policy is not driven by an assessment of energy security, but by entrenched political and commercial interests in the coal sector (Özkaynak *et al* 2020).

This double expansion policy is, in essence, a structural contradiction. The state is structurally directing massive capital toward green energy to satisfy future environmental demands and attract foreign investment, while simultaneously deploying regulatory power and public funds to lock in decades of carbon-intensive infrastructure, which inherently contradicts the long-term decarbonization trajectory mandated by the 2053 net-zero target.

3.3. Contradictions in international climate diplomacy

Turkey's diplomatic history within the UNFCCC framework reveals a long-standing effort to craft a unique identity that maximizes its perceived entitlements while minimizing its obligations, a strategy often resulting in observable contradictions.

Firstly, for years, Turkey's primary diplomatic objective was to be removed from the list of Annex I (developed) countries under the UNFCCC, seeking recognition as a developing country with 'special circumstances.' The argument rested on the premise that its historical emissions and per capita income were lower than those of other Annex I parties (Turhan *et al* 2016, Cerit Mazlum 2017). While this position had historical merit in the early 1990s, it became increasingly anomalous as Turkey's economy grew into the global top 20 (World Bank 2022). The insistence on special circumstances effectively functioned to defer binding mitigation targets, maintaining the benefits of OECD integration while seeking the leniency afforded to developing nations.

The second contradiction lies in the ratification of Paris Agreement being used as a bargaining chip. Turkey was one of the last major economies to ratify the Paris Agreement, doing so only in late 2021. For six years after the Paris Agreement, it held out, using its ratification as a bargaining chip to secure access to climate finance. Immediately upon ratification, Turkey announced a memorandum of understanding with Germany, France, the World Bank, and others for $3.2 billion in financing to support its green transition (Anadolu Agency 2021).

This sequence of events suggests a highly pragmatic approach to climate commitment. The timing of the ratification and the accompanying net-zero pledge aligned closely with the unlocking of international funds. This sequence suggests that financial incentives were a major catalyst for the policy shift. The contradiction lies in presenting this move as a profound, value-driven commitment to global climate action, while one of the principal motives was financial. The subsequent failure to align domestic policy with the 2053 net-zero target (as detailed in previous sections) suggests that the *declaration itself* was the key deliverable, not the actual work of decarbonization.

The last contradiction lies in how, at COP28, Turkey has constructed a narrative of climate justice that is both selective and self-serving. The official position frames justice almost exclusively as a matter of international finance, demanding funds from developed nations based on claims of low historical responsibility and high vulnerability (Esmiyor Podcast 2023). This discourse positions Turkey as a victim in need of financial support and of access to the newly established loss and damage fund, which signals a stance designed to maximize financial inflows.

However, a structural tension emerges when this international posture is put next to the domestic energy practices. While advocating for justice globally, domestic policies continue to facilitate coal expansion in the pursuit of energy security. The case of the Akbelen Forest, where local communities are displaced and local ecosystems and agricultural lands have been cleared to expand lignite mining operations, is a good example (Fide 2024). The continued prioritization of a carbon-intensive domestic development model over local environmental preservation stands in contrast to the state's international framing as a defender of climate vulnerability.

4. Conclusion

Analysing Turkish climate policy reveals a consistent and deeply troubling pattern of structural contradictions. Unlike simple policy incoherence resulting from fragmented bureaucracies acting accidentally at cross-purposes, or mere performative governance aimed at pacifying public scrutiny through superficial symbols, the Turkish state systematically designs, mandates, and heavily funds divergent pathways. The institutional framework simultaneously embraces the international architecture of climate mitigation and the continued expansion of a high-carbon developmental model.

This is not to say that there are no sincere efforts within Turkey; the growth in renewable energy is materially real, and civil society works diligently for a sustainable future. While the massive integration of solar and wind energy provides a vital foundation for future decarbonization, the concurrent reliance on coal guarantees a dangerous carbon lock-in. These structurally opposed policy tracks function in a way that secures the diplomatic and financial benefits of being perceived as a climate-conscious nation while largely bypassing the politically difficult and economically disruptive structural transformations that genuine climate action requires.

The consequences of these contradictions are severe. They erode public trust. They misdirect capital, channelling green finance into an ecosystem that fails to deliver structural emissions reductions. Most dangerously, this incoherence delays meaningful action, locking the country into high-carbon infrastructure and ensuring that the inevitable economic transition will be significantly more abrupt, painful, and costly. On a global scale, when a major G20 economy submits contradictory and inflated NDCs, it lowers the bar for international compliance and weakens the collective peer pressure essential for the Paris Agreement's success. Moving beyond these contradictions requires a fundamental shift from performative statecraft to genuine accountability, demanding that international partners and civil society look past the impressive-sounding headlines to scrutinize the deep inconsistencies beneath.

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Author contribution

Cem İskender Aydın 0000-0002-8071-8789
Conceptualization (lead), Investigation (lead), Writing – original draft (lead), Writing – review & editing (lead)

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