



THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN TURKEY

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Introduction

On December 31st, 2019, China officially reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) that it had detected an unknown type of pneumonia in Hubei Province. By early January, the WHO had named this new disease COVID-19 and declared a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern'. As COVID-19 proliferated outside of China, the WHO announced on March 11th, 2020 that the disease had become a pandemic.¹

Early efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 resulted in a variety of measures: On January 23rd, China imposed a lockdown in Hubei Province and restricted the use of public transportation. Such regulations received widespread criticism from various international organizations over their consequences for human rights and freedoms, particularly in non-democratic countries. Yet, as COVID-19 spread to different states, the practice of lockdown as a primary form of quarantine became widely used in nations including Italy, France, and Germany. By mid-March 2020, societal lockdown was a nearly global phenomenon. To date, at either the local or national level, nearly 180 countries have enacted some degree of a mandated lockdown, which has resulted in the closure of education systems and the restriction of most business activities. Lockdowns, quarantines, and other preventative measures have had far reaching impact on the political and economic wellbeing of countries around the world, including Turkey. This report analyzes the Turkish government's response to COVID-19 through political, economic, and sociopolitical lenses, in attempt to showcase the far-reaching and potentially long-term consequences of the virus on the nation's future.

The first section of the report focuses on COVID-19 as a political phenomenon: To some observers, the implementation of curfews, quarantines, and stay-at-home orders are not simply tools to combat the spread of the pandemic: restrictions over the right to protest, closure of national and local parliaments, tightening of social media rules, and increase of executive orders have all been

regarded as examples of "power grabs" by several global leaders.² While some policies that curbed liberties have a legitimate basis in medical advice, others, especially under some authoritarian regimes, have been received as a move towards power consolidation and a tool to exploit political freedoms.³

Turkey offers a particularly insightful example of this situation. On March 11th, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca reported the country's first positive COVID-19 case; a day later, President Erdoğan announced countrywide regulations to combat the spread of the disease.⁴ As cases continued to climb, however, the government enacted additional restrictions. Following the tightening of regulations at the end of March, several civil society organizations (CSOs), professional organizations, and media agencies began to express concern over the transparency of the lockdown process. In response, the government continued to combat the spread of COVID-19 while also working to limit opposition municipalities and restrain dissent. By investigating the policies issued by the Presidency and his supporting circles this report analyzes the implications of the COVID-19 response within the overarching Turkish political sphere. This analysis focuses on actors in the major political parties and local municipalities, as well as representatives of civil society and media.

The first section of the report is structured as follows: After the introduction, the methodology of the political chapter is outlined. Within this methodology, the time span, content of the governmental policies, and major political actors are clearly defined. In the third section, we examine the implications of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) or AKP's policies concerning constitutional liberties, local governance, CSOs and professional organizations, and media. In this section, the report relates the impacts of government regulations and presidential decrees on the right to protest, legislative activities, restraints of power in the local municipalities, and disputes among representatives

¹ WHO. (2020, March 12.) WHO announce COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. Retrieved from <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/who-announces-covid-19-outbreak-a-pandemic>

² Roth, K. (2020, April 3). How Authoritarians Are Exploiting the COVID-19 Crisis to Grab Power. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/how-authoritarians-are-exploiting-covid-19-crisis-grab-power>

³ Thorpe, N. (2020, April 17). Coronavirus: Is pandemic being used for power grab in Europe? BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52308002>

⁴ Güler, A. (2020, March 13). Türkiye koronavirüs için etkin önlemler aldı. Anadolu Anjası. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/turkiye-koronavirus-icin-etkin-onlemler-aldi/1765471>

of civil society. The third part of the political section is devoted to the responses of political actors impacted by the AKP government's pandemic-based regulations. In the final section of this chapter, the report offers a conclusion in the form of both short and long-term predictions for the pandemic's impact on Turkish politics.

The second part of the report focuses on the impact of the pandemic on Turkey's economic status. The Turkish economy — already struggling with a volatile currency and high-risk market for borrowing — has been particularly vulnerable to the global financial devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. With international appetite for fiscal risk at a low, pressure on the lira to rebound from its current worrying-level is as high as ever. In response to such circumstances, the government has considered three major economic moves: prevent a massive budget deficit by raising taxes, despite a declining public purchasing power; widen the budget deficit in order to finance stimulus packages through public spending; or create cheap credit options for its citizens. Assessing the situation today, the government and its financial institutions opted for the third strategy and are working to generate affordable credit options for the Turkish public. Thus, the second part of the report explores the governments'

attempts to create credit opportunities, as well as a variety of supplementary measures enacted in the last nine months.

The third section of the report delves into sociopolitical outcomes of the pandemic. This final chapter draws heavily from surveys that have analyzed the Turkish public's reactions to the virus on a month-by-month basis. The sociopolitical study offers a nuanced understanding of the ways in which socioeconomic status, age, gender, and political affiliation have impacted popular understanding of the virus. In assessing levels of public 'concern', the sociopolitical component of the report highlights how the overarching political and economic policies that have been enacted during the pandemic have often produced results starkly different from their intended goals. Moreover, this final section offers the greatest insight into Turkish popular opinion throughout the report, while also situating the status of the country within the context of states around the world. Together, the political, economic, and sociopolitical sections of this report offer a multifaceted analysis of COVID-19's impact in Turkey. All three chapters ultimately paint a worrying picture, particularly in regard to political in-fighting and long-term economic growth.

PART ONE: POLITICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Methodology

This section focuses its findings on the period between March 11th 2020, when the first countrywide COVID-19 precautions were adopted, and August 15th 2020. Despite the lack of official COVID-19 cases prior to March 11th, Turkey had created an initial set of regulations in airports and international borders; it also formed the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board in mid-January. However, the implications of the COVID-19 emergency, at that time, were limited and did not generate a direct or public political reaction. March 11th was selected as the date of initial study because it represents the first marker of politically influential COVID-19-based rules and regulations.

International reports have generally tended to focus on either the daily effects or economic consequences of COVID-19. The fight against COVID-19 has required a wide variety of unprecedented methods, including curfews, stay-at-home orders, and restrictions of social activity. These new regulations have had direct consequences on local, national, and international economies; business and trade at almost every level and industry have been devastated or transformed by the pandemic. This chapter of the report, however, specifically scrutinizes the political impact of COVID-19 in Turkey, focusing on the relationship between the government and opposition actors.

Background

In April of 2017, the results of a national referendum prompted a complete overhaul of Turkey's political system: the parliamentary government that had been in use since the country's inception as a Republic was changed to a presidential-based system. In June of the following year, presidential and general elections were held, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first President of the newly adopted government, having already served for nearly four years as a politically non-affiliated President of parliament. His lack of political affiliation at the time stemmed from a prior law that the role of Head of State could not be assumed by an individual who was formally associated with one of the

This section identifies and elaborates on decisions that have had direct and observable implications over civil society, local governments, political parties, and media. As such, it assesses decisions primarily in regard to their impact on democratic governance. In order to generate a well-rounded perspective, the report considers applications of power at the executive and legislative levels, as well as actions of opposition forces. Prominent examples of this evidence include restrictions over the right to protest, new regulations over fundraising methods for local governments, attempts to further constrain social media, and new rules in regard to professional organizations.

In order to study the political impact of the COVID-19 emergency response in Turkey, the report identifies and focuses on the primary relevant political actors in the nation: the President and his executive government, the political parties that makeup parliament, local governments and municipalities, and professional organizations and CSOs that work on matters of transparency and human rights in relation to the pandemic. In sum, these actors hold most executive and legislative powers, ultimately setting Turkey's modern political agenda.

political parties in parliament. However, with the adoption of the new governmental structure, presidents could maintain their party membership. As the Prime Minister and chair of the AKP from 2003 to 2014, Erdoğan re-joined his party as chairman in May of 2017. Additionally, the new system strengthened the powers of the President, allowing Erdoğan to issue decrees that significantly influenced national legislation.⁵ The structural changes of 2017 and general elections of 2018 solidified Erdoğan as head of state, center of executive power, and chair of the AKP – the party that holds the plurality of seats in parliament.⁶

⁵ In Turkey's presidential system, a vote from the majority of MPs can overrule presidential decrees. The President also cannot decree laws if the parliament has already passed legislation on that particular issue.

⁶ The AKP has 42.6%, or 295 out of 600 seats in parliament.

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Health (Sağlık Bakanlığı) and Ministry of the Interior (İçişleri Bakanlığı) have been primarily responsible for shaping governmental regulations, announcing curfews and stay-at-home orders, and issuing new national policies. The government also formed the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board in a consultative capacity. As such, these ministries — as well as the presidency and AKP — offered a streamlined insight into the domestic political activity in Turkey during the pandemic.⁷

Despite losing its parliamentary majority, the AKP has benefitted from the support of far-right nationalist MHP party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi). With the formation of an alliance between the AKP and MHP in February of 2018, known as the People's Alliance, the MHP declared its direct support for President Erdoğan and worked to sustain a collective parliamentary majority. The People's Alliance successfully carried over into the local elections in March of 2019 and has continued up until today.

From 2002, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) or CHP has represented the main opposition to the AKP government. After the presidential and general elections in June of 2018, the CHP maintained its position as the primary opposition within parliament. In local elections in March of 2019, however, the CHP's mayoral candidates — supported by center-right nationalist İYİ Party and pro-Kurdish leftist HDP — secured victories in İstanbul and Ankara, unseating the AKP-backed candidates that had dominated this post for over 25 years in the process.⁸ These local wins in İstanbul and Ankara, Turkey's two largest cities, meant that the CHP now controlled more than 48% of the population in Turkey in regards to local governance. The AKP, in contrast, held power over about 39% of the

population, making the 2019 local elections a resounding victory for both the CHP and its supporters.⁹ The CHP has also made its own political alliances, joining forces with the center-right nationalist İYİ Party for both the 2018 general and 2019 local elections. Receiving nearly 10% of the vote in 2018, the İYİ Party is now the fifth largest in parliament. Alongside the Nation Alliance — the name given to the CHP-İYİ electoral cooperation — the pro-Kurdish leftist HDP is the second largest opposition party. Receiving nearly 12% of the vote in the 2018 general election, the HDP gained 67 MPs in parliament. The party also secured electoral gains in the local elections of 2019, winning races in 65 municipalities. However, these wins have only translated to present-day representation in 12 of the 65 municipalities; the remaining 53 mayors have been forcibly removed by the Ministry of the Interior or are facing legal charges.¹⁰

During the pandemic, two professional organizations have expressed particularly harsh criticism over the government's COVID-19 policies: the Turkish Medical Association (*Türk Tabipler Birliği*) or TTB, and the Turkish Bar Association (*Türkiye Barolar Birliği*) or TBB have regularly accused the government of being ineffective and lacking transparency. Furthermore, rights-based CSOs have also played a key role in assessing the impact of COVID-19-based regulations on democratic governance. Primary examples of these CSOs include the Human Rights Association (*İnsan Hakları Derneği*) or İHD, Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı*) or TİHV, and Amnesty International Turkey. Lastly, the role of media, particularly social media platforms, must also be mentioned. Through the inclusion of the media as both an actor and impacted party in the political consequences of COVID-19 in Turkey, the latest initiatives and regulations towards press freedom can be explored.

⁷ Reference to President Erdoğan, or the Presidency, in this report, includes the Vice President Fuat Oktay, Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın, and the Communications Director, Fahrettin Altun.

⁸ After the narrow victory of CHP candidate İmamoğlu in İstanbul, President Erdoğan and the AKP demanded a re-run of the elections, citing alleged irregularities in the vote count. Canceling the mayoral elections, Supreme Electoral Council declared a re-run in June. Previously elected as the mayor of İstanbul on the 31st of March, İmamoğlu decisively declared a second victory in the re-run, with more than 54% of the vote.

⁹ Yanatma, S. (2020, April 2). Büyükşehir ve il belediyelerinde Türkiye nüfusunun yarısını CHP yönetecek. Euronews. Retrieved from <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/04/02/buyuksehir-ve-il-belediyelerinde-turkiye-nufusunun-yarisini-chp-yonetecek-31-mart-yerel>

¹⁰ Kamer, H. (2020, May 15). HDP'li 5 belediyeye kayyum: Eş Başkan Mithat Sancar 'Yapılan darbe pratiğidir' dedi. BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52676205>

Political Measures Taken by the AKP Government during the Pandemic

The Turkish government announced its first efforts to combat COVID-19 on March 12th, 2020. From that date onwards, the government's response to the pandemic —and those who either support or criticize it — has become the focal point of the Turkish sociopolitical sphere. In order to accurately assess the government handling of COVID-19, this section is divided into four sub-sections. In the first sub-section, the report illustrates the relationship between pandemic-prompted regulations and the constitutional rights and freedoms defined in the Turkish Constitution. This analysis primarily concentrates on the parliamentary process, actions of political parties, and validity of freedom of assembly within the context of social distancing requirements.

Secondly, the report showcases how pandemic-based rulings have impacted the relationship between the national administration and local municipalities. This section of the report focuses on the opposition-held municipalities of İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir, aiming to highlight a tension between the two actors with respect to political authority. In the third sub-section, COVID-19's effects over civil society are examined: the conflict between the government and professional organizations like TTB and TBB, as well as CSOs are explored in detail. This section also covers the impact of the pandemic on rules and restraints in the media sector.

Constitutional Rights and Freedoms

During the pandemic, three topics have mostly dominated politics in Turkey: the government's handling of COVID-19 and criticism of it, the status of incarcerated people as a high-risk population for COVID-19 and the potential consequences of this reality, and the limitations over the right to protest issued by the national government.

The government's efforts to combat the pandemic have become a predictable epicenter of conflict between the government and opposition. From the first days of the pandemic, opposition parties have highlighted the sluggish response of the government's approach towards COVID-19. Forming its own Coronavirus Committee, the CHP outwardly questioned the government's official data and argued for a more transparent process, citing gaps in the reported

COVID-19 results that included the location, age, and gender of patients. Specifically targeting the Ministry of Health, the CHP, İYİ, and HDP parties adamantly and consistently questioned the COVID-19 data.¹¹⁻¹² Yet, each party had its own set of recommended policy changes: The İYİ Party proposed a total curfew and proclamation of a state of emergency, while the CHP highlighted the shortcomings of the public health sector in regards to medical personnel and equipment compared to other OECD countries.¹³⁻¹⁴ CHP Party Chair Kılıçdaroğlu also expressed his party's desire to increase coordination between the central government and local municipalities.¹⁶ HDP Co-Chair Buldan also announced her party's own response plan, which highlighted governmental transparency, the evacuation of the elderly, sick, and children from prison, and a ban over the dismissal

¹¹ Komite Başkanlığı. (2020, March 13). CHP'en Koronavirüs Komitesi. CHP. Retrieved from <https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chpden-koronavirus-komitesi>

¹² Sözcü. (2020, March 26). CHP'li Gürsel Tekin sordu: Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan ile Sağlık Bakanı'nın elinde farklı veriler mi var? https://www.google.com/search?q=sozcu+paper&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS694US694&oq=sozcu+paper&aqs=chrome..69l57j0l4j69l60l3.3274j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

¹³ Ağbaba, Veli. (2020, March 29). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/veliagbaba/status/1244281618338021376?s=20>

¹⁴ Duvar. (2020, March 15). İYİ Parti'den 'sokağa çıkma yasağı' çağrısı. Duvar. Retrieved from <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/politika/2020/03/15/iyi-partiden-sokaga-cikma-yasagi-cagrisi/>

¹⁵ Licalı, M. (2020, March 17). CHP'den salgın raporu: Doktor ve hemşire sayısı yetersiz. Hurriyet. Retrieved from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/chpden-salgin-raporu-doktor-ve-hemsire-sayisi-yetersiz-1727651>

¹⁶ BirGün. (2020, March 23). Kılıçdaroğlu, 13 maddelik koronavirüs önlem paketini açıkladı. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/kilicdaroglu-13-maddelik-koronavirus-onlem-paketini-acikladi-292847>

of private firms.¹⁷ Broadly denouncing these proposals, President Erdoğan and the AKP issued its “Evde Kal” (Stay at Home) order to the public in an effort to curb the number of cases.¹⁸ Directly challenging the President’s calls and accusing the government of inaction, Minister Kılıçdaroğlu counter-declared the CHP’s “Evde Tut” (Keep at Home) policy, specifically calling for mandated-curfews.¹⁹

In late March, President Erdoğan announced a “Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası” (National Solidarity Campaign) entitled “Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem” (We Suffice for Ourselves Turkey). Erdoğan kicked off this new effort by donating the equivalent of 7-months of his salary and creating public bank accounts to collect donations from citizens.²⁰ While the AKP and MHP welcomed the campaign, opposition figures in the CHP and HDP, in particular, criticized the move as a further sign of inaction that asked the public to contribute their own funds to combat the virus.²¹ The national campaign was also immediately compared to donation campaigns that had recently been launched in local municipalities like İstanbul and Ankara. Opposition parties cautioned this comparison, arguing that unlike the central government, local municipalities did not possess the economic and administrative institutions capable of generating widespread COVID-19 relief. Still, pro-government commentators insisted that Erdoğan’s campaign would foster solidarity within the nation and better address the needs of citizens.

The İstanbul and Ankara municipalities’ specific attempts to organize financial and social help, the AKP argued, would be ineffective. In a further development, opposition leaders argued that the AKP’s campaign disproportionately burdened workers and the less fortunate, citing evidence that suggested people had been forced to donate to the campaign.²² Communications Director Fahrettin Altun, however, rejected such claims as misinformation and reiterated the voluntary character of the national effort.²³

In early April, İYİ Party leader Akşener accused President Erdoğan of forcing the head scientist of Turkey’s Scientific Board to resign after he recommended issuing a curfew to combat the pandemic.²⁴ On the same day, the Ministry of Interior issued a mandatory two-day curfew for 31 cities that would begin just two hours after the announcement. These unexpected regulations sparked a public panic: people flocked to grocery stores and markets, walked through the streets without masks, and gathered in large crowds. The CHP, HDP, and İYİ Party sharply criticized the government for this indecision; Chairwoman Meral Akşener alleged that the latest curfew was adopted without the Scientific Board’s consent, and that Erdoğan himself was directly responsible for the last-minute decision.²⁵⁻²⁶ After mounting criticism, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu announced his resignation on Twitter, accepting full responsibility for the latest regulations and panic.²⁷ However, the Office of

¹⁷ Gazete Karıncı. (2020, March 18). HDP’den hükümete sağlık, hukuk ve ekonomi alanlarında ‘Corona’ çağrısı. Gazete Karıncı. Retrieved from <https://gazetekarınca.com/2020/03/hdpden-hukumete-saglik-hukuk-ve-ekonomi-alanlarinda-corona-cagrisi/>

¹⁸ T24. (2020, March 22). Erdoğan’dan vatandaşlara sesli mesaj; “Evde kal” çağrısı yaptı. T24. Retrieved from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-dan-vatandaslara-sesli-mesaj-evde-kal-cagrisi-yapti,867999>

¹⁹ T24. (2020, March 28). Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: Yaygın ve etkin bir sokağa çıkma yasağı ile karantina ihtiyacı olduğu açıktır. T24. Retrieved from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/kemal-kilicdaroglu-yaygin-ve-etkin-bir-sokaga-cikma-yasagi-ve-karantina-ihtiyaci-oldugu-aciktir,869327>

²⁰ Sputnik. (2020, March 30). Erdoğan, ‘Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası’nı duyurdu: 7 aylık maaşımı başışlayarak açıyorum. Sputnik. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200331103822/https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/202003301041721380-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-aciklama-yapiyor/>

²¹ Diken. (2020, March 30). ‘Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası’na destek de var eleştiri de. Diken. Retrieved from <http://www.diken.com.tr/milli-dayanisma-kampanyasina-destek-de-var-elistiri-de/>

²² Cumhuriyet. (2020, March 31). Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası işçilere zorunlu kıldı. Cumhuriyet. Retrieved from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/milli-dayanisma-kampanyasi-iscilere-zorunlu-kilindi-1730537>

²³ NTV. (2020, April 1). Fahrettin Altun’dan Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası için açıklama. NTV. Retrieved from <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/fahrettin-altundan-milli-dayanisma-kampanyasi-icin-aciklama,MJ-YvKLFNkaBNkkKlhb19Q>

²⁴ T24. (2020, April 10). Meral Akşener: Bilim Kurulu tam karantina istedi, Erdoğan reddetti. T24. Retrieved from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/meral-aksener-bilim-kurulu-tam-karantina-istedi-erdogan-reddetti,871842>

²⁵ Independent. (2020, April 11). Akşener ve Karamollaoğlu’ndan sokağa çıkma yasağına saat tepkisi: Salgınla mücadele zaafa uğratılmıştır. Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.indyurk.com/node/161696/haber/aksener-ve-karamollaoğlu-ndan-sokaga-cikma-yasagina-saat-tepkisi-salginla-mucadele>

²⁶ Akşener, M. (2020, April 12.) Twitter. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/meral_aksener/status/1249396962509705217?s=20

²⁷ Sayin, A. (2020, April 13). Süleyman Soylu istifa etti, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan kabul etmedi. BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52265897>

Communications immediately issued a counter-statement, informing the public that President Erdoğan had not accepted Soyulu's resignation, and that Soyulu would maintain his position as minister.²⁸ Opposition circles expressed their objections, and cited these statements as proof of a cabinet instability and disorganization that symbolized the government's COVID-19 pandemic response.

Evidence of government-opposition conflict is well documented: HDP MPs regularly used Parliamentary Questions to scrutinize the Health Ministry's COVID-19 policies. They questioned why the WHO's medical codes were not utilized within Turkey, and why Diyarbakır had developed the second-fastest growth rate of infection in the world despite the lack of official government statistics on the city.²⁹ In early May, in direct contradiction of the opposition parties' suggestions, the government decided to open shopping malls, and begin the process of societal normalization. These efforts represented, in the eyes of the opposition, yet another prioritization of business over public health.³⁰

Education has been another hotspot of debate in regard to pandemic policy.³¹ While national high school and university entrance exams were originally scheduled for June, some students and educators feared cancellation or indefinite postponement. Others were primarily concerned with the notable lack of medical care in schools to prevent the transmission of the virus during these exams. Still, some argued that the scheduling of these exams in June was directly related to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which allegedly wanted students to sit these exams in June

so that they and their families could travel as planned and participate in the previously thriving tourism industry. Both high school and university entrance exams were, in fact, held during June at a time when daily rates of infections were both significant and continuously rising. Opposition parties once again vocalized their criticism over the government's handling of the situation, scrutinizing the lack of virus-conscious planning in exam rooms and large crowds at schools.

In late June, external research claimed that the tests used in Turkey reflected a 40% accuracy rate, with many COVID-19-infected patients still generating negative results.³² Following this report, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca accused the head of Turkey's testing laboratory of erroneously reporting COVID-19 tests. As the Health Ministry officially denounced such claims, MPs from CHP and İYİ Party suggested that these reports were, in fact, valid, and that the Health Ministry had once again failed to accurately disclose COVID-19 information.³³⁻³⁴

The conditions of incarcerated individuals and debate around amnesty has also been a center of political discussion from the moment COVID-19 crossed Turkish borders. CHP Minister Turan Aydoğan was quick to suggest the release of incarcerated children, and HDP MP Gergerlioğlu highlighted the overall severe conditions of prisons and proposed a general amnesty for all prisoners.³⁵ While AKP spokespersons also suggested some form of amnesty, and discussed their intention to cooperate with the MHP, they refused to disclose the details of the judicial package. When the AKP's amnesty proposal was finally released, HDP MPs

²⁸ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Başkanlığı. (2020, April 12). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/iletisim/status/1249439900174372869?s=20>

²⁹ Bir Gün. (2020, June 3). Diyarbakır vaka artış hızında Türkiye genelinde 2'inci sırada mı? Bir Gün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/diyarbakir-vaka-artis-hizinda-turkiye-genelinde-2-inci-sirada-mi-303260>

³⁰ TV100. (2020, May 11). CHP'den o karara tepki: Park, bahçe kapalıyken AVM'ler neden açılıyor? TV100. Retrieved from <https://www.tv100.com/chpden-o-karara-tepki-park-bahce-kapaliyken-avmler-neden-aciliyor-haber-495639>

³¹ Kaya, Y. (2020, June 24). CHP Genel Başkan Yardımcısı Yıldırım Kaya: "Tedbirler Alınamıyorsa YKS'yi Erteleyin". CHP. Retrieved from <https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-genel-baskan-yardimcisi-yildirim-kaya-tedbirler-alinamiyorsa-yksyi-erteleyin>

³² A3 Haber. (2020, June 21). Koronavirüsle ilgili önemli iddia: 'Bakanlık tek şirketle çalışıyor, şirketin testlerinin doğruluk oranı yüzde 40'. A3 Haber. Retrieved from <https://www.a3haber.com/2020/07/21/koronaviruse-iligili-onemli-iddia-bakanlik-tek-sirketle-calisiyor-sirketin-testlerinin-dogruluk-orani-yuzde-40/>

³³ Ulu, G. (2020, April 11). İYİ Parti'li Çıray' dan şok iddia: Test kiti güvenilir değil. Sözcü. Retrieved from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/iyi-partili-ciraydan-sok-iddia-test-kiti-guvenilir-degil-5741472/>

³⁴ Sözcü. (2020, June 23.) Sağlık Bakanlığı'ndan 'tani kiti' iddialarına yanıt. Sözcü. Retrieved from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/saglik/son-dakika-saglik-bakanligindan-tani-kiti-iddialarina-yanit-5948086/>

³⁵ Demokrat Haber. (2020, March 17). Gergerlioğlu: Cezaevlerinde tahliyelerin başlaması gerekiyor. Demokrat Haber. Retrieved from <https://www.demokrathaber.org/siyaset/gergerlioglu-cezaevlerinde-tahliyelerin-baslami-gerekiyor-h125956.html>

quickly declared that they would not support the package as it did not cover political prisoners and violated the equality principle granted under the constitution.³⁶

The amnesty draft law, however, was accepted into parliament's Justice Commission with the support of the AKP and MHP. The HDP and CHP further criticized the amnesty regulation for failing to provide amnesty to oppositional and political prisoners, while including prisoners who were convicted of sexual assault and rape.³⁷ However, the AKP argued that the draft proposal would not include provisions of amnesty for perpetrators of sexual assault and child abuse.³⁸ After the draft law passed through the Commission, HDP MPs organized a protest in parliament against the draft.³⁹ Despite the opposition's effort, the first ten articles of the amnesty package were passed in parliament on April 10th.⁴⁰ Prominent rights-based CSOs and bar associations also protested the law, citing the refusal to release political

prisoners while offering amnesty to over 90,000 people.⁴¹⁻⁴²⁻⁴³ President Erdoğan, in contrast, praised the new law in a video call on April 14th, citing it as a sign of the sensitivity of the Turkish nation.⁴⁴ The following day, prisons began to release people. On April 21st, the CHP announced that they would seek to overturn the legislation on the grounds that it violated the equality principle of the constitution.⁴⁵ On June 12th, the CHP applied to the Constitutional Court to annul the amnesty law.⁴⁶ On June 25th, the Constitutional Court announced that it would examine the merits of the case.⁴⁷ However, the Constitutional Court ultimately rejected the CHP's first application to repeal the law due to the fact that the party's second application was still pending.⁴⁸ In sum, the debates over amnesty during the COVID-19 pandemic chiefly intensified the political polarization in the government, and remain a topic that will shape political affiliations in the future.

³⁶ Gazete Karıncı. (2020, March 24). HDP'li Çepni: Siyasi tutukluları kapsamayan düzenlemeyi kabul etmeyeceğiz. Gazete Karıncı. Retrieved from <https://gazetekarinca.com/2020/03/hdpli-cepni-siyasi-tutuklulari-kapsamayan-duzenlemeyi-kabul-etmeyecegiz/>

³⁷ Uludağ, A. (2020, April 7). Tecavüzcüye kısmi af. Cumhuriyet. Retrieved from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/tecavuzcuye-kismi-af-1731622>.

³⁸ Teyit. (2020). Çocuk istismarından hükümlü bulunanlara af geldiği iddiası. Teyit. Retrieved from <https://teyit.org/cocuk-istismarindan-hukumlu-bulunanlara-af-geldigi-iddiasi>

³⁹ Tele 1. (2020, April 8). HDP'li vekiller Meclis'te yürüyüş yaptı: İnfazda eşitlik istiyoruz. Tele 1. Retrieved from <https://tele1.com.tr/hdpli-vekiler-mecliste-yuruyus-yapti-infazda-esitlik-istiyoruz-149561/>

⁴⁰ TRT Haber. (2020, April 10). İnfaz düzenlemesinin ilk 10 maddesi kabul edildi. TRT Haber. Retrieved from <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/infaz-duzenlemesinin-ilk-10-maddesi-kabul-edildi-474857.html>

⁴¹ BİA Haber Merkezi. (2020, April 13). İnfaz Düzenlemesinin İkinci Bölümü TBMM Genel Kurulunda Kabul Edildi. Bianet. Retrieved from <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/hukuk/222840-infaz-duzenlemesinin-ikinci-bolumu-tbmm-genel-kurulunda-kabul-edildi>

⁴² İzmir Barosu. (2020, April 14). Twitter. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/izmir_barosu/status/1249828792840925184?s=20

⁴³ Gergerlioğlu, Ö. (2020, April 14). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/gergerliogluof/status/1249810081652396037?s=20>

⁴⁴ Sabah. (2020, April 14). Başkan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'dan infaz yasası açıklaması! Sabah. Retrieved from <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2020/04/14/son-dakika-baskan-recep-tayyip-erdogandan-infaz-yasasi-aciklamasi>

⁴⁵ CNN Türk. (2020, April 22). Son dakika...CHP infaz düzenlemesini AYM'ye taşıdı. CNN Türk. Retrieved from <https://www.cnntrk.com/turkiye/son-dakika-chp-infaz-duzenlemesini-aymye-tasidi>

⁴⁶ Duvar English. (2020, June 11). CHP files second appeal with Constitutional Court for annulment of prisoner release law. Duvar English. Retrieved from <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/06/11/main-opposition-chp-applies-to-constitutional-court-for-annulment-of-prisoner-release-law/>

⁴⁷ BirGün. (2020, June 25). AYM, CHP'nin Af Yasası başvurusunu esastan görüşmeye karar verdi. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/aym-chp-nin-af-yasasi-basvurusunu-esastan-gorusmeye-karar-verdi-305961>

⁴⁸ BirGün. (2020, June 25). AYM, CHP'nin Af Yasası başvurusunu esastan görüşmeye karar verdi. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/aym-chp-nin-af-yasasi-basvurusunu-esastan-gorusmeye-karar-verdi-305961>

Authority and Enforcement in Municipalities

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to develop, responses to the virus in CHP-held metropolitan municipalities became a growing point of political contention. CHP local governance was increasingly politicized on a national scale, and intense disputes between central and local authorities over the handling of the pandemic dominated political discourse. While tensions first emerged after the 2019 local elections, the pandemic has both exacerbated the conflict and altered the stages through which these battles have taken place.

At the onset of the COVID-19 emergency, metropolitan municipalities adopted new measures to combat the pandemic. Examples of such regulations in İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir included the creation of administrative leaves for personnel with children, development of educational campaigns intended to spread awareness about the disease, postponement of rent and utility bills, and formation of formal scientific boards.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰⁻⁵¹⁻⁵²⁻⁵³ Additionally, İstanbul and İzmir municipalities allowed medical personnel to use public transportation for free.⁵⁴ During the first weeks of the pandemic, these policies were received with both widespread interest from the media and a generally favorable public response.

İstanbul, however, became a point of major political contention between the AKP and opposition CHP when

the much anticipated İstanbul Canal Project continued to be a focus of national government investment despite the declaration of a national health emergency. Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu of the CHP publicly denounced the creation of an eight billion-lira budget for the project, while highlighting Turkey's lack of funding in the health sector to combat the pandemic.⁵⁵ Two days later, President Erdoğan dismissed Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Mehmet Turhan. This move was seen as a direct consequence of a disagreement between the President and Turhan over the timing of the İstanbul Canal Project tender.⁵⁶ With this sudden ousting, Turhan became the first minister to be dismissed by Erdoğan since the implementation of the presidential system in Turkey.

In late March, the Ankara and İzmir Metropolitan Municipalities both announced donation campaigns that aimed to foster social solidarity among the cities' citizens and financially contribute to the fight against COVID-19.⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸ In İstanbul, Mayor İmamoğlu called for a citywide curfew and announced the creation of a municipal campaign entitled "Birlikte Başaracağız" (We Will Succeed Together) to help vulnerable citizens.⁵⁹ However, one day later, the Ministry of Interior blocked all coronavirus emergency donation accounts through a ministerial notice.⁶⁰ Interior Minister Soylu defended this action in interviews with

⁴⁹ BirGün. (2020, March 13). 12 yaşından küçük çocuklu ABB çalışanı annelere idari izin. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/12-yasindan-kucuk-cocuklu-abb-calisan-annelere-idari-izin-291699>

⁵⁰ İbb Kurumsal. (2020, March 16). İBB'den Vatandaşa Koronavirüs Eğitimi. İBB. Retrieved from <https://www.ibt.istanbul/News/Detail/36574>

⁵¹ İbb Kurumsal. (2020, March 20). İBB'den Koronavirüs'e Karşı Beş Dilde Bilgilendirici Animasyon. İBB. Retrieved from <https://www.ibt.istanbul/News/Detail/36585>

⁵² Yavaş, M. (2020, March 17). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/mansuryavas06/status/1239823407635730433?s=20>

⁵³ Soyer, T. (2020, March 17). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tuncsoyer/status/1239852964937940992?s=20>

⁵⁴ İBB Kurumsal. (2020, March 19). İmamoğlu: "İSPARK'ın ve toplu ulaşım sağlık çalışanlarımız için ücretsiz. Size minnettarız, iyi ki varsınız". Retrieved from <https://www.ibt.istanbul/News/Detail/36581>

⁵⁵ Euronews. (2020, March 26). Kanal İstanbul için ilk ihale yapıldı, 5 firma katıldı. Euronews. Retrieved from <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/03/26/kanal-istanbul-icin-ilk-ihale-yap-ld-5-firma-kat-ld>

⁵⁶ Cumhuriyet. (2020, March 28) Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanı Cavit Turhan neden görevden alındı? Cumhuriyet. Retrieved from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ulastirma-ve-altyapi-bakani-cavit-turhan-neden-gorevden-alindi-1729964>

⁵⁷ Ankara Büyükşehir Belediye. (2020, March 27). Başkan Yavaş'tan Yardım Kampanyası. ABB. Retrieved from <http://www.ankara.bel.tr/haberler/baskan-yavastan-yardim-kampanyasi/>

⁵⁸ Soyer, T. (2020, March 24). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tuncsoyer/status/1242459126921416704?s=20>

⁵⁹ T24. (2020, March 30). İBB Başkanı Ekrem İmamoğlu: Sokağa çıkma yasağı Türkiye çapında olmayabilir ama İstanbul'da olmalı. T24. Retrieved from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/koronavirus-ibt-baskani-ekrem-imamoglu-sokaga-cikma-yasagi-turkiye-capinda-olmayabilir-ama-istanbul-da-olmalı,869582>

⁶⁰ Demirkaya, N. (2020, March 31). Yardım hesapları bloke edilen belediyelere VEFA uyarısı! Gazete Duvar. Retrieved from <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2020/03/31/yardim-hesaplari-bloke-edilen-belediyelere-vefa-uyarisi/>

multiple TV outlets on the legal grounds that municipalities could not collect donations because it would reflect an attempt to form a “parallel state.” In addition to Soylu, many senior figures in the AKP and MHP have suggested that municipalities could not launch donation campaigns because they symbolized an inappropriate and unlawful act of autonomy against the Turkish state. Opposition journalists and politicians, however, have denounced these actions as obvious attempts to prevent the rise in favorability of opposition-led mayors and stifle the CHP. Eleven of the CHP-held municipalities, including İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir, responded to the Interior Ministry’s actions with a collective statement vocalizing their legal right to collect donations from their residents.⁶¹ The İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality went so far as to sue the Interior Ministry on the grounds that municipalities are legally allowed to collect financial donations per the Constitution.⁶² In a video call with the mayors of AKP-held municipalities, President Erdoğan targeted the opposition municipalities’ campaigns and sharply criticized the local governments’ efforts.

In another move, Mayor İmamoğlu declared that his municipality would organize a scientific board with a cooperation and coordination center in order to spearhead the effort against the pandemic in the city. The municipality immediately began to distribute facemasks to its personnel as well as all citizens who use public transportation for commuting to work.⁶³ By mid-April, eleven CHP mayors had called on the government to declare a curfew or place a total restriction on public movement.⁶⁴ The İstanbul Metropolitan

Municipality also announced that it had formed a donation fund for registered refugee populations.⁶⁵ Prompted by this effort, the Mayor Tunç Soyer of İzmir also announced that his municipality would offer financial support to 40,000 households.⁶⁶

On the 17th of April, more than two weeks after the Interior Ministry blocked the municipalities’ donation funds, the ministry opened a criminal investigation into Mayor İmamoğlu of İstanbul and Mayor Mansur Yavaş of Ankara.⁶⁷ Minister Kılıçdaroğlu was particularly vocal about denouncing this legal action; he also expressed concern over the government’s creation of its own bread donation campaign in the CHP-led municipality of Mersin as a clear strategy by the President to block CHP control regardless of policy.⁶⁸ CHP MPs turned to parliament to vocalize their outrage, presenting motions that challenged the governments’ inconsistent activity in regards to public foundations and COVID-19 aid, as well as the politicization of humanitarian relief during a national emergency.⁶⁹

In early May, the İstanbul Municipality attempted to launch a new campaign, “Askıda Fatura” (Pay-It-Forward), in an effort to once again generate funds to combat the pandemic from the city’s residents.⁷⁰ Mayor Yavaş of Ankara followed suit, announcing the new donation campaign “Ankara Tek Yürek” (Ankara Together). This plan aimed to alleviate the burden of utility bills and generate general financial donations for the city. The public reaction to this campaign was sweeping: the initiative raised 6.5 million lira in relief money in a single

⁶¹ Sayın, A. (2020, April 1). Koronavirüs: Belediyelerin yardım kampanyaları neden tartışma yarattı, iktidar ve muhalefet ne diyor? BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52127212>

⁶² İBB. (2020, April 1). İBB, Durdurulan Yardım Kampanyası ve Bloke Edilen Hesaplar İçin Dava Açtı. İBB. Retrieved from <https://www.ibt.istanbul/News/Detail/36631>

⁶³ Güvenli, Ö. (2020, March 27). İmamoğlu’ndan İstanbul’deki corona virüsü tedbirleriyle ilgili önemli açıklama. Sözcü. Retrieved from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/imamoglu-zor-gunlerin-henuz-basindayiz-5706926/>

⁶⁴ DW. (2020, April 16.) CHP’li 11 büyükşehir belediye başkanından sokağa çıkma yasağı çağrısı. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/tr/chpl-11-buyuksehir-belediye-baskanindan-sokağa-çıkma-yasağı-çağrısı/a-53143993>

⁶⁵ İGAM. (2020, April 17). 400 Suriyeli Doktor Göreve Hazır. İGAM. Retrieved from <https://igamder.org/TR/igam/goc-gundemi-11-17-nisan-2020>

⁶⁶ Soyer, T. (2020, April 4). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tuncsoyer/status/1246321355471171590?s=20>

⁶⁷ DW. (2020, April 17). İmamoğlu ve Yavaş’a bağlı soruşturma. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/tr/imamoglu-ve-yavasa-bagis-sorusurmasi/a-53161262>

⁶⁸ Öztürk, S. (2020, April 19). Sözcü. Retrieved from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/yazarlar/saygi-ozturk/chp-genel-baskani-sozcuye-konustu-yardim-yapmamiz-bizzat-erdogan-tarafindan-onleniyor-5758112/>

⁶⁹ Evci, M. (2020, April 19). CHP’ye yasaklandı! AKP’li belediye mahalle mahalle ekmeğe dağıttı. Sözcü. Retrieved from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/chpye-yasaklandi-akpli-belediye-mahalle-mahalle-ekmek-dagititi-5759070/>

⁷⁰ İBB. (2020, May 6). IMM’S Pay-It-Forward Campaign Raises 3 Million TL For İstanbul Residents With Outstanding Bill. İBB. Retrieved from <https://www.ibt.istanbul/en/News/Detail/1519>

day, as well as nearly 8 million lira to be spent on household utility bills.⁷¹ The municipality also extended the provision of free health masks and public transportation to healthcare workers for an additional three months.⁷²

Yet, CHP, unsatisfied with this ongoing conflict between the President and opposition-controlled local governments, further demanded that the central government support municipality-run COVID-19 relief efforts. CHP Vice-Chair

Seyit Torun, voicing concern over the enduring economic consequences of the pandemic, called on the central government to help municipalities combat COVID-19.⁷³ Several CHP MPs supplemented these requests with a call for the central government to help alleviate municipalities' public debts.⁷⁴ The President ignored these demands, a move opposition actors have suggested reflects the AKP's intent to reduce or cut the financial assets of CHP-led municipalities.

Political Impact of COVID-19 Measures on Professional Organizations and CSOs

The national response to the pandemic has also placed the government at odds with a plethora of professional organization and CSOs. These tensions have stemmed from differing approaches to protecting public health, concerns over the impact of the virus on civil liberties, and fears of long-term changes to the statuses of professional organizations within Turkey.

From the onset of the pandemic, the Turkish Medical Association (*Türk Tabipler Birliği*) or TTB has criticized the Health Ministry over misinformation and manipulation in regard to COVID-19 cases. The TTB accused the Ministry of being dangerously slow to act in its policies, inadequate in providing wide-spread testing, and unable to ensure proper equipment for medical personnel.⁷⁵ The TTB has gone so far as to suggest that the Health Ministry has deliberately and repeatedly misreported COVID-19 case numbers.⁷⁶ As COVID-19 cases continued to climb, the TTB, alongside five

other medical associations, issued a request for increased governmental transparency and drawn attention to the continued lack of accessible testing and medical equipment within the nation.⁷⁷ Despite such calls, the Health Ministry has failed to offer any additional information, refusing to disclose statistics that give any indication of the sex, age, or locations of alleged COVID-19 patients.

In late March, the TTB Central Council provided a general evaluation of the government's response to the pandemic. It asserted that the government missed its opportunity to implement valuable preventative measures to combat the virus and has put the public at risk of a long and difficult effort to return to normalcy.⁷⁹ As such, the TTB officially recommended the use of lockdowns and curfews across the country. On April 1st, perhaps in response to demands for transparency, the Health Ministry released its first city-based statistics on infection rates and death counts. However, the

⁷¹ ABB. (2020). 6 Milyon Tek Yürek Bayram Etsin. ABB. Retrieved from <https://www.ankaratekyurek.com>

⁷² Yavaş, M (2020, May 31). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/mansuryavas06/status/1267087630182895616?s=20>

⁷³ Dokuz Haber (2020, May 13). "Belediyelerimiz kapılarını kilit vurmak zorunda kalabilir". Dokuz Haber. Retrieved from <https://dokuz8haber.net/gundem/belediyelerimiz-kapilarina-kilit-vurmak-zorunda-kalabilir/>

⁷⁴ Evrensel. (2020, May 19). CHP Milletvekili Gürer: Belediyelerin kamu borçları silinsin. Evrensel. Retrieved from <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/405099/chp-milletvekili-gurer-belediyelerin-kamu-borclari-silinsin>

⁷⁵ Türk Tabipleri Birliği (2020, March 13). Sağlık meslek örgütleri temsilcileri Sağlık Bakanı Fahrettin Koca ile görüştü. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=db301036-651b-11ea-897f-e0b4e354fcf1

⁷⁶ Türk Tabipleri Birliği. (2020, March 16). Koronavirüs salgınına karşı önlemler sıklaştırılmalı, hazırlıklar hızlandırılmalı. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=1e55ba42-678c-11ea-9b1e-2ffd6a1940f6

⁷⁷ Akyol, U. (2020, March 18). Merhaba. Hekimlik. Retrieved from <http://www.hekimlik.org/koronavirus/merhaba/>

⁷⁸ Türk Tabipleri Birliği (2020, March 30). Salgında başarı, bulaşı-hastalanmayı önlemektir; mücadelede doğru yöntem epidemiyoloji bilimine uymaktır! TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=75461e5c-7257-11ea-b12d-d839943d748d

⁷⁹ Anadolu Anjasi. (2020, April 4). Türkiye'nin 1 Nisan İtibarıyla il il Kovid-19 Vaka Haritası. Anadolu Anjasi. Retrieved from: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/info/infografik/17983>

Ministry continued to refuse to release information on the age and sex of those infected by the virus. Moreover, the TTB's İstanbul branch quickly issued claims that the statistics released by the Health Ministry were still deliberately lower than than the rates of infection and death in cities.⁸⁰

Within the same month, the TTB clashed with the Health Ministry once again for its refusal to utilize the WHO standards of documenting and reporting COVID-19 cases.⁸¹ They also condemned the government's sporadic curfew methods in Turkey's largest cities, as well as the ineffective distribution of facemasks to the general public.⁸²⁻⁸³ In response to these claims, parliament summoned the chairs of the TTB's Van and Urfa branches to testify. These testimonies resulted in the accusation from the central government that TTB chairs in CHP-led cities were provoking fear in the public through misinformation.⁸⁴

As the government attempted to move the country back to a level of normalcy, the TTB became the focal actor in opposition to new national regulations. After a fierce debate between the government and TTB over the handling of the pandemic, the government announced that it planned to change the process of electing professional organizations'

leadership. This move included an effort to change the hierarchy of the TTB and TBB. The TTB informed the government that it simply aimed to silence professional organizations that opposed the national political agenda and violate democratic governance.⁸⁵⁻⁸⁶

Refusing to back down, the TTB issued a second monthly medical report that ranked Turkey at the bottom of OECD countries in its efforts to combat the pandemic.⁸⁷ In addition, the TTB continued to criticize the lack of doctors and nurses, neglect of public-prioritized decisions, and failure to nationalize medical institutions for efficiency purposes. The president of the TTB argued that the government was prioritizing the economic demands of business owners and shopping malls instead of the medical needs of its citizens.⁸⁸ The TTB was also particularly vocal in criticizing the government's refusal to cancel high school and university entrance exams.⁸⁹⁻⁹⁰ Deeming it a "controlled normalization", the TTB blamed the rise of COVID-19 cases on the government's risky efforts to force society to return to normal.⁹¹ The TTB highlighted that the government's actions particularly placed medical and disadvantaged communities at risk, a move that would ultimately cause the country more issues in the long-term future.⁹² They

⁸⁰ Diken. (2020, April 2). İstanbul Tabip Odası: Bakanlığın tablosu gerçek vaka sayısını göstermekten çok uzak. Diken. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200424161129/http://www.diken.com.tr/istanbul-tabip-odasi-bakanligin-tablosu-gercek-vaka-sayisini-gostermekten-cok-uzak/>

⁸¹ Türk Tabipleri Birliği (2020, April 8). Sağlık Bakanlığı COVID-19 ölümlerini Dünya Sağlık Örgütü kodlarına göre raporlamıyor. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=01965494-7988-11ea-a12d-7aee3f6e69c5

⁸² İstanbul Tabip Odası. (2020, April 10). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/istabip/status/1248704134896922627?s=20>

⁸³ T24. (2020, April 22). İstanbul Tabip Odası: Üç beş maskeyi bile dağıtamaz duruma düşmek hicap verici. T24. Retrieved from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/istanbul-tabip-odasi-uc-bes-maskeyi-bile-dagitamaz-duruma-dusmek-hicap-verici,874361>

⁸⁴ Uluslararası Af Örgütü. (2020, June 17). Türkiye: COVID-19 pandemisi döneminde ifade özgürlüğüne yönelik sınırlandırmalar. Uluslararası Af Örgütü. Retrieved from <https://amnesty.org.tr/icerik/turkiye-covid-19-pandemisi-doneminde-ifade-ozgurlugune-yonelik-sinirlandirmalar>

⁸⁵ Türk Tabipleri Birliği. (2020, May 6). COVID-19 Pandemisinde beklenen çare Tabip Odalarının seçim sistemini değiştirmek olabilir mi? TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=74f726f6-8f9b-11ea-9b7d-6d38d16eb233

⁸⁶ Türk Tabipleri Birliği (2020, May 15). Seçim sistemlerine müdahale demokrasi ile bağdaşmaz. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=f82c6ce6-96a0-11ea-baf3-777c09b98775

⁸⁷ Türk Tabipleri Birliği. (2020, May 14). COVID-19 Pandemisi. TTB. Retrieved from <https://www.ttb.org.tr/kutuphane/covid19-rapor.pdf>

⁸⁸ Bianet (2020, May 14). TTB: "AVM'lerin Açılması için Erkendi". Bianet. Retrieved from <https://bianet.org/1/1/224277-ttb-avm-lerin-acilmasi-icin-erkendi>

⁸⁹ Eğitim Sen. (2020, June 21). LGS'den Geriye Kalanlar ve Yanıtlanması Gereken Sorular. Eğitim Sen. Retrieved from <http://egitimsen.org.tr/lgsden-geriye-kalanlar-ve-yanitlanmasi-gereken-sorular/>

⁹⁰ Türk Tabipleri Birliği. (2020, June 24). TTB Merkez Konseyi'nden hafta sonu yapılacak YKS öncesinde açıklama: Adayların kaygıları değil, onları koruyacak önlemler artırılmalıdır. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=f5c79e74-b614-11ea-8f35-317ace9a9b3b

⁹¹ BirGün. (2020, July 10.) TTB'den, Covid-19 pandemisi 4. ay değerlendirme raporu: Normalleşmenin sonuçları olumsuz. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/ttb-den-covid-19-pandemisi-4-ay-degerlendirme-raporu-normallesmenin-sonuclari-olumsuz-307860>

⁹² Türk Tabipleri Birliği. (2020, July 6). COVID-19 Pandemisi: 4. Ay Değerlendirme Raporu. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/kutuphane/covid19-rapor_4.pdf

also warned of a potential second wave of the virus if the government's policies did not change. From late July to mid August, the TTB continued to publically share their concerns over the distortion of COVID-19 updates. They criticized the Health Ministry for removing access to information regarding rates of intubation and intensive care admittance from the daily coronavirus charts, as well as downplaying rates of new infections across the nation.⁹³

Meanwhile, the government's new amnesty law sparked a set of political disputes between the Ministry of Justice and several rights based CSOs. İHD, TİHV, and four other rights-based CSOs had jointly issued a report recommending a set of protective measures for incarcerated people, calling on the Justice Ministry to declare an urgent amnesty and eviction for high-risk incarcerated people.⁹⁴ While the government ultimately adopted its amnesty law, these civil society organizations criticized the exclusion of political prisoners on the grounds that such a move violated the equality principle of the constitution. After the government's law was passed with little regard for these objections, representatives of these CSOs and some city bar associations protested the law and accused the government of undemocratic actions.⁹⁵

On the 24th of April, during his Friday khutbah, President of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş suggested that homosexuality and adultery were related to the spread of both HIV and COVID-19. These remarks outraged many LGBTI+ rights-based CSOs who heavily criticized the Friday khutbah for using the public health emergency to target vulnerable communities.⁹⁶ Alongside the CHP and HDP, bar associations in Ankara, Diyarbakır, İstanbul, and İzmir

accused the Ministry of Religious Affairs of promoting hatred and declared their solidarity with both LGBTI+ communities and supporting CSOs.⁹⁷ After these parties issued a written statement, the government filed a criminal complaint against the Ankara Bar Association, and an investigation was opened into the association's public denouncement of Erbaş's remarks.⁹⁸ The AKP was quick to defend Erbaş, insisting that the figure had a right to speak his mind and spread Islamic teachings.⁹⁹ Opposition MPs and rights-based CSOs, on the other hand, argued that constitutional law, which barred discrimination towards specific communities, bound every public institution, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In response to the growing conflict between bar associations across the country and the central government, the AKP announced its efforts to change the process of elections within the bar associations. The move was seen by opposition forces as a deliberate effort to stack the courts with pro-AKP judges. On the 22nd of June, the chairs of 80 bar associations planned to organize a protest against the AKP efforts with a "Defense March" in Ankara. Before the march could take place, however, Ankara's government issued a last minute ban on the protest, citing the pandemic as an emergency justification.¹⁰⁰ While bar associations pointed out the political nature of this regulation, opposition actors also criticized the AKP for preventing the march while summoning a judiciary committee to push through new laws. Despite the opposition's best efforts, a proposal that introduced the creation of multiple bar associations in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and curbed the power of existing bar associations, was approved on the 12th of July.¹⁰¹

⁹³ Türk Tabipleri Birliği (2020, July 30). Prof. Dr. Sinan Adıyaman: Sağlık Bakanlığı COVID'le ilgili durumu kendi istediği gibi yansıtmaya çalışıyor. TTB. Retrieved from https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=f6b24646-d260-11ea-be10-6c152474dcf3

⁹⁴ Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı (2020, March 20). Covid-19 Salgını ve Hapishanelerde Acilen Alınması Gereken Önlemler. TİHV. Retrieved from <https://tihv.org.tr/basin-aciklamalari/covid-19-salgini-ve-hapishanelerde-acilen-alinmasi-gereken-onlemler/>

⁹⁵ Durakoğlu, M. (2020, April 6). Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/DURAKOGLU2016/status/1247132955950055424?s=20>

⁹⁶ Kaos GL. (2020, April 24). Diyanet'in Cuma hutbesinde nefret: "İslam eşcinselliği lanetliyor". Kaos GL. Retrieved from <https://www.kaosgl.org/haber/diyanet-in-cuma-hutbesinde-nefret-islam-escinselligi-lanetliyor>

⁹⁷ Tar, Yıldız. (2020, April 27). Diyanet'in nefret hutbesinin ardından neler oldu? Kaos GL. Retrieved from <https://www.kaosgl.org/haber/diyanet-in-nefret-hutbesinin-ardindan-neler-oldu>

⁹⁸ Kaplan, E. (2020, April 27). Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığından Ankara Barosu yöneticileri hakkında suç duyurusu. Anadolu Anjasi. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/diyanet-isleri-baskanligindan-ankara-barosu-yoneticileri-hakkinda-suc-duyurusu/1820176>

⁹⁹ Sabah. (2020, April 28). AK Parti Sözcüsü Ömer Çelik'ten Ankara Barosu'na tepki: Tam bir faşist kafanın zihniyetidir. Sabah. Retrieved from: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2020/04/28/ak-parti-sozcusu-omer-celikten-kritik-aciklamalar>

¹⁰⁰ BirGün. (2020, July 2). Büyük Savunma Mitingi öncesi Ankara'da eylem yasağı. BirGün. Retrieved from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/buyuk-savunma-mitingi-oncesi-ankara-da-eylem-yasagi-306917>

¹⁰¹ Yılmaz, Turan. (2020, July 12). Çoklu baro Meclis'ten geçti. Hürriyet. Retrieved from <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/coklu-baro-meclisten-gecti-41562691>

PART TWO: ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Background

This section of the report outlines and analyzes the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Turkish economy: The government's immediate fiscal response to COVID-19 had a narrow scope: while some tax deferrals were issued to the public, most financial support took the form of expansionary monetary measures. In late March, the Ministry of Treasury and Finance announced the government's intent to support national and local businesses. By mid-April, the government indicated its plan to protect employment rates and preserve wage levels. Both of these measures relied on a increase in economic consumption, a feat the government hoped to achieve by providing affordable credit opportunities. Yet, rates of international trade paint a worrying picture: As of April, exports and imports have

dropped by 41.3% and 25%, respectively, since last year. This imbalanced fall has decreased the net export ratio from 84.9% (2019) to 66.3% (2020).

The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey announced major changes in monetary policies on March 17th, March 31th, April 17th, April 23rd, May 20th, and June 5th. One such announcement included the adjustment of repo interest rates. The government has also issued limited stimulus packages on multiple occasions in the past 6 months. This section of the report will summarize and examine the potential impacts of these financial strategies to revive the Turkish economy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monetary Policy Measures

Overall, the Central Bank increased its domestic debt holdings to ₺80 bn, in accordance with regulatory quantitative measures. While the gross reserves of the Central Bank are currently at \$53 bn, net reserves, excluding swap agreements, fell to negative levels in April of this year. In terms of direct expansionary monetary policies, the Central Bank's repo rates were brought down to 9.75% on March 17th, 8.75% on April 23rd, and 8.25% on May 22nd. In between these reductions in repo rates, the government also issued financial stimulus packages on March 18th, March 25th,

April 14th, and June 2nd. The reserve requirements on foreign currency deposits were also reduced by 500 bps so that banks could meet lending growth targets.

As of June 12th, the Turkish M1 money supply has increased from ₺588 bn in 2019, to ₺1.07 tn. The M2 and M3 money supplies have also increased from ₺2.15 tn to ₺2.95 tn, and ₺3.09 bn to ₺2.29 tn last year respectively. Additionally, a key bilateral swap agreement between Turkey and Qatar was increased in value from the equivalent of \$5 bn to \$15 bn.

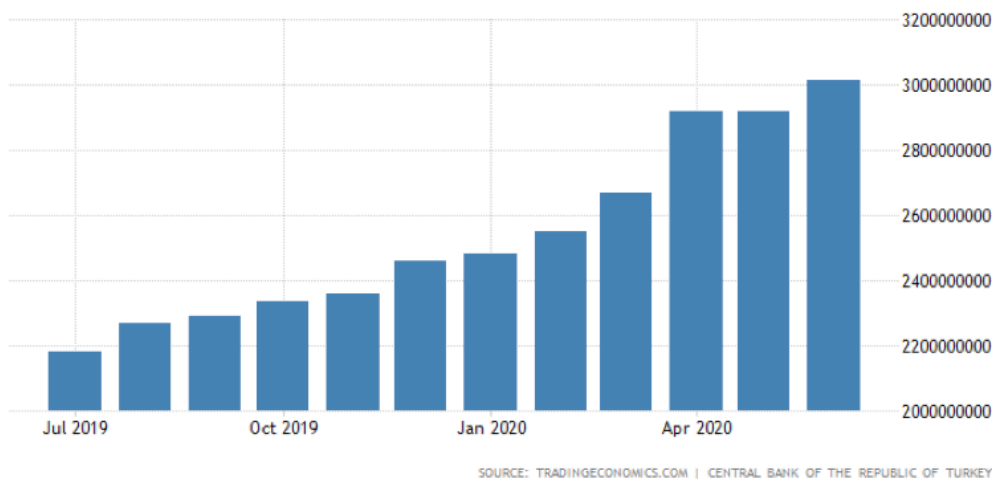


Table 1. Turkey Money Supply: M2

Source: Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, Trading Economics

On May 23rd, President Erdoğan issued a decree that increased the tax levied on all business operations based in a foreign currency from 0.2% to 1.0%. This sudden move raised suspicions that a “Tobin tax” was about to be implemented. On May 29th, the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (Bankacılık Düzenleme ve Denetleme Kurumu), or BRSA, announced that it had amended its bank asset ratio (AR) calculations in order to encourage domestic lending. This decision was directly related to the aforementioned change in reserve requirements and effort to insert liquid assets into the COVID-impacted economy. On June 3rd, the withholding tax on returns from FX mutual funds was raised from 10% to 15%. The FX Funds, which invest around 80% of their value in Eurobonds. The FX Funds were a clear target in the effort to jumpstart domestic economic activity through

the taxation of a potentially more-stable mixed foreign currency investment. Furthermore, the Banking and Insurance Transaction Tax rate on real persons’ foreign exchange and gold purchases was also raised from 0.2% to 1%, while the withholding tax on interest income from banks’ commercial bonds was raised from 10% to 15%.

A variety of financial global institutions responded to the changes in Turkish monetary policy: MSCI, operating as a notable global financial index, announced that it was considering downgrading Turkey’s financial status from a “developing” to a “frontier country” due to its lack of accessibility. The International Institute of Finance has also warned that Turkey’s unprecedented increase in lending may lead to a severe imbalance in assets and liabilities in the future.

Fiscal Measures

Through the data collected by Bruegel — as well as our own findings — the following comparison in fiscal responses to COVID-19 can be made:

Discretionary 2020 fiscal measures adopted in response to coronavirus, % of 2019 GDP

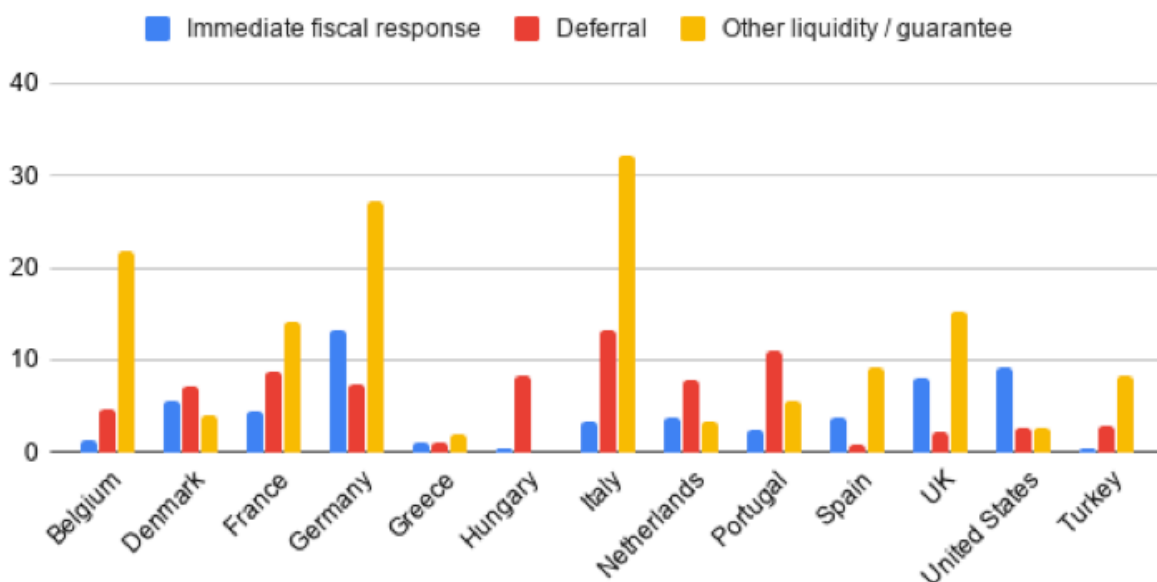


Table 2. Source: Bruegel, authors

Direct Income Support

According to a study published by the CEPR Press, as of June 4th, Turkey's fiscal response to COVID-19 now makes up 3.78% of its GDP. This figure includes credits offered through monetary policy measures, stimulus packages, and direct income support. Moreover, interest rates during the pandemic have been cut by 23.25% and government macro-financial spending has fallen by 1.53%, with no spending regarding the Balance of Payments.

Furthermore, ₺1000 supports have been granted to 5.5 million families, comprising a total government contribution of around ₺5.5 bn. More than ₺6 bn has been given to 4.5 million citizens in the forms of cash payments (₺441 mn), unemployment funds (₺730 mn), and short time working allowances (₺4.8 bn). Bonus Ramadan payments for citizens with the lowest pensions were also raised to ₺1.500. Grants up to ₺1.9 bn were allocated to seed, herbal, and traditional husbandry production, while ₺5.2 bn was granted to renewable energy companies. Additionally, more than ₺2 bn of public donations have been collected under the "Together We Are Enough, Turkey" campaign, an effort organized by the national government to generate public financial support for those most severely impacted by the pandemic.

Local municipalities have also demonstrated far-reaching and effective campaigns in the fight against COVID-19. The İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality's "Askıda Fatura" or "Bills on Hold" aid campaign generated over ₺20 mn in contributions towards local residents' utility bills. In Ankara, the nation's capital, the Metropolitan Municipality's "İyilik Hastalıktan Bulaşıcıdır" or "Goodness is More Contagious than the Disease" campaign managed to secure funding for the equivalent of ₺7.8 mn of utility bills, as well as ₺12.3 mn in overall aid.

A variety of changes to worker rights and salaries have also been made during the pandemic: at the onset of the virus in Turkey, the government granted administrative leave to all public sector employees. Private sector employees, however, were all but left out of this national labor relief effort. While it was possible for private sector employees to apply for short-work allowances, this move depended on the ability and willingness of the individual employer to submit a written application to the official Turkish Employment Agency (Türkiye İş Kurumu), or İŞKUR, that included a pledge not to dismiss workers.

However, in response to the health risks cultivated by the current labor laws, İŞKUR introduced an amendment intended to relax the conditions of short-work allowance qualification: workers who had been working for 60 days before their potential short-work allowance would now be entitled to payment if they had worked within the insurance system for at least 450 days, and had paid unemployment insurance contributions in the last three years. The Unemployment Insurance Fund largely financed this scheme. In reality, short-work allowances comprised of 60% of worker's average wages over the last 12 months and were capped at 150% of the minimum wage rate. As part of this amendment, the number of documents applicants were required to submit for İŞKUR approval was also reduced from 10 to 2. Between March 23rd and April 27th, 291,000 firms applied for this allowance on behalf of over 3.2 million workers. Moreover, unemployment scheme applications have also doubled since last year, reaching a total of 308,000 applications as of April 2020.

On April 16th, İŞKUR announced a 3-month ban on the dismissal of employees, with the exception of "cases contradicting rules of ethics and goodwill". Within the context of this regulation, workers no longer required official approval to go on unpaid leave. Furthermore, İŞKUR stipulated that if workers were sent on unpaid leave — and therefore could not meet the new conditions of the short-work allowance — he or she would benefit from a daily cash payment of ₺39.24. The application for this daily payment was deemed the responsibility of the employer and was funded by the Unemployment Insurance Fund.

Additionally, the Social Security Institution (*Sosyal Güvenlik Kurumu*) or SGK became responsible for the sick-leave wages of workers who tested positive for COVID-19 while on the job. The new wage rules offered employers the opportunity to place employees on paid-leave but offered no legal requirements for this measure. Employers were also allowed to use the funds and time allocated from workers' annual paid leaves to contribute to this fund. However, the Directorate General for Pension Services emphasized that COVID-19 did not count as a work accident or occupational disease, which contradicted the Social Insurance and General Health Insurance Law (No. 5510) and the Occupational Health and Safety Law (No. 6331) CITE.

İŞKUR capped overtime hours in sectors where demand has risen due to the pandemic at 11 hours a day, to be imposed with or without the approval of the worker. If employers chose to ignore the required health and safety measures in their businesses, workers were given the right to refrain from work, or terminate their labor contracts. As of May 18th, ₺11.5 bn worth of funds have been provided to workers: ₺4.8 bn have been allocated to short-work allowances, ₺441 mn to cash wage support payments, ₺730 mn to unemployment allowances, and ₺ 5.4 bn to the social support programme CITE.

However, in the face of the pandemic, the government opted not to include professional associations and trade unions in official crisis management committees. In response, unions issued their own set of formal demands, and then entered into a series of negotiations with the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services (*Çalışma, Sosyal Hizmetler ve Aile Bakanlığı*). Demands from the unions included a wide-range and far-reaching set of support for workers during the pandemic. They sought the guarantee of:

1. Payment to unemployed workers for a period of three months of a sum equal to the minimum wage
 - a. Financing of the aforementioned payment from the Unemployment Insurance Fund
2. Complete stoppage of production for a period of 15 days in all sectors that are not considered strategic,
3. Short-work allowance from the Unemployment Insurance Fund instead of dismissal

Tax Deferrals

The total amount of tax deferrals issued by the government thus far has reached around ₺118 bn (2.8% of GDP). They include:

1. The postponement of ₺66 bn worth of VAT and Social Security (SGK) payments for more than 2 million citizens for 6 months
2. The delay of repayments for rediscount credit (FX loans to exporters) estimated to be worth \$7.6bn (₺52 bn) for up to 3 months

In some sectors of the economy, payment for a number of taxes has been postponed due to a 'force majeure'. Tax liabilities, SGK premiums, and credit debts of employers in

4. Suspension of all activity if a worker tests positive for COVID-19 within a business

On March 23rd, however, the Ministry suspended these talks. The third demand was the only policy to be met by the government and talks of cooperation have not resumed since.

On May 14th, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu), or DİSK, announced its 'Road Map for Working Life During and After COVID-19' document. The report aimed to function as a tool to increase employment rates, reduce the working week to 37.5 hours, consider those who catch COVID-19 at work as qualified accidents, create a rotating work-from-home and work-in-person schedule if possible, accept COVID-19 as an occupational illness healthcare and support workers, restart collective bargaining in July, implement the Istanbul Agreement Law (No. 6284) on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence against Women, and ratify the ILO Convention 190. As of August, none of DİSK's demands have been met.

On a final note, Turkey's unemployment rate in March decreased from 14.1 to 13.2%. However, this drop can be partially explained by the fall in workforce participation from 52.9% to 48.4%. The consumer confidence index, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute, has fluctuated between 57.3 58.5, 54.9, and 59.5 points in February, March, April, and May, respectively.

the services and tourism sectors have also been postponed by 6 months.

These delays in repayment have been released as COVID-19 has evolved in Turkey. On March 18th, the first series of measures were announced: Accommodation taxes for the tourism industry were suspended until November, the VAT on domestic flights was reduced to 1% for 3 months, and credit payments previously due to Halkbank between April and June were postponed for 3 months. The compensatory work period was also increased from 2 to 4 months in order to ensure continuity in employment.

On March 22nd, all financial enforcement and bankruptcy proceedings were halted until April 30th. On March 23rd, all

payments to the Small and Medium Industry Development Organization (KOSGEB) — which were previously due on the 30th of June — were postponed until 2021, and employers' inability to pay rent for their offices and places of work between March 1st and June 30th was disqualified as a valid reason to cancel residency contracts. On the same day, all rent payments due within the tourism sector and tech-incubation industry were postponed for 6 and 2 months, respectively. On March 24th, the annual subscription fees for the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce and Stock Market were postponed until October without interest or fines. Finally, on March 26th, public contract deadlines and violations were made viable for extension or cancellation.

In April, another wave of relief measures were announced: On April 2nd, banking watchdog BDDK extended its process of pursuing delayed credits from 90 to 180 days. Two weeks later, all higher education credit payments were pushed back by 3 months. On April 17th, an additional series of measures were announced for further debt postponement: annual advertisement and environmental taxes for firms that had stopped operations during the pandemic were halted during closure, water bills for non-functioning workplaces — previously intended to be collected by municipalities — were postponed for 3 months, and corporate tax returns were postponed from April 30th until the beginning of June.

Credits and Loans

Since last year, the amount of total loans has increased across most sectors of the economy. According to the Union of Banks, the value of total personal loans has risen from ₺208 bn to ₺312 bn since April of 2019. Housing loans, which make up approximately 10% of all loans, have increased from ₺190 bn to ₺217 bn. As a result, the housing market

Equity companies were only permitted to share 25% of their revenue as dividends until September 30th, 2020. Finally, credit, check, bond, and credit card debts were entirely restructured until the end of 2020, with the assurance that they would not impact residents' credit records.

In addition to these changes, several labor organizations and unions — including the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK), Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions (KESK), Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), and Turkish Medical Association (TTB) organized in order to lobby the national and local governments for additional fiscal allowances. In early April, they launched a signature campaign to garner support for their demands. Their proposal comprised of seven articles, including: the temporary suspension of all economic activity except the essential and obligatory sectors, nationalization of private hospitals for the duration of the pandemic, postponement of servicing consumers, housing and vehicle credits, and postponement of water, natural gas, and electricity bills without the addition of interest. Despite these efforts, only the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality announced its intent to establish an “unpaid bills fund” through which residents could pay for the bills of lower-income citizens during the pandemic.

experienced an 8% increase in the sale of new houses and a 28% increase in the sale of pre-built houses between April and June. Automobile loans have also gone up from ₺6.20 bn to ₺6.97 bn. Credit card loans, however, have remained relatively stable at ₺104 bn, compared to last year's ₺103 bn.

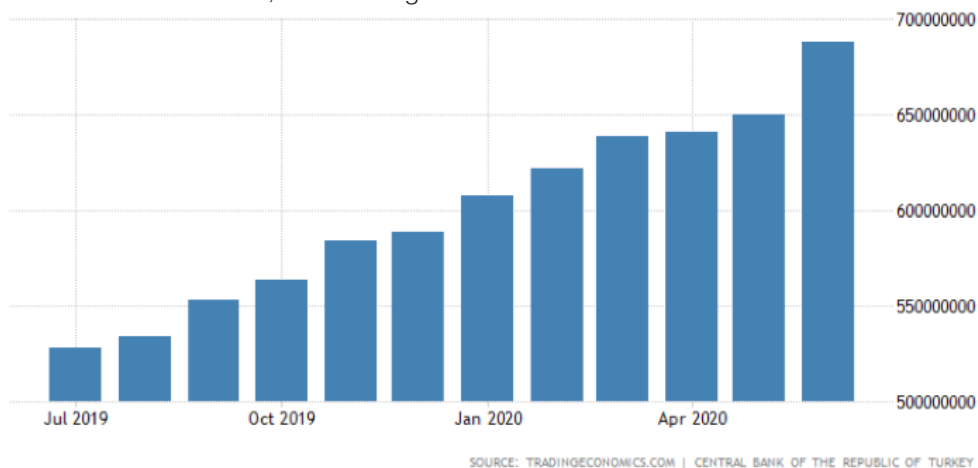


Table 3. Turkey Consumer Credits

Source: Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, Trading Economics

On March 18th, the government released an “Economic Stabilization Shield” relief package that both created new credit opportunities and postponed a variety of scheduled debt repayments. The package offered credit support to companies that were continuing to work, with conditions of an annual 7.5% interest rate and 36-month term. The scheme, which was officially launched on March 26th, was based on the strict requirement that companies maintained their existing level of employment, provided hygienic work conditions, and reported any positive COVID-19 cases to the authorities. If work was stopped for any obligatory reason, compensatory work could also be requested for up to four months.

The Turkish Industry and Business Association (*Türk Sanayicileri ve İş İnsanları Derneği*), or TÜSİAD, held a webinar in which they requested a rise in the pre-existing ₺100 bn of government support, as well as the implementation of extensive curfews for a faster societal recovery. President Tayyip Erdoğan, in a statement made on April 27th, expressed that the total amount of support within the Economic Stability Shield had reached a value of ₺200 bn.

On May 8th, the Central Bank of Turkey injected ₺20 bn worth of liquidity into the economy through public banks. Halkbank and Vakıfbank received ₺7.5 bn, while Ziraat Bank secured ₺5 bn. On June 1st, the government announced the creation of a normalization package through the public banks. In accordance with the initiative, adjustments to monthly interest rates included: a 0.64% interest for new houses and 0.74% interest for second-hand homes, to be paid back in 15 years with no payments in the first 12 months. New and used cars were financed at 0.49% and 0.82% respectively, with an emphasis on better interest rates for locally produced cars. Monthly interest for locally produced furniture, electronics, domestic appliances, household items, bicycles valued between ₺3,000 and ₺30,000 was financed at 0.55% over 60 months, and with no payments for the first 6 months. A maximum of ₺10,000 liras of credit for vacations by travel agencies was also announced and granted with 36 months of maturity, and was free from payments for 6 months. Moreover, on June 9th, one third of the ₺60 bn rediscount credit program, which was previously granted to exporters and advance loans, was reallocated for investment in support of strategic projects.

Additional credit opportunities were provided to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Examples of such efforts

included the “Continuation of Work Credit Support”, which was issued on March 27th by the Union of Banks. This support program provided loans at a 9.5% interest rate, with no payment for 3 months and a 12-month maturity. Additionally, the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (*Türkiye Odalar ve Borsalar Birliği*), or TOBB issued “breath credits” for small businesses, with ITO special credits for Chamber members.

In an effort to provide liquidity to firms with insufficient assurances, the limit for the Credit Guarantee Fund (*Kredi Garantisi Fonu*), or KGF, was increased from ₺25 bn to ₺50 bn. Bail capacity was also increased to ₺500 bn, with the assurance that the fund would not ask for evidence of “no tax or SGK premium liabilities”.

Furthermore, the government granted the Turkey Wealth Fund (TWF) new rights to buy stakes in distressed firms. The TWF purchased 26.2% of shares at Turkcell and 36% of shares at Türkiye Vakıflar Bankası. The TWF expressed that it intended to fund this scheme by selling around €2 bn worth of Eurobonds. Furthermore, the government instructed the TWF to inject a core capital of 0.4% of the GDP into three state banks, to be funded by issuance of Treasury bonds.

In addition to changes to the TWF and other aforementioned efforts, the total liquidity and guarantee measures that have been employed under governmental instruction have generated a total of ₺351.25 bn for the Turkish market, or 8.2% of the GDP. While the Economic Stability Shield package has reached a value of around ₺260 bn, the estimated extended impact of the initiative on the economy is closer to ₺600 bn. Through this package, ₺39 bn worth of credits from public banks have been issued to 6.6 million citizens under the pretext of a “basic necessities credit”. Furthermore, HalkBank has offered more than ₺26 bn to more than 684 thousand SMEs in their “PARAF commercial credit card” and “SME support package” initiatives. In the sponsorship of the Credit Guarantee Fund (KGF), ₺154 bn worth of credits have been offered to 197,000 firms in Turkey, 97% of these firms being SMEs.

Finally, ₺40 bn in loans have been issued to more than 6.7 million citizens with an income lower than ₺5000L. Halkbank has provided ₺27 bn in loans to farmers; local private banks have supplied ₺14 bn-worth of credits; and foreign banks have supplied credits valued at approximately ₺30 bn. In addition, the World Bank issued ₺250 mn in loans to

the Turkish Eximbank in order to contribute to SMEs' export markets. Moreover, the Turkish Central Bank has instituted a host of emergency measures regarding FX reserve requirements in order to free up ₺34 bn for Turkish banks. 65% of credits have come from public banks, where there has been a 23% and 93% increase in issued credits for the last 3 and 12 months respectively. Overall, as this report has outlined,

the Turkish government has sought to propel its economy through the pandemic by implementing a variety of staggered responses. The provision of greater credit options for banks and business alike, as well as the dedication to an overarching expansionary monetary policy, has altered the country's economic structure in the hopes that, like its citizens, it will also recover from COVID-19.

PART THREE: SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Introduction

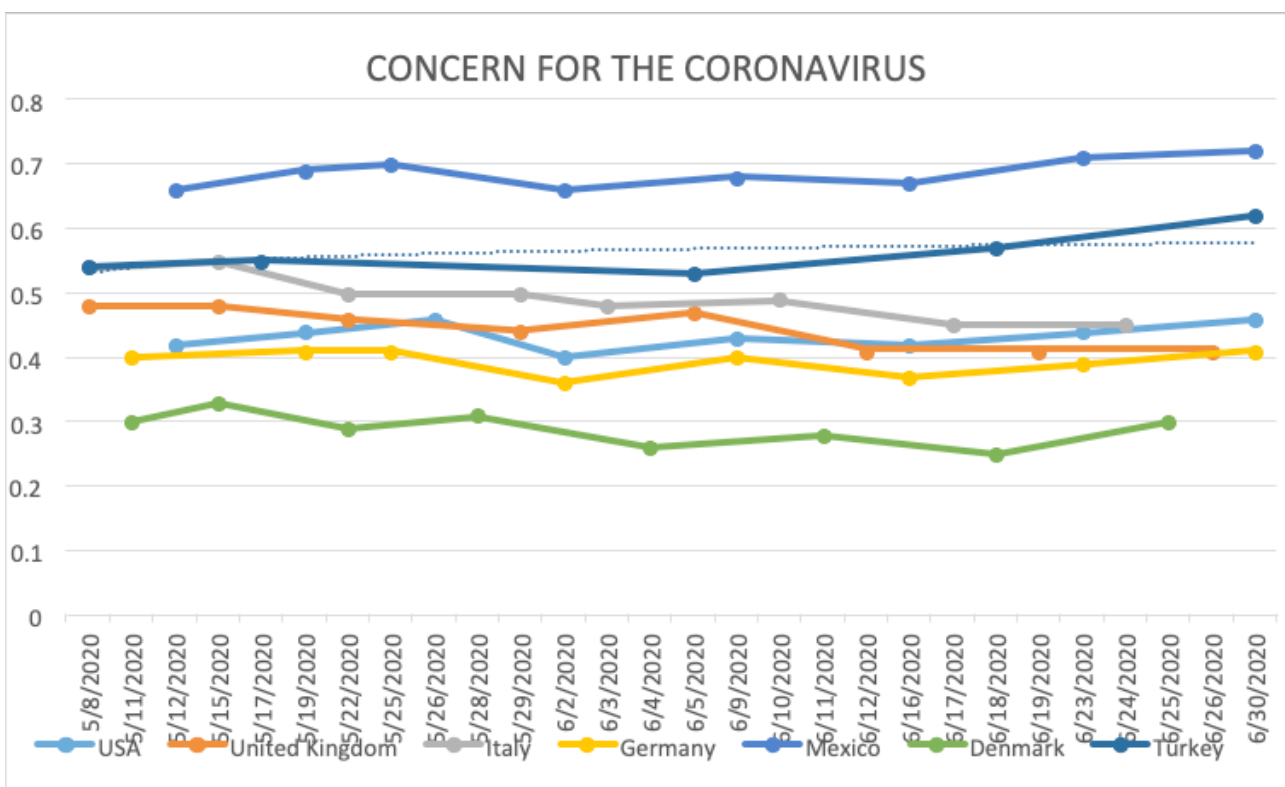
The third section of this report unpacks the sociopolitical impact of COVID-19. The inclusion of the sociopolitical consequences of the pandemic within this analysis draws attention to a compelling and some-what unexpected component of Turkey’s response to the disease. In order to sufficiently convey the sociopolitical impact, this section includes analysis in how socioeconomic, gender, age, and other factors have influenced Turkish peoples’ reactions to COVID-19. Specifically, the report looks at measurements of ‘concern’ among the public, as well as how government policy and external factors influence this ‘concern’. This chapter primarily focuses on individual-oriented COVID-19 measures, over society-wide regulations. This selection

is intended to improve understanding of how Turkish individuals, across a variety of political parties, have observed the pandemic since its official onset in 2019. Furthermore, the section explores public economic expectations during the pandemic, giving particular attention to the attitudes of pro-government and Peoples’ Alliance individuals. This final part of the report also touches on the role of industries such as E-Commerce on the economic make up of Turkey during the pandemic. Ultimately, the final section of the report aims to tie the political and economic COVID-19 analyses into societal attitudes, as well as offer a different approach into the perceived status of the state.

Public Concern

According to a recent study, accounting for peaks and falls in COVID-19 cases, the USA and Germany represent the countries most similar to Turkey in measures of public concern levels. This pattern is remarkable, especially given that there are practically no similarities in rates of cases or timelines of infections between the three states. Furthermore, amongst countries compared, Mexico was the

only country found to have higher public concern levels than Turkey. In contrast, Denmark — the country with the most similar case to population ratio as Turkey — was found to have remarkably low levels of public concern. The reasons for the respective high and low concern levels in Mexico and Denmark can largely be attributed to public trust (or distrust) in government and healthcare systems.



Moreover, despite having much higher case-to-population ratios, Turkey displayed the highest number of agitated citizens amongst all other countries it was compared to, including the USA and the UK. This section outlines how these reported levels of concern are likely rooted in worries regar-

ding the socioeconomic impacts of both the disease and the government's responses to it. Assessing these levels of concern is also particularly important for predicting the public's future political affiliations.

Individualism in COVID-19 Policy

In general, assessment of public reaction to official COVID-19 policy focuses responses to changes in everyday life, such as the closings of schools, restaurants, cafés, and shopping malls, or the suspension of community prayers in mosques and prayer rooms. In Turkey, specific aspects of national societal dynamics, such as Turkish Football and the status of Turkish residents living abroad, also make up noteworthy points of concern in measuring public sentiments. For example, in the early days of the pandemic, the public reacted to measures taken concerning the return of Turkish residents abroad positively. Within this context, the enforcement of two-week quarantines for Turkish citizens returning from abroad as well as people returning from Saudi Arabia for Hajj was strongly supported amongst the public. This high support of a strict rule was likely attributed to its individualistic nature; it focused on a relatively small number

of people and did not pose a perceived threat to the course of society's everyday life.

Yet, the actions of individuals have changed just as much as the government during the pandemic. Between March and April of 2020, the greatest increase in individually oriented preventative measures took place. This period also saw the greatest marker of public concern. This mutual trend in rates of concern and preventative measures can be continuously observed. However, this correlation needs to be further analyzed before presumed as a causation. The public's perception of the seriousness of COVID-19 can also be observed through an inquiry into its impact on summer holiday plans. The relevant findings are displayed in the chart below:



Amongst all individual health reasons cited for not going on holiday, staying home is undoubtedly the leading factor. The findings indicate that despite the fact lockdown measures in Turkey have been lifted, the public still displays a tendency to stay home, with the exception of compulsory work shifts.

According to a survey conducted in April 2020, there is a clear relationship between both socioeconomic and educational status, and a higher tendency to stay home. Indicators of such findings can be found in a variety of factors: For example, people who watched the fewest hours online, particularly watching internet series, were the surveyed group with the lowest levels of education. This trend appears to reflect either a lack of access to internet, or an age that indicates less familiarity with technology. On the other hand, the group that gave the most positive answers to watching internet series or otherwise using the internet at home, tended to have some form of advanced education. It should be mentioned that a large portion of the 65 and over demographic surveyed indicated a tendency to stay home and read.

Remote working also offers insight into the role of socioeconomic factors in the decision to stay home: according to

the study, the number of people spending time at home by remote working showed a positive correlation with the level of one's education. This does not come as a surprise. Due to the high qualifications required for remote working positions, the preference for highly educated people can be expected. It is also not surprising that individuals belonging to the highly educated group of the citizenry are also presented with the most opportunities to work at home.

Interestingly, the trend of at-home exercising among the Turkish public appears to have increased with age. Growing worries concerning health as one ages, as well as the availability of more free time are two potential determinants that have led to higher levels of exercise by older individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, COVID-19 does not appear to have had much of an impact on habits concerning cooking at home. With an 86% positive response rate, women were still the majority of those surveyed who claimed to cook from home. When we look at the age distributions, moreover, it can be observed that the 18-24 age group claims to cook the least. Other age groups showed no remarkable changes in their cooking or eating trends.

Trends in Concern: Political affiliation

Understandably, the measured rates of concern amongst the Turkish public have changed dramatically over the course of the pandemic. However, these trends in concern have a complex relationship when studied in accordance with each political party: In March, all political party affiliations appeared unimpacted by the pandemic. However, in the first week of April, respondents from all parties except the AKP displayed much higher levels of concern. Moreover, the levels of concern in AKP constituencies increased two weeks later than other districts. However, while they were later to rise, they have grown at a faster rate than for members of other parties. In fact, by the end of April — despite entering a period of decline in the number of cases and continuity in social restrictions — reported levels of concern fell for the previously-least agitated group, while increasing for the neutral or undecided group. By the second half of May, the government's relaxation of social distancing measures also led to a decline in the concern of the opposition, or Millet Alliance's, constituencies. On the contrary, President Erdogan's TV address on the 18th of May — in which he called on the public to comply with social distancing measures — negatively influenced members of

his own constituencies more negatively, balancing out the levels of concern for both pro and opposition government groups.

The President's second TV address on the 28th of May, however, had different effects. His speech, in which he announced a relaxing of restrictions by June 1st, immediately prompted widespread relief from concern for his AKP constituencies, noted officially in the June 2020 data. The lifting of curfew for citizens who were under 18 or over 65, and holding of the National Defense University's entrance exam (the first national exam of the year), however, led to an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. This uptick prompted the concern levels of both the AKP and CHP constituencies to once again rise. Interestingly, the MHP and Iyi Party's support base remained unchanged.

Following the belief that COVID-19 weakens with warmer temperatures and the implementation of necessary preventative measures, four million students participated in the high school entrance exams and Higher Education Board tests. As previously mentioned, these exams represented

a major point of conflict, and popular response to their scheduling shed light on the public's attitude towards the policy. Ultimately, the National Alliance's constituencies experienced a rise in measures levels of concern, whereas

the levels of stress for the People's Alliance's base remained unchanged. Over the course of the summer, supporters of all parties, except the HDP party's base, have ultimately shown an increase in their COVID-19 worries.

Reactions Against Social Restrictions

While many trends in the public's reaction to COVID-19 were more or less predictable, the pandemic has also prompted some unexpected trends in concern levels to lockdown policy: As of April 2020, the strongest support of government-mandated lockdown policy came from individuals with advanced-level-education, then with basic-level-education, and then with medium-level-education, respectively. By the end of the month, however, it was observed that the highest form of support for pandemic restrictions came from individuals with a basic-level education, followed by advanced-level, and then medium-level. Politically, while the strongest supporters of the lockdown were originally members of the opposition, in the surveys conducted two weeks later, the People's Alliance supporters showed more support for the ban, corresponding with their rising levels of concern. People with the highest and lowest levels of education also most strongly supported the lockdown policy targeting citizens under 18 or over 65. Interestingly, when we look at the age category of the strongest supporters of the ban for the citizens under 18, we find that teenagers who were closest in age to that category (18-24) formed the majority of the supporters of the regulation, at approximately 68%. When we look at levels of support towards the lockdown regulation for citizens aged over 65, in contrast, we can see that the people subjected to this ban formed the group who opposed the policy the most.

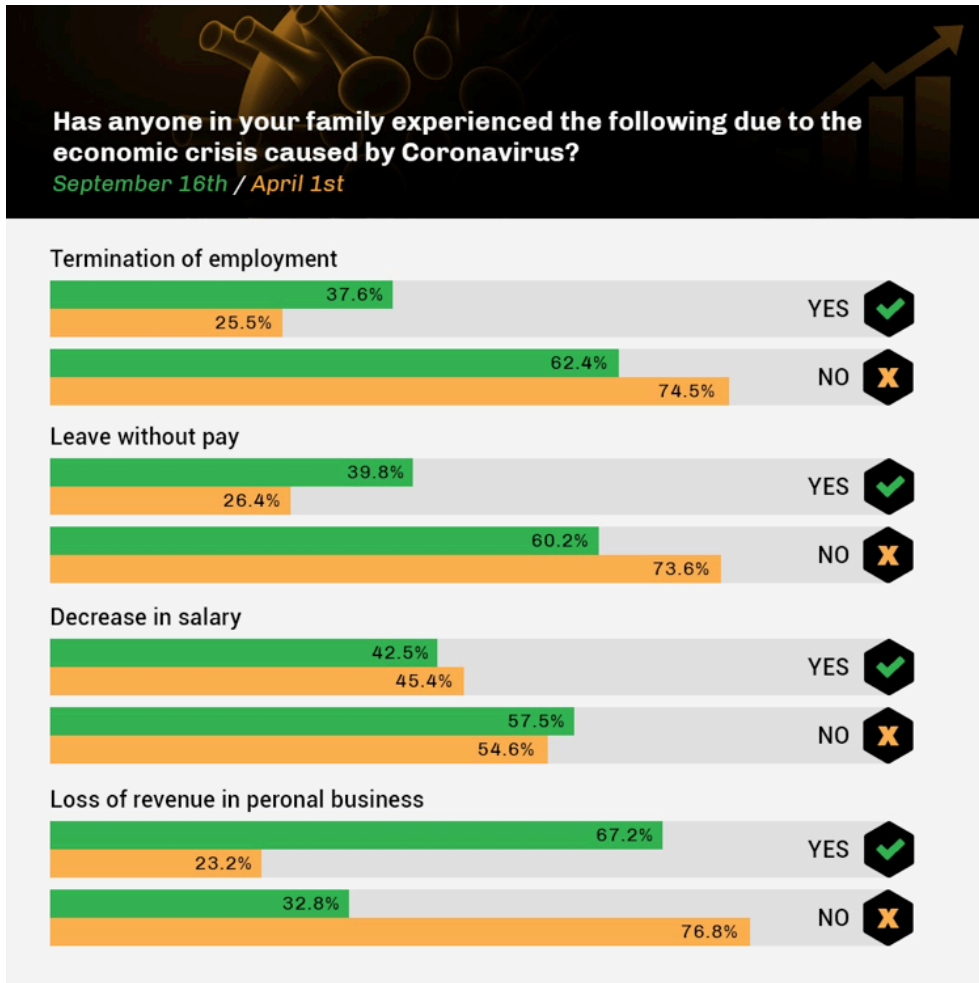
In May and June — following the announcement of future quarantine relaxation measures and subsequent implementation of these policies — the question of “what will you do when the pandemic-related restrictions are lifted?” was asked to the public. When the results were compared, it can be seen that the number of participants who responded that they will be continuing the same course of life they had been living prior to the pandemic were roughly equal in both rounds.

One of the most important recent questions regarding polls has been the matter of vaccines. Compared to other countries, the Turkish population at first appeared less willing to take future vaccines made available to combat the virus. The number of people willing to get the vaccine remained incredibly low until June, when the survey showed a remarkable uptick in willingness to take the drug. In contrast, the number of people in other surveyed countries who were willing to take the vaccine decreased in June, alongside an overall decline in pandemic-related concern. When we look at the differences in attitudes towards a future vaccine based on political party, no observable distinction in attitude could be made. Yet, support for taking a potential vaccine was indicated most strongly among, once again, the citizens with the highest and lowest levels of education.

Perceived Economic Impact of COVID-19

Turkey's economy has been far from exempt from the worst global economic fallout since the Great Depression. While the overarching economic consequences of the pandemic have been already been explored in this report, there are a few components of the sociopolitical fallout of COVID-19

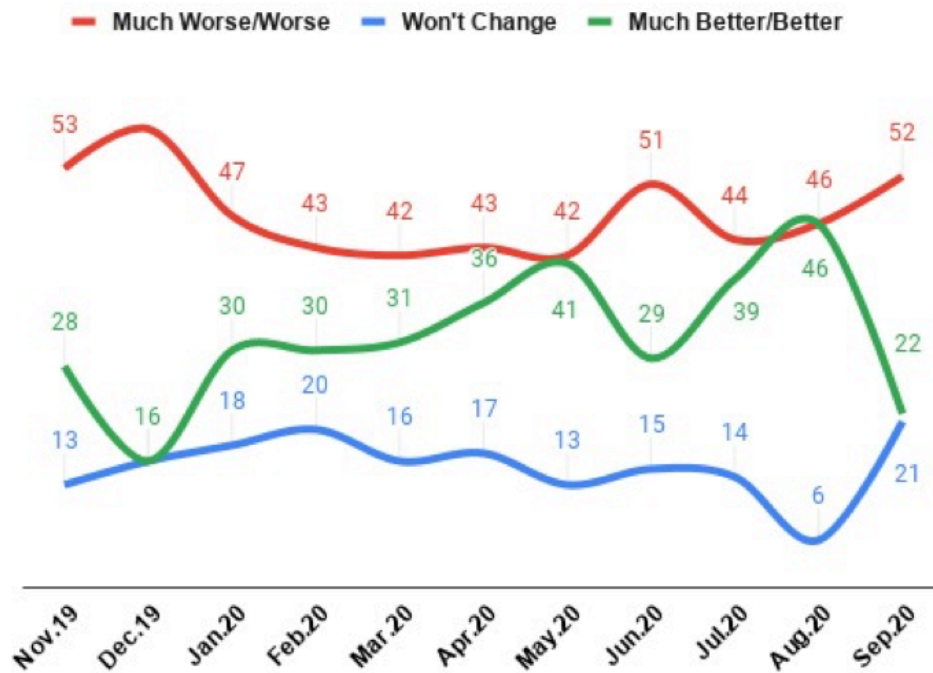
that are still worth mentioning: As we traced attitudes towards the Turkish economy at home, a worsening picture emerged, especially in terms of understandings of income and unemployment:



As illustrated in the chart above, by mid-September, participants in the survey who indicated that one of their close family members had been fired during the pandemic increased by 13%, from 25% to 38%. Similarly, the percentage of people who stated that one of their close relatives had been put on unpaid leave increased from 26% to 40%. Lastly, the number of participants who said that one of their relatives who had their own business has had an income loss jumped to 67% from 23%. Income and job losses are closely tied to individuals' economic expectations; the sociopolitical fallout

of the pandemic manifests most directly in Turkish citizens' understanding of their family, friends', and own experiences of fiscal prosperity. The extent to which this economic reality and the negative experiences will translate to changes in political or economic preferences, however, has yet to be seen. That being said, global concern over the economic fallout of the pandemic, alongside the already-concerning status of Turkey's economic growth, has created a complex, but ultimately negative set of public economic expectations:

2.1 Economic Expectations



For this survey, participants were asked at the end of each month about their expectations for the Turkish economy. As expected, their inputs reflected the events that took place in the immediate month prior. However, despite the fact that April was the month with the sharpest pandemic-related economic downturn across the globe, it reflected a period of increasing positive sentiments and hopefulness in Turkey. These findings may show that the people surveyed in this study may be responding to the pandemic's impact over their own economic lives — or localized economic perceptions — rather than the broader global economy. The survey participants who experienced no negative changes in their business' activities have been observed to be more positive, whereas people who suffered from the economic downturn have been observed to be more pessimistic. However, due to the fact that the effects of the pandemic were quite new in April, the responses recorded during the survey for the first month may represent an outlier.

Additionally, the first months of COVID-19 in Turkey fueled a growing divide between those who saw the future of the Turkish economic in a positive light and those who did not. In May, the number of people who were optimistic about the future state of the economy surpassed the number of people who were primarily concerned. Our findings show that people who were unable to pay their bills in April maintained a level of optimism for their financial situation in May. By

June, the gap between those who viewed the future of the economy in a positive or negative light reached a record high, at 26 points. In September, however, perceptions regarding the status of the economy swiftly turned negative, with the number of pessimistic respondents surveying at 50%. Pandemic-related economic developments, including rises in the prices of fuel, electricity, and natural gas, had direct and serious consequences within the Turkish people's everyday lives. Coupled with the devaluation of the Turkish Lira, the Turkish people's perceptions of the course of the economy tended to be far from positive. However, it is important to highlight that peoples' attitudes towards the economy did not transform from optimistic to pessimist overnight, but rather, have understandably moved into a phase of neutrality or stagnant expectations. The continuation of the current economic situation and increasing costs of everyday expenses such as heating and food indicate that this neutrality might soon turn to pessimism. These increases costs, coupled with the rise in unemployment levels across the country, are likely to drastically negatively influence the expectations of the economy for the foreseeable future.

When we look at economic predictions based on party affiliation, AKP and MHP constituencies' assessments' show significant changes in the last few months. In September, the number of AKP supporters who thought the economy was 'bad' or 'really bad' increased significantly (by 33 points

in a month), while the number of MHP supporters who were pessimistic about the course of the economy increased by 55 points. This rise in economic concern is both recent and sudden and raises questions in regards to the future development of these constituencies' economic perceptions. This shift marked the first time that supporters of the Peoples' Alliance indicated primarily negative attitudes towards the future state of the Turkish economy, and thus, this change needs to be closely monitored in future assessments of economic expectations.

As expected, E-Commerce reflects one of the few primary industries that has been positively impacted by the pandemic. When we look at the increase in E-Commerce usage in Turkey in terms of levels of education of customers, the people with advanced-level and medium-level education have sparked a national uptick in online shopping activities. Judging from their limited internet access, the e-shopping activities of people with basic-education, in contrast, have remained the same. When it comes to the relationship

between age and E-Commerce, however, an increase in E-Commerce usage can be observed across the board. Interestingly, the biggest increase in usage has been in individuals aged 65 or above (from 22.8% to 59.9%). People between the ages of 55 and 64 have demonstrated the least-noticeable change in E-Commerce usage during the pandemic (with an increase of 0.7%). This may be due to the fact, per the national regulations, people within this age group were still able to leave their homes in order to make necessary purchases, while also still not being very familiar with the workings of online shopping. Ultimately, whether in regard to E-Commerce or university entrance exams, perceptions of the government's response to COVID-19 among the Turkish public has shaped political, economic, and social outlooks on the pandemic. These understandings of the virus have impacted decisions made by the public already; where they lead the Turkish government and its people in the future, however, may ultimately be the most influential determinant in the nation's ability to recover from the disease.

Conclusion

COVID-19, a disease that began as an under-reported, poorly understood disease in China's Hubei province, has become a defining and life-altering facet of global society. Threatening human life, health, and medicine, the COVID-19 emergency also produced political and societal consequences in many nations that have irrevocably transformed daily life. COVID-19 has created not only an unprecedented challenge to global public health, but a unique setting through which many governments and administrations have attempted to secure greater political power and socially alter their countries. This report has examined exactly how the pandemic has fostered changes in Turkey's political and economic spheres.

Reporting its first COVID-19 case on March 10th, the Turkish government joined many other countries in implementing various methods to combat the pandemic. Yet, as the rates of infection rose and extended into the summer months, the pandemic also dominated the political priorities of the presidency, various political parties, municipalities, and societal institutions. At the heart of this impact was a complex battle between the AKP-majority central government and opposition-led municipalities, professional organizations, and media. This ongoing political conflict manifested most evidently in the battle over power between the central government and CHP-led opposition metropolitan municipalities, particularly in İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir portending the future key contest in shaping the Turkish

political landscape.

At the same time, COVID-19 shocked the global economy. Turkish economic institutions were forced to respond to an unprecedented and unpredictable transformation in its own fiscal status, as well as in global financial strategies. The pandemic prompted the Turkish government to implement both immediate short-term credit opportunities and long-term options for direct income support, tax deferrals, and interest rate adjustments. Overall, the political fallout of the pandemic has provided a new platform for partisan politics, while the economic consequences have shed light on the long-term concerns for the future development of the nation's economy. The sociopolitical impact of the pandemic paints a picture of easily-influenced, often not-fully-formed reactions to both government policies and perceptions of the economic. By measuring levels of public concern — and attempting to identify patterns in sociopolitical action across different political parties, age groups, and education-levels — this report has also drawn attention to the complex ways in which the pandemic manifests in the actions of society. Overall, however, the ambiguity and capriciousness of these public reactions symbolize the uncertainty of both the government and the national economy. As COVID-19 continues to define the political, economic, and societal wellbeing of the nation, therefore the Turkish government must reject vagueness and indecision in its effort to overcome the disease.



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