



## RETHINKING GLOBAL COOPERATION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic, which still raises many questions regarding its origin and date of spread, has continued to be a global crisis for the past year with the risks, dangers and devastating consequences in all areas. Although panic and fear prevalent at the beginning of the pandemic has decreased with the emerging availability of vaccines, it is anticipated that the crisis will continue for a long time due to the issues of vaccine supply, distribution and fair sharing. Moreover, while economically and technologically strong countries “take care of themselves”, approximately 10% of the world population, especially societies in Africa, Asia and South America live below the breadline. Therefore, considering the fact that it is not always possible for these countries to supply vaccines using their own resources, it would be naive to think about the global reduction of transmissions or the end of the pandemic on a country basis. At this point, some questions arise: first, what is the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the management and control of the pandemic, as discussed frequently in the public; secondly, why “global cooperation” in the fair sharing of vaccines could not be realized; the last and most important one, why international cooperation, which is most vividly seen in international trade and related issues, has so far failed to meet the expectations during the Covid-19 crisis? This analysis aims to discuss the status of global cooperation, including WHO’s place in the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of these questions.

Numerous names and characteristic definitions have been given to the era we are living in. Especially in the post-1990 period, “new world order” and “globalization” are the most commonly used definitions in social sciences literature. Although there are many definitions from different perspectives, globalization is defined as “the process of increasing influence between individuals, communities, states and nations from politics to economy, from sports to arts, from trade to culture”, where the mutual dependency is at the center. As part of globalization discussions, a series of conceptualizations such as second modernity, postmodern, information society and risk society have been made regarding today’s societies and the international system. Among them, Ulrich Beck’s approach to the risk society is based on the basic argument that there is a new modernization that is an uninterrupted continuation of today’s modernity. In his article titled “Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity”, while discussing his thoughts on the risk society, Beck classified the present risks in categories such as ecological, political, injustice, economic, technological and individualization. Emphasizing that all of these risks are a product of human beings, Beck focuses on the risks caused by the unconscious practices in medicine and gene technology, as well as environmental problems resulting from inappropriate policies and practices in our age, especially in his work titled “Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk”. Describing the main reason behind the mentioned risks as “organized irresponsibility”, Beck em-

phasizes that there is a need for global and governmental awareness in reducing risks, strong supervisory and regulatory institutions with cooperation.

Nowadays, when globalization is constantly accelerating, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major global crisis as a concrete indicator of “organized irresponsibility”. As of February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the number of coronavirus cases is approaching 113 million worldwide. Approximately 2.5 million people died from the coronavirus compared to 88 million patients who have recovered. As of December 2020, looking at the vaccination rates by country, countries such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates, England, the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), China and Russia are among the top 10. Practice-based data shows that vaccination rates in African, Asian and South American countries remain at a very low level, with some exceptions when population and case rates are low. This picture shows that the vaccine was not distributed fairly, prompting a reaction from the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), Antonio Guterres. Guterres stated that “10 countries received 75% of the coronavirus vaccines in the world, while 130 countries did not even receive a single dose of vaccine,” and demonstrated his reaction to this injustice, expressing that the fair use of vaccines in this crisis is “the biggest test facing the global community”.

At this point, when we recall the North-South imbalance and inequality, it is a big question, why the UN, WHO, USA and EU, which are “identified with democracy and human rights,” remain silent and unresponsive to this injustice that affects the lives of millions of people. Globalization, while increasing the roles of global organizations, has also opened the discussions regarding the legitimacy and bindingness of these organizations. Although globalization has increased the importance of international organizations and other non-state structures in international relations, states still maintain their de facto position of being the main determinant actors both in their domestic policies and in foreign matters related to sovereign rights. In the context of international organizations, although there are differing views on the legitimacy of international law and its associated bindingness, the common view defended by international lawyers such as Jack Goldsmith and Eric Posner is that the basis of international law is insufficient and therefore its legitimacy is controversial. The problem of the legitimacy of international law has caused various criticisms of international organizations. This problem of the legitimacy of international law naturally reflects on the bindingness of the functions and decisions of international organizations. This problem has been manifested in WHO’s attitude and its relations with states, especially China, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Founded in 1948 with the aim of “reaching the highest possible health level for all people”, WHO currently has 194 members and around 7,000 personnel in 150 countries. The purpose of the organization is to ensure the cooperation

and coordination of health studies at international level. Also WHO can provide top-level advice to governments on international health issues WHO’s decisions are not binding on states. Looking at the relations of WHO with China in order to reach accurate and reliable data on the pandemic, it has been observed that the Organization lacks cooperation and coordination between the states. Due to this and some other allegations, former US President Donald Trump severely criticized WHO and announced that the US had terminated its relationship with WHO as of May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In addition to the USA, WHO has received criticism from France and Japan for various reasons. However, now that the vaccination studies are completed, although developed countries have received the majority of pre-ordered vaccines in stock, the fact that “nearly 75% of the world societies” have not received even a single dose of vaccine has been systematically mentioned by the Secretary-General of UN himself. It is highly thought-provoking both in terms of showing the wound of “global cooperation” and in terms of the fact that “the emperor’s new clothes” was recognized by the emperor himself.

The aforementioned confession made by the Secretary-General of the UN has also undermined the ideal of the motto “Only One Earth”, which is engraved in our memories, especially on environmental and health issues. At this point, the international community believes that international organizations have more ontological problems, in addition to legal legitimacy problems, as illustrated by the example of WHO. For now, without starting a new discussion over hegemony and taking the issue out of context, if the country accused of misleading WHO by hiding data in this crisis, which killed more than 2.5 million people, was not China but an ordinary country, what would be the reaction of the UN, WHO, EU, USA and other states? It would be appropriate to ask the question and leave the answer to the reader.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic, which we can say is the result of “organized irresponsibility” in our age, when global cooperation and global governance are no longer a choice, has opened the discussion on the existence and functions of international law and international organizations in the risk society. During this period, when globalization itself was frequently discussed, radical changes in national policies and significant breakdowns in relations between states were also experienced. The increase in xenophobia in some European countries at the beginning of the pandemic, “mask wars” between states in terms of mask supply and selfish policies far from cooperation where “everyone takes care of themselves”, as seen in the lack of sharing of the vaccines, are the most concrete indicators of fragility. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary for international law and global organizations to be re-discussed and transformed in line with the pace of globalization. In addition, it has shown the importance of raising awareness in a wide range of areas ranging from individuals to societies, states and international organizations against the risks posed by humanity itself.

## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rashid Meredov, visited Turkey and had a meeting with the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. During the visit, Minister Meredov and his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, signed a cooperation program for the period of 2021-2022. The parties agreed to intensify political, economic and cultural cooperation between the two countries. They will also coordinate their regional and multilateral activities (Kabar.kg, 24.02.2021).
- The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, signed a Decree on Ukraine's withdrawal from international treaties concluded within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In particular, Ukraine will withdraw from the Agreement on Civil Aviation and the Agreement on the Use of Airspace. President Zelensky set a task to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to notify the Council on Aviation and the Use of Airspace of Ukraine's withdrawal from the above-mentioned agreements (President.gov.ua, 23.02.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Ruslan Kazakbaev, had a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The parties discussed successful results of the recent visit of the President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Zhaparov, to Russia. The parties agreed to strengthen bilateral political and economic cooperations. Moreover, they emphasized the need to promote the Eurasian integration and inter-regional interaction. As a result of the meeting, the Ministers signed an Agreement on cooperation in the field of ensuring international information security (Kabar, 25.02.2021).
- According to Russia's Deputy Prime Minister, Alexey Overchuk, the trilateral working group on Nagorno-Karabakh, consisting of the deputy prime ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, will have an online meeting on March 1. The officials will discuss implementation of agreements on transport and economic relations. In particular, they will consider control issues, including safety, border, customs, sanitary, veterinary and phytosanitary norms. The working group will also finalize the draft report on restoration of the transport infrastructure facilities (TASS, 28.02.2021).
- Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlut Cavusoglu, received the governor of Moldova's autonomous Gagauzia region, Irina Vlah, in Ankara. Discussing the bilateral cooperation opportunities, Irina Vlah mentioned that they would evaluate an industrial school construction project in Gagauzia. The institution is expected to contribute to both the education of engineers and the development of the region's industry. Minister Cavusoglu said that Ankara would continue to support Gagauzia in every field (Aa.com.tr, 22.02.2021).
- The President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, received the Minister of Interior of Iran, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, who led a high-ranking Iranian delegation. The sides discussed a wide range of issues of bilateral cooperation and reportedly exchanged views on practical steps taken by the governments of the two countries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tajik president emphasized the need for implementation of comprehensive cooperation documents signed between the two countries (Asiaplustj.info, 24.02.2021).

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The Government of Kazakhstan and the Lower House of Kazakh Parliament, Mazhilis, discussed a possibility of increasing the country's minimum wage. The wage experienced substantial growth two years ago increasing from \$68 to \$102. Higher level of the wage cost the government an additional \$626.5 million. The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Askar Mamin, mentioned that the government was also planning to increase the minimum pension from 54% to 70% of the subsistence minimum (Qazaq TV, 24.02.2021).
- The Energy Ministers of the Turkic Council Member and Observer States conducted the first online meeting where they presented capabilities of the countries. The Ministers discussed energy sector reforms, best practices, advanced energy technologies and investment projects. The list of negotiated issues included joint implementation of energy projects, development of renewable energy and creation of the green energy zones. Energy cooperation is an important part of the Turkic Council Strategy for 2025 and the organization's Vision until 2040 (Turkkon.org, 24.02.2021).
- According to the Accounts Chamber of Russia, the country's public debt increased by 39.9% in 2020. In nominal terms, the growth amounted to \$73 billion. In total, the debt volume reached \$257 billion and accounted for 17.8% of GDP. In 2019, the country's debt grew by modest 7.8% and its share in GDP reached 12.3%. Russia mainly borrows from the domestic market. The domestic debt surged by \$62.4 billion, while foreign debt increased by only \$1.9 billion (TASS, 24.02.2021).
- Understanding the importance of trade-related information, the United Nations Development Programme jointly with the International Trade Centre have launched the Central Asian Trade Intelligence Portal in Kyrgyzstan. The portal aims to increase trade within Central Asia by providing free online data. In particular, the information will consist of key trade requirements, statistics, tariffs and business contacts. It is expected that the portal will enhance trade integration between Central Asia and the European Union (24.kg, 27.02.2021).
- As of January 1, 2021, external debt of Uzbekistan reached \$21.1 billion and accounted for 36.5% of GDP. The government of Uzbekistan attracted loans worth \$15.1 billion, while the state guaranteed loans amounted to \$6 billion. The government used the funds to finance agricultural and industrial projects, while \$2.6 billion were directed to energy projects. The country borrowed \$5 billion from the Asian Development Bank, \$3.7 billion from the World Bank and \$2 billion from the Chinese Eximbank (UzReport, 27.02.2021).
- According to Azerbaijan's Energy Minister, Parviz Shahbazov, the country invested \$18.3 billion in the economies of the Turkic Council Member States between 1995 and 2020. For the reported period, Azerbaijan attracted investments worth \$13 billion from those countries. Beside investments, trade cooperation between the countries is also deepening. Azerbaijan's trade turnover with its Turkic partners amounted to \$4.4 billion in 2020, increasing by 3.5 times compared to the 2009 indicator. Turkic States account for almost 18% of Azerbaijan's foreign trade (MENAFN, 25.02.2021).

## Society and Culture

- The Center for Strategic Research (SAM) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey and the International Turkic Academy organized an online conference titled "Turkic Republics on the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of their Independence: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Opportunities and Challenges in Cooperation in Education and Science". The event was attended by the heads of International Turkic Organizations, Ministers and Diplomats from Turkic States. The participants shared their thoughts on the achievements made during 30 years of independence and discussed prospects of future cooperation between the Turkic States (Turkkon.org, 24.02.2021).
- The Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Mustafa Sentop, the Deputy Foreign Minister, Yavuz Selim Kiran, the Governor of Ankara, Vasip Sahin, and ambassadors from various countries attended the opening ceremony of the replica of the legendary Tonyukuk inscriptions in Ankara's Altindag district. The original 1,300-years-old Turkic inscriptions are located in present-day Mongolia and narrate the historical events that occurred during the Gokturk era in Central Asia. Upon Turkey's proposal, UNESCO included the 1,300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the Tonyukuk Monument in its anniversary recommendations list for 2020-2021 (Dailysabah.com 22.02.2021).
- Mongolia received food parcels and hygiene products for 2000 families from the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). The donation was made in order to help low-income families in different regions of Mongolia and support the fight against COVID-19. The ceremony was attended by Mongolia's Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Protection, Zulfikar Sarkit, and TIKA's Coordinator in Ulaanbaatar, Emrah Ustaomer (Reliefweb.int, 22.02.2021).
- The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) has launched a food assistance program to Tajikistan with the financial support of the government of the Russian Federation. The assistance consists of 1,200 tons of wheat flour and 50 tons of vegetable oil. The food assistance remains part of the WFP School Feeding Program, reaching over 600,000 elementary school students in 2,000 schools across 52 rural districts and towns of Tajikistan (Asiaplustj.info, 22.02.2021).
- The Minister of Agriculture of Uzbekistan, Jamshid Khodjaev, and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) signed an agreement on the implementation of the project "Environmentally oriented regional development in the Aral Sea region". The project is aimed at supporting the governments of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in achieving sustainable development goals in transboundary waters of the Aral Sea region. The project has a budget of €8 million and will be implemented in the period of four years (Uzdaily.uz, 26.02.2021).
- Turkestan has entered into the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC), which will raise the international status of the city. Under the auspices of UNESCO, Turkestan will also host the fifth International Conference of Eurasia World Heritage Cities on April 2, 2021. The OWHC organizes different events dedicated to the management, preservation and enhancement of historic cities. Its program and projects promote and support the maintenance, recognition and enhancement of their world heritage (Astanatimes.com, 26.02.2021).