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**Turkey and the Fight against the Coronavirus: Significant Challenge,  
Partial Response**

**Gallia Lindenstrauss and Remi Daniel**

**Turkey reported its first coronavirus case relatively late, but since early April it has figured among the ten countries with the highest numbers of confirmed cases. It seems that economic considerations in Ankara still trump ideas on addressing the epidemic more effectively, even though in many other countries it is understood that without controlling the extent of the disease, the economy will suffer critical damage. Internal political considerations, in particular an effort to try and obstruct actions of mayors from opposition parties, undermine the effectiveness of the Turkish response to the spread of the virus. Statements by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Turkey can overcome the virus within two to three weeks seem baseless, despite the Turkish health system having certain advantages, including a relatively high number of ICU beds per capita.**

Compared to other countries, Turkey reported its first case of coronavirus relatively late, but since early April 2020, it has figured among the ten countries with the highest number of confirmed cases. In addition, Turkey has the second highest number of confirmed cases in the Middle East, after Iran. The first case of coronavirus was reported on March 11, and the first death from the virus was reported on March 17. As of the end of March, the growth rate in the number of new coronavirus cases in Turkey is among the fastest in the world, although this comparison is problematic, because it depends in part on the number of tests each country carries out.

The fact that Turkey reported its first case relatively later than other countries was seen as suspicious in light of the fact that it is one of the 20 biggest economies in the world, it is an important transportation hub, and all of the neighboring countries, except for Syria, reported cases before it. The delay in reporting the first case was attributed to the likely attempt to protect the tourism industry, which is an important sector of the Turkish economy, and more generally – an attempt to minimize the harm to the economy, which was in a process of fragile recovery from the economic crisis that Turkey weathered over the past two years.

While initially the Turkish authorities refused to publish information regarding the location of infected people, in early April it was reported that 60 percent of confirmed cases were in Istanbul. Nonetheless, there is a lack of contact between the government and the Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, of the Republican People's Party (CHP), who noted that since the report of the first case in Turkey on March 11, he had not discussed the corona threat with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Imamoglu, who since winning the local elections in Istanbul has been considered a potential threat to Erdogan's continued rule, is leading the call to impose a complete lockdown, at least in his city, while Erdogan remains opposed to this measure. Another example of the hostility between them is that while the state established a national fund for donations for the fight against the outbreak, the government criticized and even stopped campaigns by mayors from opposition parties that also aimed to collect donations. Erdogan justified this action as necessary in order to prevent the creation of a "state within the state," thus demonstrating once again his desire for full control over Turkish society.

On the national level, steps were taken gradually and late, with an emphasis on suggestions rather than prohibitions. First the government recommended to all citizens not to leave their homes, then later ordered people aged 65 and over and those with chronic diseases to stay at home. In addition, schools and universities were closed. After recommendations to refrain from mass prayers did not prevent people from gathering in droves at Friday prayers on March 13, organized prayers at mosques were prohibited. Afterwards, intercity travel was prohibited and international flights were significantly reduced. The latest step so far was a prohibition on leaving home for people up to the age of 20 (with the exception of those over 18 who are employed), and citizens were instructed only to leave home when wearing masks, which are distributed for free by the state.

Turkey has a rather decent health system. As part of the reforms carried out since the election of the Justice and Development Party in 2002, there has been a significant improvement in the coverage of medical expenses and medical services. Relative to other countries, Turkey has a large number of ICU beds per capita (46 beds per 100,000 people, compared to 29 in Germany and 12 in Italy, for example). At the same time, the emphasis was on opening private hospitals (some 40 percent of the ICU beds are in private hospitals). Presumably these hospitals can be converted for emergency purposes at the present time, and the state is also building two temporary hospitals in Istanbul. The Turkish health minister is even trained as a doctor. However, despite the relatively high number of beds, the number of doctors per capita is among the lowest in the OECD, and the health budget per capita and in relation to the GDP is low compared to other OECD countries. In addition, the political purges in Turkey since the failed coup attempt in 2016 have affected the health sector, as has brain drain. There is also an atmosphere that suppresses any kind of criticism;

for example, after videos from internal health system briefings were leaked, workers had to publicly apologize and retract their statements.

The economic situation will inevitably influence Turkey's ability to cope with the pandemic. Following the outbreak of the virus in Turkey and the global economic crisis, the value of the Turkish lira dropped to the level of the summer of 2018 (then the drop was in part against the backdrop of a severe crisis between the United States and Turkey regarding the issue of the continued imprisonment of American pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey). The value of the Turkish lira is expected to drop further due to the negative economic consequences of the pandemic. The expected cost of the struggle against the virus has also intensified the internal debate regarding Turkey's policy toward the Syrian refugees. Some in the opposition have noted that funds that could have helped Turkish citizens cope with economic difficulties at the present time have already been "wasted" on helping the refugees. In this context, in late March, Turkey backtracked from opening the border and allowing the passage of refugees to Europe, less than a month after it declared it was starting to do this. The gates were opened in order to spur the European Union to significantly increase its economic aid to Turkey to cope with the refugee issue and to support Ankara's stance regarding the Idlib campaign in northwestern Syria. However, Ankara understood that its ability to exert pressure on the EU is limited, at least at present. On the other hand, even though the majority of the consequences of the coronavirus crisis are negative for Turkey, a decline in energy prices could help it to some extent, as it is a significant energy importer.

As for Turkey's foreign relations against the backdrop of the global crisis, Turkey has aided 30 countries since the outbreak of the virus as part of what commentators in Turkey and elsewhere have called "coronavirus diplomacy." For example, it has sent medical equipment to China and Iran, and later also worked within NATO frameworks and flew medical supplies to Italy and Spain. Since the outbreak of the virus, there have been talks between Turkey and Hamas and between Turkey and the Palestinian Authority on ways to help the Palestinians cope with the pandemic. On March 31, it was reported that the Palestine-Turkey Friendship Hospital had opened in Gaza – a project initiated by Ankara in 2013. Given the tension in Turkey-Israel relations, there does not appear to be ongoing coordination between the two countries regarding coping with the coronavirus. This is in contrast, for example, with the telephone discussions that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has held with Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades through discussions with additional leaders and on the bilateral level.

It appears that for Ankara, economic considerations still trump those focused on addressing the virus more effectively, even though in other countries it is understood that the economy will be critically damaged without achieving control over the extent of the disease. In

addition, internal political considerations, in particular attempts to obstruct actions of mayors from opposition parties, also undermine the effectiveness of the Turkish response. Against this backdrop, statements such as that made by Erdogan on March 25 – that Turkey will be able to overcome the virus within two to three weeks – seem baseless and raise fears of an insufficient response to the crisis. The economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are expected to be large scale. Nonetheless, because the next elections for the presidency and the parliament are planned for 2023, it is possible that Erdogan will have time to fix shortcomings in managing the struggle against the epidemic and allow the public to forget the failures.