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Perception of Social Trust
and Pandemic Measures



Halil Nalcaoglu
Istanbul Bilgi University

Understanding the interplay between social trust, perceptions of common good, and Covid-19 response performance.

Contents

Preamble	2
Concepts and Literature	3
Social Trust and Compliance Behavior Towards Covid-19 Rules in Turkey	7
Conclusion	10
References	11

Preamble

This study aims to reveal the interplay between the concept of “social trust” and coronavirus measures, if any. With the empirical references relying on Human Development Monitor (IGM), a research study conducted in cooperation with INGEV & Istanbul Bilgi University Faculty of Communication, the study will utilize the findings of an earlier Social Cohesion research project conducted in association with INGEV & IPC (2018, 2020) as well as the data from WVS (World Values Survey 2018).

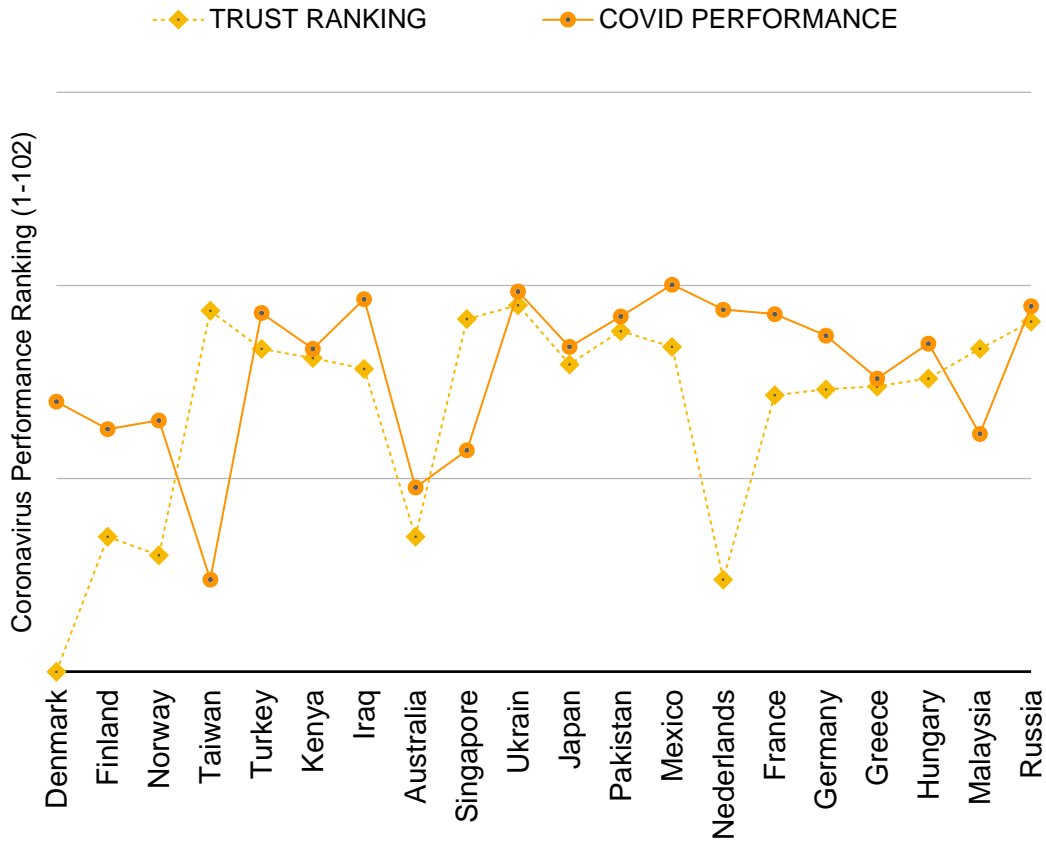
Concepts and Literature

Social trust can be defined as the belief that others would not harm us and neglect our interests (Min 2020). Social trust is defined in two broad ways in research literature: “particular trust” and “general trust.” “*Particular* trust” can be defined as the trust individuals have towards people they know, such as their friends or families. On the other hand, “general trust” corresponds to the degree of trust that individuals have towards the members of the community whom they don’t know personally. The concept of social trust is measured not only with theme-specific studies but also as part of standard indexes such as the World Values Survey. Level of social trust, which can be regarded as a basic element of “social capital”, can take on quite different values in different societies and at different times. WVS ranks the countries of the world in an index created by standardizing the responses to a wide range of questions about trust. For example, based on the answers to the question “*How much do you trust someone you meet for the first time?*”, Turkey ranks 47th (25.1%) among 85 countries according to the WVS 2018 data.

Although compliance with coronavirus measures may seem like an individual decision at first glance (a preference), it should be taken as a socially adaptive behavior which, to a great extent, unfolds in parallel with the behavior of others. Even apart from times of crisis like that of a pandemic, social trust is still a factor that broadly shapes human behavior. To further explain this idea, we can take the behavior of complying with traffic rules as an example. Although it may seem like an individual choice whether or not to obey traffic rules, individuals actually behave bearing in mind that they are a part of a system (pedestrian and vehicle traffic system) that exist apart from themselves – or at least they know this is what is expected from them. When the green light is on, pedestrians cross the road *confidently* as we know for sure that the red light is on for the vehicles, so no driver will run the red light. The decision and behavior to comply with coronavirus measures has similar dynamics as this example. While indoor, we put our mask on securely to cover our mouth and nose. Not only do we do that to protect the others nearby, but we also feel safer as we think others will behave the same way in response to our behavior.

To put it briefly, we can say that social trust, *among several other factors*, is a feeling that shapes the choice to comply with coronavirus pandemic measures.

As stated above, WVS findings reflect the data derived from international field studies conducted regularly. The coronavirus crisis has undoubtedly created extraordinary conditions in all societies around the world. In order to understand whether there is a relationship between sense of trust in society and effectiveness of the coronavirus measures, we can look at how the pandemic data have been progressing in the countries ranking at various levels in the standardized trust index. For instance, coronavirus pandemic performance of the countries ranking at different



Graph-1: Social Trust v. Coronavirus Performance

levels within the WVS trust index can be compared. For this comparison, we can use *Lowy Institute* data that ranks 102 countries by reviewing their Coronavirus responses through indicators such as total number of cases, the number of casualties, the number of cases and casualties per million, the number of cases detected in proportion to the tests performed and the number of tests conducted per thousand people. It will be sufficient to compare the country rankings in the WVS and Lowy indexes by looking broadly at the level of relationship between trust vs. Coronavirus performance. We can test the hypothesis "If countries are ranked higher in the trust index (WVS), they will similarly have a higher performance (Lowy) for coronavirus pandemic." Graph-1: Social Trust v. Coronavirus Performance) reveals this relationship.

Although it only provides an opportunity for a rough observation, Graph-1 shows a positive relationship between trust and coronavirus performance. Therefore, 20 countries selected with the exception of Taiwan, Singapore and the Netherlands have similar trust index positions and pandemic performances.

According to Min (2020) who looked at the relationship between the spread rate of the pandemic and social trust by using the WVS trust-related data set, it is understood that the general observation above, when elaborated in detail, contains significant complexities. The researcher used the criteria of "spread rate of the pandemic" and "the speed to control the spread", which are determined by more than one variable, rather than using the general coronavirus pandemic performance of the

countries. Min (2020) found that the speed to peak infection rate was higher for countries near the top rankings of the trust index compared to other countries. The reason for this is explained as the fact that the high trust within society causes close and highly social relations between individuals (high contact). The researcher also determined that the higher tendency to obey the rules and norms in such high-trust societies then starts comes into play. As a result, once the peak is reached, the speed with which the pandemic is brought under control was also high. At the risk of being speculative, we can say that this second finding confirms the overall result from graph 1, which accounts for the relationship between Coronavirus response performance and trust. In other words, high trust plays a role in the rapid control of infection after the peak has been reached, while it also contributes to the rapid spread of infection. There are also other studies indicating that high trust will further cement the behavior of compliance with the rules in the long run (Alessandri, et al. 2020).

Another fact that should not be overlooked in these observations is that there may be a relationship that goes the other way around between trust and the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, there are also such studies showing that the trust levels within the societies have decreased with the spread of the global pandemic (Bruck et al. 2020).

Social trust plays a role in determining not only the health response performance of countries, but also their economic performance. A study conducted in the USA (Mazumder 2020) compares the states that exhibit different levels of trust by evaluating their financial data during the Covid crisis. According to Mazumder, the companies located in high trust states outperformed others financially during the COVID-19 crisis. The researcher asserts that this positive relationship is specific to the period of crisis. The fact that the investors are able to obtain timely and transparent information from the companies in question plays a role in this performance.

Social Cohesion Research data conducted in partnership with INGEV&Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) can be used to examine the sense of social trust in Turkey in more detail. This study compares the levels of social cohesion indicators in Turkey for the years 2018 and 2020. The time frame in between these years spans the breakout period of the pandemic. The study findings show that there has been unfortunately an “erosion of trust” in almost every dimension of social cohesion in Turkey within these two years. According to the report published in February 2021¹, the trust level of individuals living in Turkey towards others in their society decreased from 61% in 2018 to 42% in 2020, creating a difference of 19 percentage points. Responses to a question that measures the tendency of people to follow the rules (“the people in Turkey typically tend to break the rules for their own benefit”) did not show a significant difference within two years, but the results were still quite high (2018: 61% and 2020: 66%). The rate of agreement with the statement “People in Turkish society are respectful towards each other in daily life” decreased from 43% to 18% in the same period.

¹ https://ingev.org/reports/Social_Cohesion_Monitor_2018_2020_Comparision.pdf

To summarize:

1. Turkey ranks 47th out of 87 countries in the ranking of “*trust towards the strangers*” in the WVS country ranking;
2. Turkey ranks 72nd among 102 countries in the coronavirus response performance ranking.
3. Despite significant deviations among the countries, there is still a positive correlation between “trust in others” and Coronavirus response performance.
4. Turkey underwent an overall “erosion of trust” for both institutions and individuals between 2018 - 2020.

Looking at these observations, how can a relationship be established between social trust and compliance with the pandemic rules? Both the concept of social trust and the behavior of compliance with rules are multidimensional. Therefore, several hypotheses can be put forward in this respect.

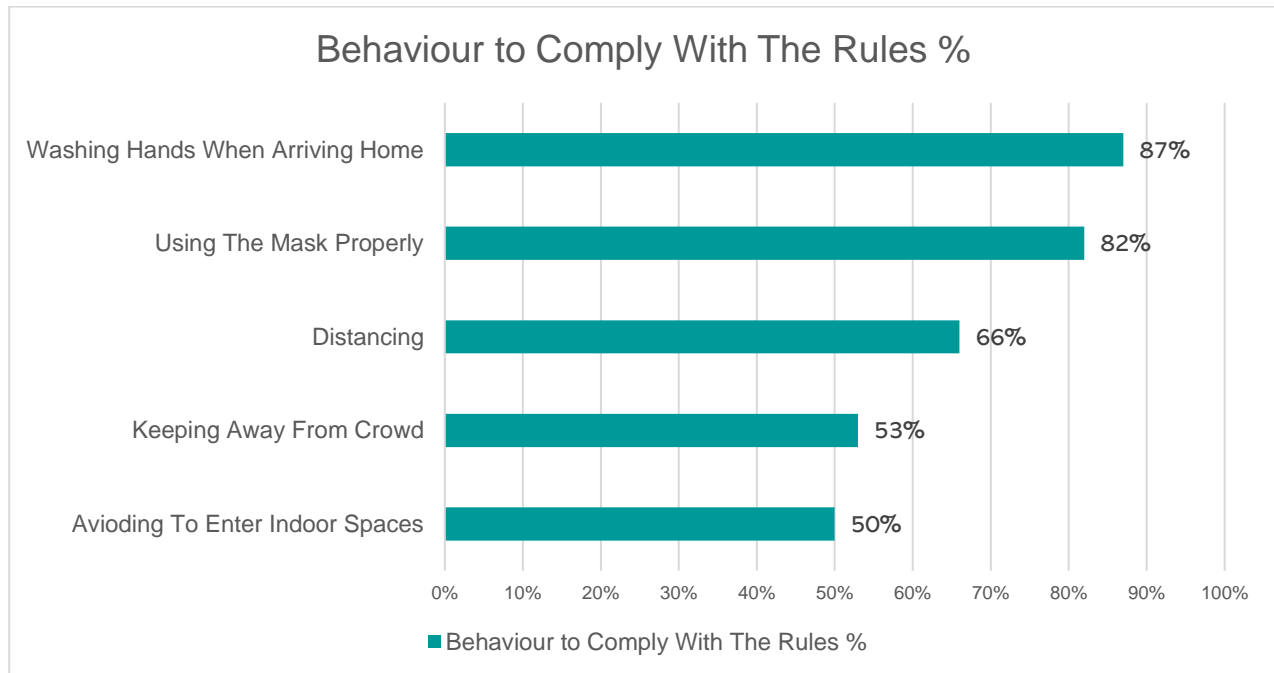
1. Belief that others will obey the rules leads one to abide by the rules.
2. High trust towards others enables individuals to feel “too safe”, causing them to relax the rules for themselves.
3. A high-level of distrust in others causes people to embrace the pandemic measures more firmly due to perception of risk.
4. In low-trust societies, people ignore the rules as they are inclined to ask themselves: “nobody follows the rules anyway, why should I?”.
5. Friends who trust each other to follow the rules well in daily life fail to follow the rules around each other as there is perceived to be low risk.
6. A person believing that his close circle of friends will follow the rules prefers to abide by the rules in an effort to protect them.
7. Although there is low trust that others will consider the common good, people still trust that others will abide by the measures against the pandemic as it is in their interest to protect themselves.

Each of these alternative hypotheses are open to verification (or falsification). However, the IGM research design does not allow for detailed testing of each of these hypotheses due to limitations in time and scope. Instead, a more general approach will be followed within the scope of this study, in an attempt to seek answers to the following questions: How do people living in Turkey act regarding the measures against the Coronavirus pandemic, how do they evaluate the behaviors of others, how much do they trust that others will comply with the rules?

Social Trust and Compliance Behavior Towards Covid-19 Rules in Turkey

Turkey has been fighting the coronavirus pandemic for nearly twenty months. There have been 6.8 million cases and more than 60,000 casualties since March 11, 2020 when the first case was officially reported. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of response has been fluctuating. As of September 2021, as many as 30 thousand cases and more than 250 casualties per day show that the coronavirus pandemic still poses a great threat to public health. The pandemic caused significant transformations in many areas on the global scale. Today, vaccination drives are considered the most important weapons in the fight against the pandemic. On the other hand, the defense strategy that has been consistently emphasized since the first days of the pandemic had to do with the use of *masks*, physical *distancing*, and personal *hygiene*.

The prevailing view is that, due to the variability of the policies and measures pursued as part of the fight against the virus in Turkey, the “trinity” of *mask-distancing-hygiene* has not been integrated well into social awareness effectively enough. The statement “they disregarded the rules”, which has long become a buzzword in the popular media language, may perhaps be true for the places where television cameras are rolling. However, we are talking about a large country such as Turkey. How true is the opinion frequently appearing in mainstream media about most people failing to follow the measures against the pandemic? IGM research sought an answer to this question. Graph-2 shows the extent to which the behaviors such as mask use, paying attention to distancing, washing hands, making sure that the mask covers both mouth and nose, avoiding entering indoors and keeping away from crowded places, etc. have been prevalent.

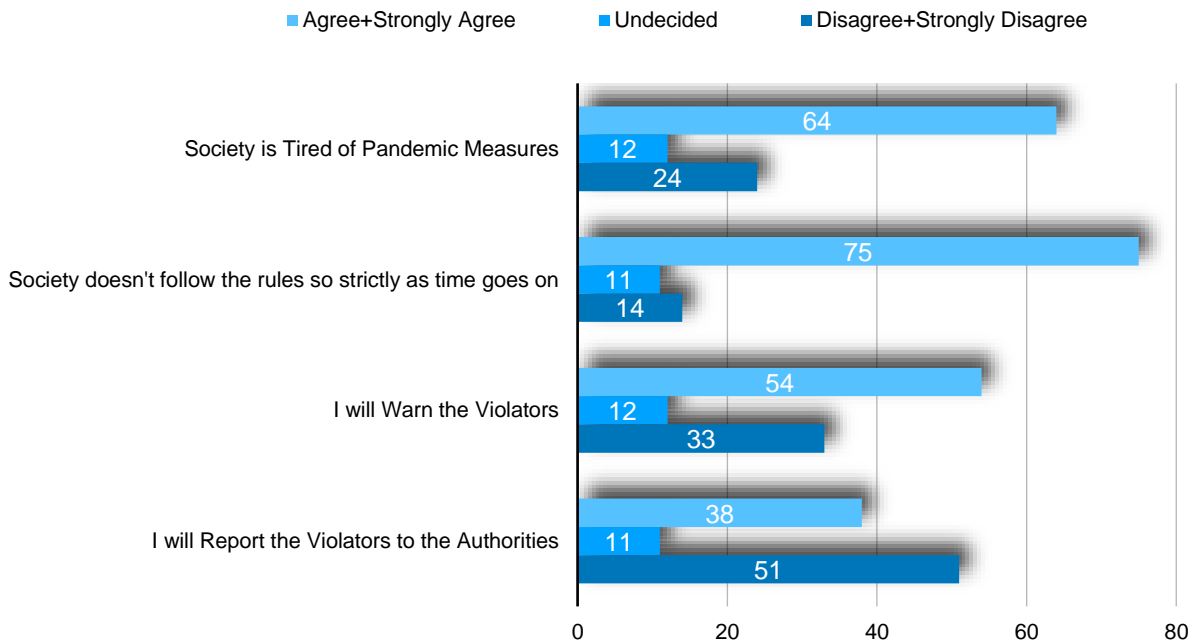


Graph-2 shows that individuals have adopted the aspect of hand hygiene significantly in the face of the coronavirus risk, approximately three out of four people use masks,

and two out of three people follow the distancing rule when meeting the strangers. It is questionable whether these rates are sufficient. To give an example, a study conducted in Wuhan, China, the city widely regarded as the ground zero of the Covid-19 pandemic, shows that the mask use behavior is observed by 96% while the distancing behavior by 85% (Jing et al.). On the other hand, it is understood that the rate of those who have been keeping away from indoor spaces and avoiding the crowds are lower at around 50%, due to the difficulty of these measures.

Leaving aside a behavior such as hand hygiene, which can also be regular practice under normal conditions even before the pandemic, wearing a mask and paying attention to distancing should be taken as behavioral changes. That there will be a level of difficulty involved in changing habitual behaviors is conceivable. With that in mind, it can be inferred that the individuals living in Turkey internalized partly, if not largely, that the pandemic poses a significant health threat.

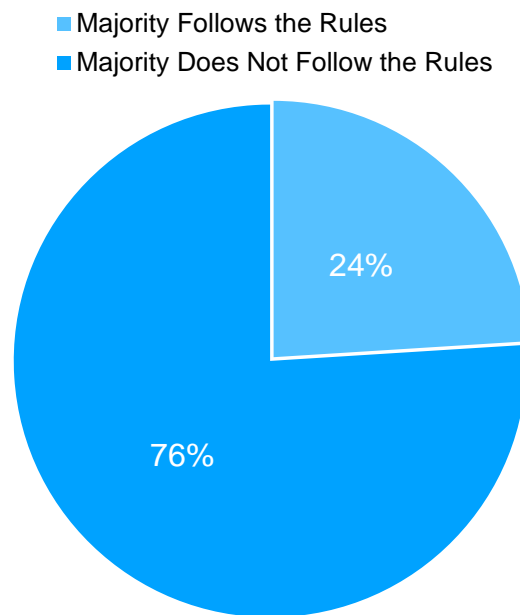
The measures of varying severity and difficulty, including full/partial lockdown, standard mask-distancing-hygiene measures, enforced ever since the breakout the pandemic, have led to a considerable fatigue in Turkish society, and therefore some sort of easing in compliance with the rules. While 64% of the society agrees with the statement "We are sick and tired of observing the Covid-19 restrictions", three out of every four persons think that the society "starts to ease the Covid-19 measures more frequently as time goes on". The awareness as regarding the measures does not lead to a widespread tendency to warn others to comply with the rules or to report the violators to the authorities (Graph-3: Fatigue, Easing, and Behavior of Warning the Violators).



Graphic-3 Fatigue, Easing and Behavior of Warning the Violators

The behavior of complying with the measures enforced during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic is associated with respect for others and acting in consideration of their needs. One of the important findings of the IGM research is that it points out the distrust that exists in the society in this respect. Individuals living in Turkey agree with the proposition “people respect each other in daily life” only at a rate of 31%. The belief that people will act in consideration of the needs of others remains at 28%. When distrust of others is measured by a tendency to violate the rules, a higher level of distrust emerges: 66% agree that “people living in Turkey will usually break the rules if it is in their interest.” 58% is found to believe that others will follow the rules only through punishment and penalties.

What do individuals who personally observe the *mask-distancing-hygiene* rules to a large extent think about whether others follow the rules or not? It can be said that Turkish people, who demonstrate a medium level of social trust according to the macro trust indexes, have a very low perception of trust when assessed at the micro level. We assessed the impact of benefit and punishment on compliance with rules. As expected, the perception that others comply with the measures appears to be at a very low level (Graph-4: Are Covid-10 Measures and Restrictions Followed?). When the high level of distrust observed in the table is examined in terms of demographic breakdowns, it seen that this holds true for all age or socioeconomic groups. There happens to be a tiny difference in the gender variable only. It can be said that women are more pessimistic than men in this regard (The statement “The rules are not followed” is agreed by 79% of women and 72% of men). Regionally, the most negative opinion was observed in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia Region (The people in this region agree with the statement “The rules are not followed” by 80%).



Graph-4: Are Covid-10 Measures and Restrictions Followed?

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between social trust and compliance with coronavirus measures. According to the data from the IGM research conducted with a sample representing the population aged 18+ in Turkey, people generally comply with the *mask-distancing-hygiene* rules that are defined as basic measures. Another remarkable finding of the study is the others' perception about obeying the rules. The individuals who personally follow the rules have the opinion that *others often fail to follow the rules*. The measures, which are stated by the experts to be very important in preventing the spread of the pandemic, will have the expected impact when they are widespread among society. The study shows that this behavior has been established to a certain extent but has not reached a level of society-wide awareness. The belief that the society in general does not comply with the rules will increase the vulnerability of the measures and prevent the establishment of a sustainable response and prevention dynamic against the pandemic.

Recent studies indicate that the individuals who are sick or have been in direct-contact with the sick during the Covid-19 pandemic have developed a decreased sense of trust towards others (Bruck 2020). We do not know whether this observation is true for Turkey. On the other hand, it can be deduced that social trust, as a deep-rooted historical and cultural concept, will only vary under extraordinary circumstances (for example, during a widespread crisis). The Social Cohesion Research (INGEV-IPC) data cited in this study show that there has been a significant erosion of trust in Turkey as of 2020. We see that several institutional structures, including the government, have been somewhat affected by this erosion. As is known, the central authority (Ministry of Health) plays a major role in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. It is obvious that trust in all public authorities, including this institution, should be increased in order to develop a stronger social awareness about compliance with the measures that the Ministry of Health wishes to enforce. Traditional sense of social trust in Turkey, which is not very strong, seems to have eroded in recent years, independently of the pandemic conditions. It is essential that this erosion be prevented, not only for compliance with the pandemic measures, but also for the general issues such as social unity, focusing on the common goals, and the desire to live together.

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Halil Nalcaoglu
Istanbul Bilgi University

Contact:

Email: info@ingev.org
Website: www.ingev.org
Phone: +90 216 540 50 21

Koşuyolu Mah. Koşuyolu Cad. No:52
Kadıköy / İSTANBUL

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