



Governance and the Pandemic

Questionnaire #2: Civil Society & Marginalised Groups

Turkey

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Question #1: Public Trust

Is the government response to the pandemic being met with public approval? Please specify where this assessment is taken from, i.e. YouGov Poll, newspaper headlines, etc.

Although Turkey is very polarized on party lines, it is still possible to say that there is general public approval accompanied with a dose of skepticism. A nationwide poll has not taken place since March 11, when the first Covid-19 case was confirmed. Only [GENAR](#), a poll company often seen as pro-government, made a comprehensive survey in three largest cities and declared that %91 of the citizens found the Health Minister successful during this process. Another Istanbul wide poll by [Perlego](#) also shows strong trust to the Ministry of Health and the president, respectively around %89,7 and %67,6.

On the other hand, social media is rife with statements of distrust. Newspapers are divided in their reaction to policies according to their already established pro or against stance against the government. They interview physicians and scientists of their own taste, who make projections ranging between disaster and swift exemplary social and economic recovery.

Highly debated measures include the absolute curfew imposed on 65+ and -20 age groups, the quarantine conditions in university accommodation facilities and the limited scope and distribution of financial assistance.

Question #2: Accurate Statistics

Are accurate statistics on infection rates and death rates available? If so, who is producing this information? And is this information trusted by the public?

The Ministry of Health produces all data on tests, confirmed cases and Covid-19 related deaths, collected via the centralized healthcare documentation system. The Minister of Health, Fahrettin Koca makes them public through daily briefings. In terms of tests and confirmed cases, the numbers are not challenged. However, the Turkish Medical Association (TMA), which has the membership of %80 of Turkey's physicians, criticized the Ministry for [not using the codes](#) recommended by WHO in the death certificates. The Minister later rejected the accusations and TMA did not object further. There are also debates about false negative PCR tests, which according to [a TMA affiliated physician](#), triple the confirmed cases.

Question #3: Support for Vulnerable Persons

In instances of a lockdown, what support is available for vulnerable persons, i.e. domestic abuse victims, less able bodied persons?

Most municipalities offer home-delivery of hot meals, shopping aid and dog-walking to the less able bodied people and those who are affected by the 65+ curfew. Neighbourhood and kin based networks also play a vital role in meeting these needs in a sustainable way. Remote kin care is also visible as younger generations distantly look after their elderly or sick relatives by shopping online for them.

Domestic violence is on the rise and women's groups are trying to create awareness. A few municipalities disseminate their own domestic violence hotlines and increase their capacity to offer shelter to the victims of abuse and violence. NGOs working with refugees are printing flyers and brochures to inform women of their rights and possible venues of action.

Question #4: Marginalised Groups

What are some of the challenges that marginalized groups, i.e. low-income households, religious/ ethnic minorities, face with regards to the pandemic?

Informal economic activities constitute [a quarter of the GDP in Turkey](#). The undocumented labour force work in more precarious conditions than others and form the lowest income strata, already under normal conditions. The pandemic containment measures affected this large segment of the population much more severely, pushing many households to dire poverty, due to absolute loss of income.

Similarly, Turkey's more than 4 million refugees and asylum seekers constitute a particularly vulnerable group. The vast majority work undocumented and therefore do not qualify for the benefits, nor do they have the chance to shift to home office. During this period, EU funded Turkish Red Cross cash benefits are continued to be distributed and, however limited, make up the main source of living for about 1,7 million Syrians under temporary protection, yet the remaining 2 million are left to survive on their own meager resources or with the sporadic assistance of NGOs and individuals.

Just before the outbreak of the pandemic in March, with the opening of the Greek border on the Turkish side, several thousand refugees flooded to the western land border, only to be violently pushed back by Greek armed forces. After suffering in the no-man's land for about a month they were then bussed to cities all over Turkey to be quarantined or simply to let go without any assistance. Without their previous living and working arrangements in place, they are now in a particularly critical condition, trying to rebuild their lives in the midst of a lock-down.

The curfew imposed on 65+ created debates on ageism, although it is praised by many as an effective measure in keeping death levels and the pressure on the health system low. [%13,4 of this age group](#) was employed before the pandemic and their livelihoods also came under threat with the curfew.

On a different note, as a majority Muslim country with high levels of religious practice during the month of Ramadan, established cultural and social customs are negatively affected by the closure of mosques to mass prayers and the ban on house visits. Ramadan turned out to be an extraordinarily lonesome affair, also shadowed by financial difficulties.

Question #5: Local Activism

How are local community groups and/or political groups responding to the pandemic in terms of providing support/ relief to vulnerable persons and/or marginalized groups?

Many groups, official NGOs and informal initiatives alike, offer aid to refugees and undocumented migrants through food packages, bill payments and food vouchers. Now that they cannot offer their normal services like language courses, job trainings, childcare, translation services... etc., their energies are directed towards immediately relief. They are revising their old methods, like home visits or drop-in advice sessions and adapt to new social distancing measures. Boxes or vouchers are often quickly dropped at home addresses of the refugees.

As an example, a local solidarity initiative, [Tarlabaşı Dayanışma](#), in the central and impoverished Tarlabaşı neighbourhood in Istanbul, redirected its efforts to provide basic aid items to undocumented migrants. They locate migrants, most of whom live in overcrowded substandard flats and almost uniformly have lost their jobs, and bring them hygiene items and supermarket vouchers. Their funding comes from individual donations, and volunteers, a mixed group of Turkish nationals and migrants, do the distributions. They try to raise awareness and funds on the social media and sometimes attract in kind donations from firms and small businesses.

Religious groups, brotherhoods and religiously motivated community leaders are also organizing similar campaigns. In the normal course of events the month of Ramadan is a high point in charitable activities. Large groups used to come together in fund-raising dinners for the fast-break (iftar). Now fasts are broken at home, religious and community leaders give their sermons and motivational speeches via Whatsapp voice-recordings, Quran recitations are listened together and donations are immediately transferred through online banking. Later volunteers make the aid deliveries with increasing help from the gate-keepers in beneficiary groups.

A very different example comes from a group of professionals who are now working home office. Their newly formed [Citizens' Solidarity Network](#) documents and maps solidarity initiatives and municipal services that became available during the pandemic. At the moment their reach is limited to secular middle class groups and municipal activities, however they are disseminating widely through social media.

Hilal Alkan. 15 May 2020.