



Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe. Focus on Western Balkans

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Abstract

Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans by Neven Andjelic focuses on the changes in political and social freedoms in the Western Balkans before and during the pandemic. In relation to this aim, it draws on the reports of 20 research organizations, including Freedom House, Friedrich Neumann Stiftung and the World Bank, and develops categories such as "open society", "fairly open society", "opening society", "suppressed society" and "closed society" and includes the Balkans, the European Union, the countries in the region and Türkiye in the analysis. Although this study is important because it has been carried out from a perspective dealing with the course of freedoms based on a comparison of pre-pandemic and pandemic process, it should be indicated that lack of an inquiry into the reliability and validity of the studies used and the lack of sufficient employment of other relevant researches are among the prominent shortcomings of this study.

Keywords: Covid-19, Western Balkans, freedom, democracy.

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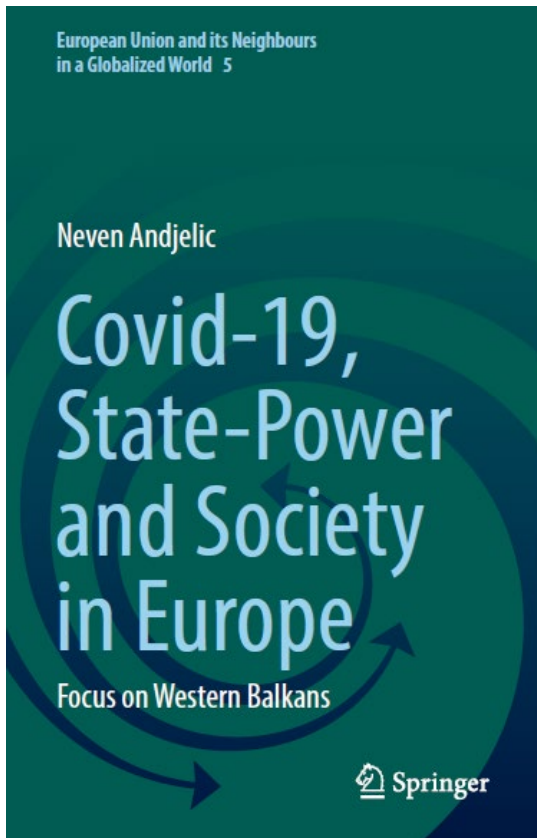
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Covid-19, Avrupa'daki Devlet Gücü ve Toplum: Batı Balkanlara Odaklanma

Öz

Neven Andjelic tarafından kaleme alınan Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans başlıklı bu çalışmada, pandemi öncesinde ve sırasında Batı Balkanlar'daki siyasal ve toplumsal özgürlüklerdeki değişime odaklanılmaktadır. Bu amaçla ilişkili olarak aralarında Freedom House, Friedrich Neumann Stiftung ve Dünya Bankası'nın yer aldığı 20 araştırma kuruluşunun raporlarından istifade edilerek "açık toplum", "oldukça açık toplum", "açıcı toplum", "bastırılmış toplum" ve "kapalı toplum" şeklinde kategoriler geliştirilerek Balkanlar olmak üzere Avrupa Birliği, bölge ülkeleri ve Türkiye analize dahil edilmiştir. Pandemi öncesini ve sürecini karşılaştıran bir bakış açısıyla özgürlüklerin seyrini ele alan bu çalışmanın yapılmış olması hayli önemli olmakla birlikte, istifade edilen çalışmaların güvenilirlik ve geçerliliğine dair bir sorgulama yapılmaması ve ilgili başka araştırmalardan yeterince istifade edilmemesi bu çalışmanın öne çıkan eksikliklerinden olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Covid-19, Batı Balkanlar, özgürlük, demokrasi.



Andjelic, N. (2022). *Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe. Focus on Western Balkans*. Springer. 187 pages.

In his book *Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans*, Neven Andjelic analyses the state-society relations and the course of democracy in 45 countries before and during Covid-19 in a comparative manner, with a particular focus on the countries in the Balkans, as well as those included in the European Union. The study is significant as it shows that abstract issues can be measured in a concrete way with the use of representative quantitative data. In particular, it is very important in terms of analyzing the political and social situation of the Balkans and other countries of the European continent that are in contact with this region before and during Covid-19. The study can also be considered as a methodological success. Indeed the author bases the dataset of the study on 20 periodically published research indices in the fields of political regimes, personal and economic freedoms, media freedoms, corruption, rule of law and human rights prepared by organizations such as Freedom

House, Friedrich Neumann Stiftung, The World Bank (pp. ix, 16).

Considering the publication dates of the indices, this study, dealing with the pre-pandemic and during the pandemic processes, focuses on the changes in liberal democracy, inequality, individual, social and economic freedoms, human rights, law, freedom of thought and media, before and during the pandemic. While the author focuses on the Western Balkan countries such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, he also includes and European Union member countries and Russia, Belarus, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan in his analysis. In this way, not only the Western Balkan countries are analyzed. Within the perspective of 20 indices, developments in other interrelated countries are discussed in the context of the issues.

With the help of the data provided by the indices, the author has developed categories such as "open society", "fairly open society", "opening society", "suppressed society" and "closed society" (pp. 17, 20). The author geographically matching these categories, designates Western (former) Europe (Ireland, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and United Kingdom) as open society (p. 17); Central Europe (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechia (Czech Republic), Cyprus, Slovenia, Poland, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Iceland) which is a mix of "old" and "new" Europe as fairly open society (p. 17); countries on the periphery of Central Europe (Malta, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Georgia, Kosovo, Armenia, North Macedonia, Albania) as opening society (p. 17); post-Soviet Western Balkan countries (Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) as suppressed society (p. 20); The Eurasian region, which includes Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Türkiye as the closed society (p. 20). The area emphasized by the author as Europe is understood in the most general extent as the countries included in the European continent. The author's method seems wrong at first glance. However, the countries in the indexes he used seem to have forced the author to make a general classification. Apart from these categories, the situation of countries is evaluated based on regimes with

concepts such as; full democracy, liberal democracy, electoral democracy, democracy, populist democracy, flawed democracy, open anocracy, closed anocracy, electoral autocracy, autocracy, populist autocracy, closed autocracy, liberal democracy, liberal democracy, full autocracy and hybrid regime with indices (pp. 38, 40-42). The main reason for using a large number of concepts related to democracy in this study is to utilize the concepts used in the indexes from which the data were obtained. The author deals with these indexes in an integrated manner, but fails to realize the democratic concept citations specific to each country's own context in a multidimensional manner.

This study, published as the fifth book of the European Union and its Neighbours in a Globalized World series, consists of nine chapters (pp. xi-xii). In the introduction part, the author mainly concentrates on deviation from liberal democracy, rise of inequalities, and the challenges of the international system (pp. 1-14). The second chapter by showing the analysis method of the study deals with the pre-pandemic process and the democracy that is claimed to be under threat (pp. 15-36). In the next chapter the Western Balkan regimes between European democracy and autocracy are focused on, the findings on European democracy and failures of democratic development in the Western Balkans are discussed (pp. 37-58). In the following chapter new forms of freedom and equality in the Western Balkans are described by particular emphasis on personal freedoms (pp. 59-74). In the fifth chapter economic freedoms in European countries and the Western Balkans are compared (pp. 75-92). In the sixth chapter, human rights, rule of law and corruption in the Western Balkans are discussed in a comparative way (pp. 93-116). In the next section, freedom of expression, media freedoms and media-state relations in the Western Balkans before the emergence of Covid-19 are discussed (pp. 117-136). The eighth chapter focuses on issues such as diplomacy, anti-government propaganda, and fake news during the pandemic in the Western Balkans (pp. 137-164). In the section that is written instead of the conclusion part, comments and analyses are made on the topics covered throughout the study with the references to the relevant literature (pp. 165-180). Based on the data obtained from the indices, the author analyses the pre and post-Covid-19 situation of the countries in the European region, especially the Balkan countries, in detail in the chapters, but does not refer to other sources sufficiently. In this sense, it would have been much better to compare the data specific to each country's own context with the data in the indices.

Andjelic argues that the process of disrupting elements such as liberal democracy, fundamental human rights and freedoms before the pandemic has become much more visible with the global pandemic on the grounds of securing public health. It is a known fact that such restrictions and obstacles have occurred in almost every country that has certain rankings according to the criteria of the indices and reports analyzed by the author. Thus, in many countries, new public health measures within the so-called new normal have undermined deeply rooted democratic cultures and practices. Accordingly, measures such as border closures, curfews and travel bans have been implemented for different periods of time in the countries studied.

The author, who states that countries which had a more cosmopolitan and global attitude before the pandemic put this approach aside with the pandemic and the economic inequality within and between states has gradually increased, emphasizes that especially populist politicians take advantage in this process (pp. 3-10, 178). However, it is seen that the author often explains the reasons under the authoritarian and populist leader emphasis with the data of only 20 indexes. Political, social, economic and similar contexts and different perspectives on why the leaders who came by elections were elected in the relevant countries are not expressed by author.

The data of the indices, which are often analyzed comparatively, are introduced to the reader and the positive and deficient aspects of the indices are promoted (pp. 16-17, 20), while the data are included in the study in tabular form (pp. xv-xvi). However, the author does not frequently include other indices,

opinions and researches related to the subjects can be mentioned as one of the important deficiencies of the study. In this respect, the use of only 20 indices as a data set in order to find an answer to the main problem of the study indicates serious deficiency. Because, in this study, a very limited inquiry is made about the reliability and validity of the 20 indexes (pp. 16-17), and the reader is not informed about how the data were collected in the context of which sample and by which methods they were analyzed.

The study, which focuses on the Balkans from the perspective of European and Western studies in general, seems to have a pioneering quality especially for Balkan studies. In this context, it is admirable that an up-to-date study has been carried out based on the data sets of certain indexes before and during Covid-19. Other researchers may have the opportunity to utilize and be aware of the indexes that constitute the data set of the research in a holistic manner. The study, which at first glance may attract the attention of politicians, sociologists and members of non-governmental organizations, contains information that may cause objections and criticisms in the relevant countries as it often does not go beyond the data provided by the indexes. The main reason for this is that the author did not consider the context of each country as well as the indexes. However, this may make it possible to carry out new studies in each country and play a guiding role for politicians in policy making.