

My name is Serra Saydam. I am a second year history and communications double major from Istanbul Turkey. I have been spending and living the pandemic in my home town of Istanbul. I returned from LA two days after UCLA's announcement of remote teaching, firstly to be with family, but also because I was scared of what would happen to me and what healthcare would be available to me if I got the virus within the US, mainly because of what I think is an inadequate healthcare system, and my status as a non-citizen living with a student visa.

It appears and seems impossible to me that something I heard about vaguely around 4 months ago has completely taken over my own life, and almost everyone else's, though for every individual the experiences has shown many variances. It would be a fair assumption to say that in just a few months, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the world, and the biggest question in everyone's mind, including my own is, what effect will this change have? Even in these past two months since the declaration of the coronavirus as a pandemic, so much has changed within myself, my family, my community, my country and the whole world. For everyone, there are differences in experience because of the pandemic, however just as much as that, one of the things that has surprised me the most these last few weeks is how a matter of health and wellbeing can be turned into a political issue that has been used by normal people and politicians alike to further or suppress an agenda.

Before delving into the effects of the pandemic on larger, extended communities, this virus has struck close to home when it comes to myself and my family. March 10: UCLA announces its switch to remote learning for the upcoming month. March 11: WHO declares the virus a pandemic. March 12: I am on the afternoon flight to Istanbul, Turkey, which has only 1 reported case of the coronavirus. March 14: my father is at a dinner with his 3 closest friends when they stumble upon their large group of friends that are celebrating a birthday.

March 18: My father falls ill with a high fever; two days later he learns that 5 of his friends from the birthday were diagnosed with the virus. The following day, he gets the test, along with my mother. March 23: Both of my parents test positive for the coronavirus. Though asymptomatic, my mother is hospitalized as a precaution alongside my father, whose fever would continue for another three weeks, with him becoming negative for the virus exactly 46 days after he got the virus at the birthday. I had returned home from LA because in a time like this, I did not want to worry about living alone, having to take on all of the responsibilities and the increasing housework that would come from being at my off campus apartment. Less than 10 days after my arrival in Istanbul, what I was expecting changed, for the upcoming month I would be the primary caretaker of the house, of my younger brother, and my parents. For two weeks, when my parents were hospitalized, I took on the typical house roles: cooking, cleaning, dishes, laundry. When my parents returned home, they were feeling better, but neither had done their check-up testings, which is done 3 weeks after the initial positive diagnosis for the virus. Until the end of the month of April, I maintained the caretaker role.

The mental health aspect of this pandemic, seemed to be the thing that affected me the most. Through the month of April, my migraines, which had largely subsided over the past year, returned. There were days I slept at 8 am only to wake up at 5pm, or days where I could simply not go to sleep because of stress, and because of my classes that were happening in a time zone 10 hour behind me. It was also in the beginning of April where those under the age of 20 were struck with a stay-at-home order, with a large penalty paid if this were to be broken. An over 65 ban was implemented 2 days after the first case in Turkey, which was understandable, as it has shown that though this virus can strike anyone, including my relatively young, healthy parents, the mortality in elders is significantly higher. The under 20 ban was instated because the lawmakers and those on the medical board believed that this age range were the “carriers”, those who did not understand the severity of the virus, went out,

socialized, and brought the virus home only to spread it to their older family members. Maybe this was the case for some, but not for myself, or my brother. Our house was already infected, and the children had tested negative for the virus. Before the ban, we could go on small walks, sometimes only for 10 minutes, to breath fresh air and escape our responsibilities. This was suddenly disallowed. 4 people in a house, where the healthy try to stay healthy, and the infected try to get better. Every time someone changed locations within the house, everything had to be cleaned. Though it took longer for both my parents to test double negatives, by May, they had regained their physical health. My father went back to his work, so did my mother. They go on their walks and socialize with friends, socially distanced. Though everyone was extremely fearful when both of them tested positive, and they had to hospitalized, they are slowly getting back to their own lives. Their mental health is intact, as intact as can be. On the other hand, my brother and I have not stepped outside in over 6 weeks. We never got sick, our parents had a physical health scare, which is now over. Now that they are negative, they even sarcastically celebrate getting sick, because, though it is not completely proven, they know that they are immune to the disease at some level. Overall, my family is split in half. Half was effected by the physical illness aspect of this pandemic, while the other half has maintained a level of physical health, though the mental aspect seems to be deteriorating. I know that if I step and just walk up and down my street, no one will even catch me. I don't even look under 20, most would say I look at least 25. However, since I have been inside for so long, I don't even want to step outside. Every day, myself, and so many of my friends, who are also under 20, feel the desire to go out, meet up, have a drink, go grab food, but we have also become so alienated from our past normal that we don't know how to return to that. My father may have had a very high fever, but we never feared for his life, or my mother's. Maybe, if a more severe case of the virus happened in our family, or even a death, I would type a different set of words. But, in my case, and in my family's, it is

now a common consensus that mine and my brother's mental health woes will probably extend way past the harm and physical illness our parents felt from being coronavirus positive. Speaking from personal experience, the statement that there are currently two pandemics going on could not be more true: one against the coronavirus, and one with our mental health.

Continuing on from the personal effects, the thing that has struck me the most as being so odd, but so infuriating at the same time is how this virus has affected politics. Turkey has actually done relatively well compared to most other nations. As this document is being typed, the country sits at number 9 in terms of cases worldwide. As of May 18th, 1650135 tests have been done, with 150593 positive cases and 4171 deaths. Compared to the US or other European countries, such as hard hit Italy and Spain, Turkey has a very young population with a median age of Turkey. Because of this, most cases are mild, and when compared, the percentage of cases that ended up in the ICU or intubated is much lower. It also has had very different approach to treatment. No matter what symptom a corona positive person is displaying, this includes no symptom, like my mother, they are given free medication that is being used to treat the virus, and depending on hospital availability, are hospitalized for as long as they can. All hospitals, private, public or research were declared pandemic hospitals, meaning they all offer coronavirus treatments that are subsidized by the government. After the initial few weeks, testing became widely available. Everyone who exhibits any symptom of any illness, doesn't have to be COVID-19, can get tested. When someone tests positive, health representatives take a list of everyone they have come in contact with, to track these people's symptoms, and even test them. This included us, my brother and I were tested when our parents were initially diagnosed and in the end of April, when they were tested again. These people are contacted every day to make sure they are self

isolating, because for those between 20-65 years of age, the working group, as long as certain guidelines are followed, leaving the house is allowed.

Turkey has tried to hold on to its deteriorating economy during the time of the pandemic. Since the end of March, it has implemented stay at home orders during the weekends, while allowing for work to continue during the week in a hope to hold on to any level of economic stability. Restaurants, bars, shopping malls, parks and beaches were the places that were closed. These implementations, and various policies that have been put in effect have also become a way for the Turkish political system to continue as it has for the past decade, which can be characterized by deep polarization between the government and the various opposition parties.

Besides the talks of a possible secondary wave of the virus coming to its origin back to Wuhan, China is something that is in the news today, when the first positive case in Turkey was reported in Turkey back in March, the policy of Wuhan to go into immediate lockdown was highlighted as a great tactic to mobilize the threat of the virus, and stop its spread. The opposition parties, led by the CHP, wanted this policy to be followed in Turkey, as it had been in other countries besides China, such as Italy and Spain. This did not happen. The very few remaining, non-imprisoned journalists that were against the government, as well as the members of the opposition parties, saw this as a move by the government that prioritized the economy over public health. Turkey's economy has been in a steady decline the past few years, with many pointing to the abolishment of the parliamentary system in 2017 as the turning point, when the authoritarian Turkish president Erdogan was given sweeping powers to rule the country. The completely lockdown would mean even more unemployment than what has happened, which would mean more financial help that the government would be responsible to provide, something it simply couldn't do, because it simply does not have the financial means for it. In the coming weeks, everything, every policy would be politicized.

When the unemployment support packages were announced, they were under the minimum wage limit. The opposition emphasized this, how the government couldn't even provide support to its citizens because it had used its monetary means in "selfish" ways, i.e. building a palace for Erdoğan, or Erdoğan building bridges to nowhere, or the world's largest airport, even though there was absolutely no need for it, other than the fact that it would be the biggest, hence Erdoğan could add that to his CV of everything accomplished during his term. When cities that had mayors from opposition parties started campaigns to raise money to give to those more affected by the pandemic, all of these efforts were stopped. Erdoğan declared these actions a coup attempt, an attempt to "form a state within a state". All efforts by opposition mayors were largely stopped, while mayors from Erdoğan's ruling party were not. This led to, daily back and forth verbal conflicts that would be had, and is still happening, between the ruling and the opposition parties. The pandemic is being used by the opposition to highlight the polarization that is being reinforced by Erdoğan because of his policies that only favor those who support him, and of the failing economy. On the other hand, the pandemic is being used by the ruling party to reiterate the idea that the opposition is secretly organizing a coup, and since Turkey had a coup attempt in July 2016 by a terrorist organization called FETÖ, they are trying to communicate the idea that if Erdoğan is not present, a coup will occur, and unlike 2016 when he was President, it might just be successful. Every press conference by the President, where he gives updates and implement policies, is opened by an attack on the opposition. The days until the next press conference, the opposition takes turns to attack Erdoğan and his cabinet for politicizing this pandemic, and putting his re-election hopes ahead of the wellbeing of the country. In summary, both sides make the argument that somehow the other side will use the pandemic to enact an ulterior plot, which can arguably be pointed out as the reason for why, especially in these days when cases are falling and we are in a process of normalization, the main function of the pandemic

is to act as the means for the components of the Turkish political system to enact their policies and attack its opposition.

In a matter of mere months, the coronavirus pandemic has changed everything. It has changed people's approach to the world and life, it has affected people's health, mentally and physically, it has had a devastating effect on global and local economies, and it has become a means for the political system to maintain itself, causing or even intensifying existing issues, such as the deep polarization and economic downfall in Turkey. When one looks at history, they can link certain events. If I were to look at myself, and look back in time to centuries ago, I find the Spanish Inquisitions, and of how the Jews that were expelled from Iberia came to Ottoman land. Over 5 centuries ago the Ottomans took in thousands of exiles of the Inquisition, but why? One of the most given reasons is that a century before that, the Black Death had killed a significant portion of the Ottoman population, hence of the Ottoman economy. The prospect of almost replacing that population with the Jews was seen as perhaps a good idea. Hence, if one tries really hard, I can tie where I live now to a deadly disease, a pandemic from over 600 years ago. History is like that, the coronavirus pandemic effects our life today, it will tomorrow, next year, maybe even 10 years from now. It also wouldn't be the biggest leap to think that in 600 years, someone may attempt to tie their present to our present, to the disease we have come to know as COVID-19.