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Domestic Policy

## Onur Talu

### Environmental Consulting at Olin - Spring 2020

A little less than two months ago, President Miller’s email sent almost all Olin students, faculty and staff home - to continue the rest of the spring semester online. While most colleges in the US have reached a similar conclusion on how to move forward under these circumstances, government responses to this pandemic have been markedly different. The COVID-19 outbreak highlighted the significance of acting timely, healthcare coverage, strength of economy and public trust in government in successfully mitigating the damage of this pandemic and similar public health crises

Different governments approached the pandemic differently, their decisions largely informed by many factors - the strength of their economies and healthcare systems to name a few. In the case of South Korea - past experiences provided the government with the political will to act with utmost caution. Having had a run-in with MERS in 2015 that killed 38, Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) set up an emergency team to study the disease, merely three days after Chinese officials informed WHO of a previously unidentified form of pneumonia in December 31.

The South Korean government sought preventative measures, which according to President Moon Jae-in, “should be strong enough to the point of being considered excessive”. In addition to the government’s swiftness, the biotechnology sector of the country stepped up, Kogene Biotech developing a test for the disease and getting it approved by KCDC by February 10th, and three other companies following suit by February 27th. Authorities tested not only those suspected to carry the disease, but isolated all who tested positive and monitored their contacts and tested them as well. Opening drive-in testing stations - modelled after McDonald’s and Starbucks - the government encouraged its citizens to get tested free of charge, curbing the spread of the disease before it could get to the levels we’ve seen in Italy.

The availability of free testing to masses, isolation and monitoring of patients who tested positive allowed its nationalized healthcare system - which boasts the second highest number of hospital beds per capita in OECD - to treat the manageable influx of patients. Unfortunately, the government’s slow response and the lack of testing availability is what made Italy’s experience with the outbreak much more gruesome.

Similar to South Korea, Italy has a nationalized healthcare system, however the government’s reservations in tackling the crisis earlier. The authorities in Lombardy, one of Europe’s richest and most productive regions, didn’t want to halt the region’s economy. The mayor of Milan even went as far as unveiling the “Milan Doesn’t Stop” campaign, allowing bars and restaurants to remain open. The Prime Minister didn’t issue a national lockdown until March 10, nearly three weeks after the first reported case in the case. The results have been detrimental, with the country's hospitals - especially in the Lombardy region - congested with patients, running out of bed capacity and needing to convert their wards to intensive care units, and seeing more than 28,000 deaths - highest per capita in the world - by May 4th.

A similar theme to Italy’s Lombardy region emerged in Turkey, who reported their first case in March 11, a day after President Miller sent out his email to the Olin community, more than a month and a half after the first reported case in the US. Even with the weeks-long period the country could have used to prepare for the crisis, the government didn’t have the breathing room other countries have. The youth unemployment had reached 28% before the pandemic, with the unemployment numbers reaching their post-2008 recession levels and even before the outbreak, the Turkish lira had depreciated against the US dollar more than 400 % since 2010. Similar to many Lombardy authorities, President Erdoğan, who has effectively ruled the country since 2003, chose to not implement a strict nation-wide lockdown. He did unveil a 15 billion USD relief package to mitigate the economic fallout, a ban for layoffs for 3 months and daily stipends for those, who lost their jobs but don’t qualify for unemployment benefits.

In addition to displaying how the lack of a robust economy can jeopardize a government’s public health policy, Turkey also exposed the vulnerabilities of authoritarian regimes, namely the lack of public trust towards the government. For many, a government that has been dishonest about the health of the economy before such a crisis, could have been dishonest about the handling of the pandemic as well. As economist İnan Doğan suggests, as a country that had one of the highest exponential growth rates of cases and deaths in the world following its very late first case, turning the curve into a linear growth model is skeptical. Additionally, there were around 50 percent more deaths in Istanbul compared to the city's average in the month of April, which doesn’t match with the government's low death count in the city.

For many citizens in Turkey, including me, the future is unclear and scary, and that manifests itself in public behavior. When the government declared a national lockdown for 48 hours on a Friday, which would come into effect only hours later , crowds rushed the streets in search of essentials at the nearest supermarkets. Public’s lack of trust in the government to provide basic goods and services, and the public reaction to a reckless application of social distancing over such a short notice caused people to crowd into corner stores, pharmacies and supermarkets to stock up, depleting many necessities for those in need.