

Evaluation of the political psychological reflections of the COVID-19 process in the context of Turkey

COVID-19 sürecinin politik psikolojik yansımalarının Türkiye bağlamında değerlendirilmesi

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SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its rapid contagion and deadly effect, emerged in China and surrounded the whole world. This pandemic, unlike other pandemics has emerged in the global age. Due to the disappearance of borders as a result of globalization, both the physiological and psychological spread of the virus has been rapid. The transmission of the Covid-19 virus through contact and droplets has provided its physiological spread, while digital media channels have provided its psychological spread. The negativities experienced in health, economy, politics and cultural structures have shaken the societies in the context of political-psychology. Anxiety and fear caused by the pandemic have negatively affected the psychology of individuals and therefore the whole society. In this study, the effects of the COVID-19 process on Turkey and how Turkey responded to the pandemic were tried to be evaluated in the context of political psychology. By examining the researches published in the process, the improvements made in the field of health against the pandemic, the regulations covering the whole society and the measures to overcome the process with the least damage were mentioned. It has been concluded that, as a result of the negative factors that directly affect mental health such as compulsory social isolation, losses, death anxiety brought by the pandemic, as well as processes such as unemployment and bankruptcy caused by inadequate socio-economic policies, a pandemic of mental disorders may occur in future.

Key Words: COVID-19, Politics, Psychology

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ÖZET

Çin'de ortaya çıkarak tüm dünyayı saran COVID-19 salgını, hızla bulaşması ve ölümcül etkisiyle dünya tarihindeki en büyük pandemilerden biri olmuştur. Bu pandemi, diğer salgınlardan farklı olarak küresel çağda ortaya çıkmıştır. Küreselleşmenin bir sonucu olarak sınırların ortadan kalkması nedeniyle virüsün hem fizyolojik hem de psikolojik yayılımı hızlı olmuştur. COVID-19 virüsünün temas ve damlacık yoluyla bulaşması fizyolojik yayılmasını sağlarken, dijital medya kanalları psikolojik yayılmasını sağlamıştır. Sağlık, ekonomi, siyaset ve kültürel yapılarda yaşanan olumsuzluklar toplumları siyaset-psikoloji bağlamında sarsmıştır. Pandeminin yarattığı endişe ve korku, bireylerin ve dolayısıyla tüm toplumun psikolojisini olumsuz etkilemiştir. Bu çalışmada politik psikoloji bağlamında COVID-19 sürecinin Türkiye üzerindeki etkileri ve Türkiye'nin pandemiye nasıl tepki verdiği değerlendirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu süreçte yayımlanan araştırmalar ve raporlar incelenerek Türkiye'nin pandemi yönetiminde hangi alanlarda başarılı ya da başarısız olduğu tespit edilmeye çalışılırken özellikle ülkedeki psikopolitik durum üzerine yoğunlaşmıştır. Pandeminin getirdiği zorunlu sosyal izolasyon, kayıplar, ölüm kaygısı gibi ruh sağlığını doğrudan etkileyen olumsuz faktörlerin yanı sıra yetersiz sosyo-ekonomik politikaların neden olduğu işsizlik ve iflas gibi süreçler sonucunda, gelecekte bir ruhsal bozukluk pandemisinin ortaya çıkabileceği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: COVID-19, Politika, Psikoloji

INTRODUCTION

For viruses, country borders are meaningless, they are as imaginary as parallels and meridians. The virus, which can reach every part of the world in just a few months, proves that the world is a "global village"(1). The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in China, shocked the whole world with its deadly effect, rapid contagion, and difficulties in control and prevention. As in the past, the pandemic affects the societies from different perspectives and brings various experiences as well as the losses it causes. The COVID pandemic continues its course with various effects in health, social, economic and political fields in all nations of the world. We have experienced in the process that many countries are not prepared for the pandemic and that although they can take various measures in the field of health, they can be affected economically and socially. Different fields of science have conducted various studies on the biopsychosocial and political effects of the process and shared their experiences. Psychiatric, socio-economic effects and political reflections of the pandemic in Turkey have been the subject of various studies (2,3,4).

The pandemic will remain in mind not only during the period but also after the traces it will leave in the national and international arena. The anxiety created by the uncertainty that emerged in the first months of the pandemic infected the whole world before the virus and became the common agenda of the whole world. While trying to make sense of the dimensions of the horror they face in the virtual world, people who were simultaneously locked in their homes due to social isolation experienced the anxiety they had reached to levels that they could not cope with by being exposed to conspiracy theories. The anxiety of individuals who have been locked in their homes for a long time, become lonely and deprived of many activities they enjoy, has started to turn into a feeling of frustration and anger over time.

State officials, who tried to make decisions by prioritizing the health and safety of the society, had to make great efforts to overcome this psychological war and medical struggle with the least damage. While the pandemic caused psychological, eco-

nomical and social collapse in the homes of ordinary people at the micro level, it also caused irreparable destructions in the economies, education systems, social and cultural areas of the states at the macro level.

The first feelings that generally appear in people in a pandemic are intense anxiety and fear. Some factors that evoke fear and anxiety in people are mentioned below:

- (i) Unlike many viruses, this virus can be transmitted to individuals without showing any symptoms,
- (ii) certain groups who have possibility of life risk,
- (iii) the complete containment of the pandemic cannot be predicted with certainty,
- (iv) the length of the vaccine development process and mistrust of the long-term consequences it may have in the human body,
- (v) possibility of the virus mutating and the emergence of second and third waves in the pandemic, with short and long-term effects on the economy (5).

Many articles have been published on the COVID process from different disciplinary perspectives. The political-psychological effects of the world and especially Turkey in the COVID pandemic process will be tried to be reviewed by examining the studies that have been done in the process and presenting outputs within this framework. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects of the Covid-19 process on Turkey and how Turkey responded to the pandemic in the context of political psychology.

PSYCHOPOLITICS IN THE EVENT OF THREAT

After the world wars in the first half of the 20th century, the Cold War process, which left its mark on the second half of the century, and its unexpected end caused the expectation of a peaceful world for the new century to reach its highest level. With the

fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a clean slate was expected to open. The bipolar world was over and the threat of nuclear war had disappeared. It was hoped that the new millennium would be different from the old one, but it did not. At the beginning of the new century, the whole world was shaken by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the USA. Security concerns embodied in al-Qaeda and radical Islamic terrorism and the vision of a global enemy caused a serious sway on the economic, political and social levels. Economic resources began to be transferred to defense expenditures; at the social level, the securitization process caused the suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms, and the rise of anti-democracy waves even in the liberal world (6).

After 9/11, the second global crisis emerged in the field of economy. With the mortgage crisis that broke out in the USA in 2008, an economic depression began to be experienced all over the world. Finally, the pandemic started before we reached the first quarter of the 21st century. This new global crisis has had and continues to have effects in social, economic and political fields. Political Psychology examines the relationship between mass psychology and politics in these difficult processes. Jost et al. have tried to explain this relation with System Legitimation Theory. Their primary motivation is to explore why and how people acknowledge and sustain the social systems that penetrate them (7,8).

The pandemic triggers the fear of loss in people. This loss could be losing health, losing loved ones, losing a job, or losing sense of security. In the face of these threats, people panic and changes in their behavior may occur. These behaviors can occur not only in a social sense, but also in a political and economic sense. Throughout history, humanity has faced many visible threats, wars, bombardments, and environmental disasters. This time, however, the threat is invisible and the possible consequences are uncertain. The common anxiety and collective consciousness formed in the society also affect the political decisions. According to John Jost, events that threaten the system cause a tendency towards conservative views in social and political attitudes (9).

In a society, oppressed groups as well as rulers can rationalize everything thoroughly. They may realize that their living conditions are far from desirable; but they rationalize this phenomenon on the basis of the notion that they deserve to suffer, that everyone is in the same situation, that it is somehow inevitable, that what is to be replaced may be much worse, and so on (10). This makes the existing conditions for individuals bearable. John Jost, with his System Legitimation Theory, claims that people unconsciously support the preservation of the status quo through subconscious processes. Individuals who try to legitimize the system support the acceptance of existing political, economic, social systems as they are because they provide stability (11). Individuals who try to avoid uncertainty determine their political preferences to maintain the status quo. According to the system justification theory, there is a psychological motive to defend and justify the status quo (12).

The times when pandemics disrupt the social order are the times when the search for a new political beginning intensifies in history and today. Different societies may perceive the same pandemic differently. The reaction of the politicians to the pandemic, the restrictions applied, the securing of the economic and social concerns of the people are an important factor and are very effective in determining the political demands and choices of the people. Although there was resistance in some cases to the measures taken by the states during the pandemic, it was observed that the political legitimacy was not shaken during the pandemic times in the modern era, especially in Europe and the Islamic world, on the contrary, the measures taken strengthened the authority of the state over the people (13).

In Zizek's own words;

“COVID-19 has also affected enormous ideological viruses that are ready to explode inside communities, such as conspiracy theories, fake news and xenophobia. Maybe we can hope that a different and beneficial ideological virus will spread and infect us: a virus of the dream of an alternative society, a virus of society beyond the nation-state that will realize itself through global forms of solidarity

and cooperation. Just as the Chernobyl disaster started the events that brought the end of Soviet communism, the speculation that the coronavirus will end the communist rule in China is frequently voiced today. But there is a paradox here: the coronavirus will also force us to reinvent a communism based on trust in society and science. The communism in question here is more than an old-style communism, it will be possible with the existence of a superior global organization that can control the markets that will limit the sovereignty of nation states (14).

According to studies, there is a serious connection between people's political views and the threatening situations (15). A recent meta-analysis showed that exposure to objectively threatening situations such as terrorist attacks was associated with adopting more politically conservative attitudes (16). For example, terrorist attacks accelerated rightward shifts after each of the following events: the 1985 bombing of an AirIndia plane; the 1989 French airline bombings in Nigeria; the 1995 bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City; the 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC; and like a train bombing in London, England in 2005. When people see that their social system is threatened, they try to preserve the status quo, even if they have previously criticised the system and accept the possibility of change (17). There may be some who assume that the COVID-19 pandemic will not have a similar effect, as the examples we have described are predominantly man-made traumas. However, it should not be completely ignored that similar political consequences can occur in traumas that affect the whole society.

THE IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL WORLD ON THE PSYCOPOLITICS OF THE PANDEMIC

Being confronted with COVID-19 in a digital world has caused information pollution, and therefore anxiety and horror. Pandemics have occurred many times in world history. The Spanish Flu, which emerged during World War I, spread to the world because of the USA's censorship of the news. When the USA joined World War I, the virus was trans-

ferred to Spain. In 1918, the Reuters news agency announced the news of the pandemic, which they thought started in Spain, to the whole world, and as a result, the name of the pandemic was heard as "Spanish Flu" (18). We can say that the same situation happened in the COVID-19 pandemic as the Presidents of the USA and Brazil initially chose the path of denial (19). Fake news or misdirection has led to more alarming situations in some countries that are more dangerous than the virus. Especially in the USA, Donald Trump was criticized for not handling the pandemic well, especially on social media (20). Gun sales, which rose sharply in the early months of pandemic, continued to rise in the United States, with first-time purchasers accounting for more than 20 % of Americans who buy guns. In March 2020, research by the FBI announced that gun sales had reached the highest level since 1998. A third study of data compiled by Northeastern University and the Harvard Injury Control Research Center and seen by the New York Times shows that in 2019, 6.5% of US adults purchased a gun in 2020 (21). It has been described that the reason for this sudden increase in gun sales in the USA is the bad world syndrome, in this case, symptoms such as avoidance, aggression or being depressed occur, and people who become aggressive try to reassure themselves and perceive everyone as a threat or even a virus, thinking that the world is getting worse (22).

The other sale, which was the most subject to the digital agenda during the pandemic, was related to toilet paper. Toilet paper hoarding, which was in the news in Australia, has also taken place in places worsened by the virus, such as Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong. Nitika Garg from the University of New South Wales states that this situation is related to mass psychology and that people do this in order not to lose their sense of control (23, 24). In this context, how leaders address their followers reveals how major issues are perceived, strengthens public confidence in government's competence, and elicits behavior change that is aligned with key policy measures (25). While most world leaders took COVID-19 seriously when the pandemic began, some leaders, including Donald Trump, did not take it seriously. Trump said he believed it was like the common flu and was accused of delaying responding appropriately. Many believe that late

government intervention is responsible for thousands of avoidable losses (26).

To distract attention from his failures, Trump blamed China for the virus, calling it the 'Chinese virus', and even blaming the World Health Organization (WHO), his political opponents and the campaign of Black Lives Matter for the spread of the virus (27). Madagascar President Andry Rajoelina rejected the treatment procedures carried out against the pandemic, putting forward an alternative COVID-19 treatment that most of the world does not take seriously. While four African country leaders ordered the 'cure' of Madagascar, most leaders did not show support at the African Union meeting in April (28). The pandemic has not only accelerated challenges in health care, social, educational, economic, political, environmental, cultural and socioeconomic systems, but has also accelerated numerous misinformation such as rumors, myths, superstitions, conspiracy theories and deceptions (29). Scientific facts and unconfirmed information have become indistinguishable among the public. Misinformation, allegations, and conspiracy theories have reduced trust in treatment or vaccines that caused xenophobia against Chinese, psychological destruction, and intolerance to measures such as quarantine and isolation.

In Turkey, there is no study on the effect of the digital world on the psychopolitics of the pandemic, but when we look at the indirectly related studies, the following studies have been found: More than 1.5 million posts on Twitter during the pandemic in Turkey were analyzed, and it was observed that there were deteriorations in the mood of the citizens during the pandemic. This negative mood was mostly expressed as emotions such as anxiety, panic and fear. Although the Minister of Health, who is managing the pandemic, has a reassuring and integrative speaking style, he preferred a one-way communication instead of two-way communication on Twitter, which is more effective in digital sense, and has been criticized in this sense. Studies have concluded that a communication model that will keep the communication dynamic between crisis managers and those affected by the crisis is necessary in the future (30). In another study, it was concluded that Facebook was the platform where the participants encountered the most false information

among social Networks and among the traditional media types, the discussion programs gave the most false information. (31).

STATES' APPROACH TO THE PANDEMIC

Pandemics enter people's lives like an asteroid hitting a planet. They kill millions of people and leave many more with great losses, deep suffering, social and psychological collapse. They suspend and traumatize societies. They remove people from their normal patterns and cause societies to redefine themselves (32). An overly common sense of anxiety can activate strong dynamics that can also create a break in the society's relations with the market and the state. The state's test with this unexpected situation is a candidate to produce results as strong as the pandemic itself. The most important of these results is that the resulting uncertainty and risks increase the expectations of the state and the responsibilities of the state (33). With the WHO's declaration of a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, the first response of governments to this situation was to make an action plan to slow the spread of the virus. The states first closed their border gates, limited intercity movements, and imposed curfews. States use their authorities to impose various sanctions for the health of their citizens. These sanctions, which could be considered authoritarian, were tolerated by the society. At this point, it became important for leaders to provide accurate and understandable information to people who are confined to their homes, because during global pandemics such as COVID-19, politicians are responsible for communicating effectively with the public.

It is clear that there are effective responses to COVID-19 where leaders have succeeded in forging a sense of "us" that allows them to unleash the power of society and come together against the virus (34). The response of states and societies to the pandemic differs from region to region. The psychopolitical behaviors of societies also differentiate their responses to the pandemic and restrictions. Italy and Spain, which located on the Mediterranean coast, were late in taking precautions, and they were adversely affected by the pandemic and suffered many casualties. While

Germany applied the "controlled panic" principle, England tried to provide herd immunity with the free movement principle, but had to step back when it failed. It has implemented isolation and quarantine measures. Central and Eastern European countries, where the state practice and perception is more dominant, the pandemic was tried to be kept under control with more dominant measures. In this process, the restrictions of fundamental rights and freedoms, the medical interventions of the states in the pandemic, the competition between the states in vaccine studies and treatments, the mutual accusations between the USA and China, the loss of trust in the World Health Organization, the issue of "natural selection", which arises due to the high risk of elderly and chronic patients, and the moral and psychological state of societies have been the prominent topics of this process (35).

Mental health is a state of mental well-being in which people can cope well with many of life's stresses, realize their own potential, work productively and efficiently, and contribute to their communities (36). In order to protect and maintain this state of well-being during the pandemic, states have taken some initiatives for mental health and psychosocial support through NGOs and associations; In Lebanon, the Ministry of Public Health created an action plan that comprehensively addresses the mental health aspects of COVID-19, with teams from Egypt, Kenya, Nepal, Malaysia and New Zealand establishing emergency hotlines to reach people in need of mental health. The Government of the Bahamas decided to work with UN agencies to respond to the mental health and psychosocial causes of the COVID-19 pandemic. A non-governmental organization in Pakistan had to close the vocational training centers for economic strengthening, but people with mental health problems participating in training centers have started to plant face masks for health officials to support their communities. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Association of Psychiatrists and mental health NGOs have come together to form COVID-19 Partners in Mental Health and have worked with both government and civil society to provide education in mental health and teletherapy (37). The pandemic is a global problem. WHO has been the body that the whole world hoped to get information from since the

beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. When WHO defined COVID-19 as a serious pandemic, it had been a month since the pandemic started and most of the cases were in China, 98 cases were detected in 18 countries outside of China and no casualties were reported yet (38). At this point, WHO made a statement and announced that there was no need to restrict international trade and travel (39). On March 11, 2020, Covid-19 was designated a "pandemic" by WHO after the virus infected more than 118,000 patients in more than 100 countries and caused more than 4,200 deaths (40).

HOW DID TURKEY MEET THE PANDEMIC?

COVID-19 began to be experienced in Turkey with the first diagnosis on March 12, 1920. At the first stage, the state suspended primary and secondary schools, courses and exams were postponed in all universities. Full closure was implemented in various areas. On April 10, 2020, a curfew was declared in 31 provinces. The closure, which will last for 48 hours, caused interesting images to be experienced on the streets. People flocked to markets and bakeries in panic. Long queues formed in front of bakeries and markets for fear of starvation during the two-day closure. People were afraid of starving more than the virus. The end of the curfews caused a chaotic environment just like the beginning. The removal of bans was perceived as the abandonment of the rule-making in the hands of absolute power, and a carnival atmosphere was experienced with the removal of norms, rules and prohibitions. Although the virus threat has not disappeared, this environment can only be understood when those wild impulses that are suppressed in the unconscious go out of control (41). Turkey's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has set an example to the world and the region in the fight against this new virus and in solidarity. Turkey has one of the lowest case fatality rates (2.8% and 52.5% infections/million population), especially among the elderly aged 65 and over (high risk group). Although Turkey is both a European and an Asian country, it is also a Mediterranean country with its Mediterranean culture and heritage. Turkish people prefer close contact as a tradition. Gathering in social events and hugging are common in daily life. Preventing physical contact is essential for a virus that spreads through droplets and close contact.

Before the pandemic, Turkey had one of the most comprehensive universal health insurance plans. Health services were not only available to Turks, but also to more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees who took refuge in Turkey. Turkey's emphasis on health has a long history in the prevention and control of infectious diseases, starting with the early Ottoman Empire. Some health professionals have been trained and organized to provide psychosocial and mental health support to the society by being placed in a health institution in each province at least once.

A COVID-19 specific software module has been added to the Public Health Management System software to facilitate disease surveillance and contact tracing.

Mental Health Support System app has been developed by the Ministry of Health in order to provide a direct channel to protect mental health between mental health professionals and health workers. A mobile application called "Hayat Eve Sığar" was also developed by the Ministry of Health in order to inform, guide and protect the public about areas with high risk of exposure, and to warn about high-risk behaviors.

Turkey offers lessons and best practices that can be useful in contributing to the global health arsenal against the pandemic with the help of technical support of WHO (42). It is difficult to say that the success of the measures in the field of health described above is also in the economic field. It is thought that the studies carried out in this field are more affected in Turkey, which is one of the developing countries, and the real reflections of being affected will be seen in the long term. It can be said that Turkey is among the successful countries when the disease and death rates are compared in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the health measures taken within the scope of the pandemic process. However, as one of the objective criteria for the success of measures to affect other areas of life (social, economic, etc.), the influence on people's mental health can be considered. As can be seen in the two tables below, the proportional increase in mental disorders was higher in countries where socio-economic measures were insufficient (43).

In addition to illness and death anxiety, the most difficult psychological process that people experience during pandemics is economic inadequacy and job loss. This state of psychological anxiety also affects their economic behavior, their perception of

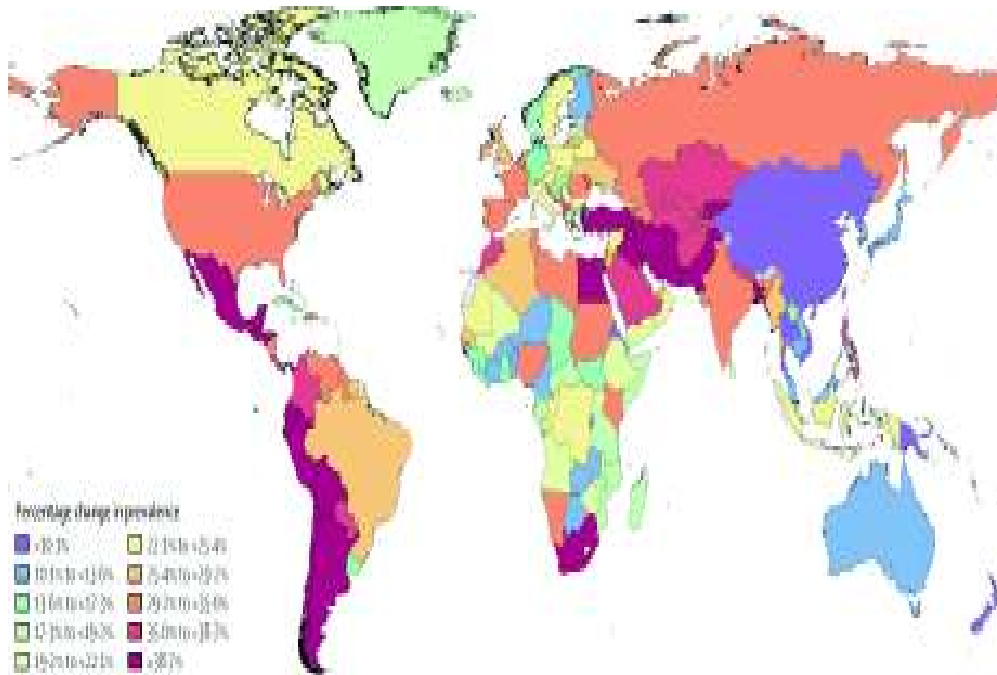


Figure 1: Change in the prevalence of major depressive disorder after adjustment for (ie, during) the COVID-19 pandemic

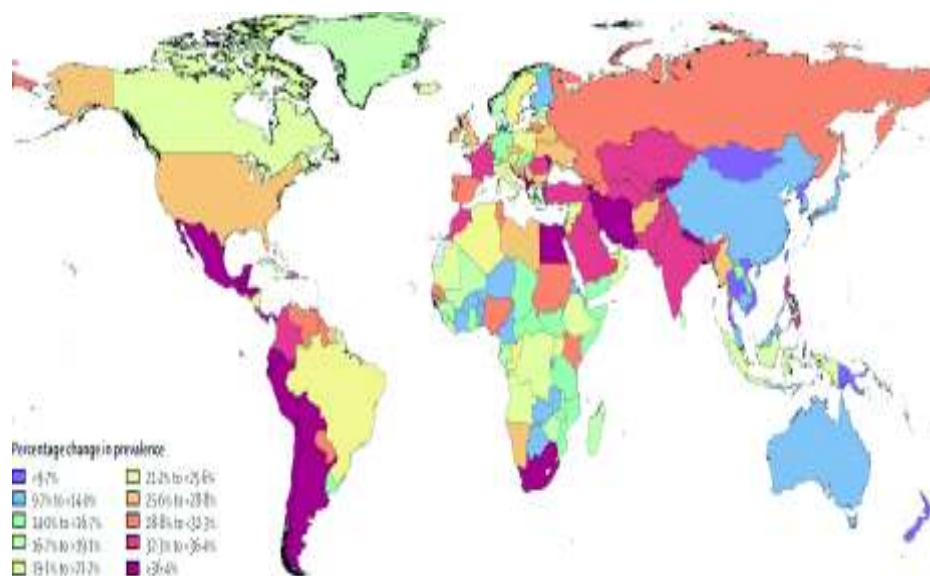


Figure 2: Change in the prevalence of anxiety disorders after adjustment for (ie, during)

the environment, thus their spending and living standards (46).

CONCLUSION

Pandemics, which were seen as the wrath of God before the modern age and believed to be met with resignation, have evolved into a perception that the state has to fight and all responsibility lies with the state in modern state systems (47). In this study, it has been tried to evaluate the process in the context of political psychology by referring to the policies and restrictions applied in the world and in Turkey in terms of health, economy and culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, each country has responded to its own socio-cultural structure and economic power, depending on its competence in the field of health. It can be said that Turkey has achieved a successful graphic with its drug sufficiency in the field of health, ease of access to vaccines and treatment opportunities provided to the entire population. With the explanations made using different information channels, it is aimed to create a perception to the public that the status quo will be protected in the context of political psychology, that the pandemic is under the control of the state and that the necessary measures are taken in line with the maximum good of the people. Despite the successful health policies, it is understood from the

published reports and research that the economic measures taken are insufficient and the effects of this on the psychological state of individuals will be seen in the long term. Pandemics have not lasted more than two years in world history, in other words, the pandemic is temporary, but the post-pandemic political processes will be determined by the political behaviors applied during the pandemic. Acquired COVID-19 pandemic experiences and national and international literature review have shown that; it is important to develop policies that will ensure preparedness for economic collapses that may develop secondary to the pandemic, as well as preventive health measures for pandemics. It can be said that, as a result of the negative factors that directly affect mental health such as compulsory social isolation, losses, death anxiety brought by the pandemic, as well as processes such as unemployment and bankruptcy caused by inadequate socio-economic policies, a pandemic of mental disorders may occur. It has been seen that many researches and articles have been published in the field of both health and social sciences regarding the COVID process, but it has been seen that there are no studies that address the pandemic, which affects people from a biopsychosocial perspective, from a psychopolitical framework and make recommendations. In this study, although there are some points that could not be addressed, Turkey's COVID process was evaluated from a psychopolitical window and it was tried to include determina-

tions that could be the subject of research in the future.

It is thought that WHO, which is accepted as the authority in the field of health in the world, informs about the pandemic by using all communication tools at the right time and in order to create a widespread effect, especially in order to make conspiracy theories that may lead to xenophobia. Politicians should also avoid making statements accusing the country where the pandemic started in the face of a common threat, such as the pandemic, in which countries must act together, and should not utter a claim that has not been proven by research such as the "chinese virus". Furthermore,

It may also be advisable to have an anniversary or commemoration day, where the world humanity can share their pain related to the pandemic.

Academicians specialized in political psychology should conduct more research in this field and lead the development of national policies suitable for the cultural and specific structure of the society.

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