

European Union and its Neighbours
in a Globalized World 5

Neven Andjelic

Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe

Focus on Western Balkans

 Springer

European Union and its Neighbours in a Globalized World

Volume 5

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*In loving memory of my father, Milenko
Anđelić, who taught me that it was possible to
be dedicated and loyal to the idea but critical
and aware of its shortcomings at the same
time, to be honest above all. To my mother,
Milica.
To the most supportive son and wife, Oskar
and Davorka.*

Preface

I have been conducting and broadening my research in the field of comparative political regimes with particular attention to the failings of liberal democracies. When I started developing the idea of a possible manuscript, the publications were few, but numerous authors have offered their excellent contributions since. At the time when I was thinking of abandoning the idea, the COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives. A busy, lively and generally free working life was transformed to the existence of restricted movement, social distancing, fake news and suppressed rights. Corrupt performances by some politicians that saw the pandemic as a business opportunity were not restricted to illiberal, hybrid or authoritarian regimes. Technological developments enabled governments to trace our movements, contacts and communications. The “Big Brother” society was genuinely possible and developed in some forms in some countries. Governments sought to increase their power while civic space came under immense pressure. Society was resisting rising state powers, but the new era had undoubtedly begun. Life, as we knew it, was interrupted. Stopped.

This gave me the idea that it might allow me to try and find out the state of play across 45 European states at the same time—on the eve of the pandemic, at the end of an era or at the interruption of the era. Instead of providing opinionated views based on lengthy and thorough research, I decided to focus on indices that many organisations are periodically publishing in fields of political regimes, personal, economic and media freedoms, corruption, the rule of law and human rights. The idea was that empirical findings of others would enable me to study society and state-power objectively. The 20 indices consulted invite for interpretation of their findings. They use different methodologies and are conducted at different periods. Academic vigorousness would probably say, perhaps, they should not be combined. However, I found that I am personally very interested in measuring the performances of the state. A look at the media confirms many people share this interest. This made me more determined to the idea of compiling the indices. After all, the lockdown restricted our possible activities to books and television. The project offered an alternative that might have helped me keep my sanity. It is not certain that it was

successfully preserved, but, more importantly, the result of this attempt is before you to inform yourself, think of it critically and make your judgement.

Therefore, I decided to do the “unthinkable” and create an index based on 20 indices. The state-power and society index represents 20 specific measurements looking into the elements of this relationship that came under specific scrutiny during the pandemic. The issue has been around before. This is an experimental attempt to discover the specifics of relations between the state and the society and offer further empirical support to arguments about specific countries. The resulting categories have been developed by me and are based on different categories in the consulted indices. They range from the “open society” to the “closed society”. The three categories between the extremes are “fairly open”, “opening” and “suppressed” society. I hesitated from arguing that one type of society is better than the other. However, the general question is whether you would prefer to live in Ireland or Switzerland, the two most open societies, or in Azerbaijan or Belarus, the two most closed societies.

I have been testing my students at Regent's University London for generations by asking them to choose a leader they would like to live in the imaginary state. They were offered a choice between Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, Xi Jinping and Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Angela Merkel was always the most popular choice by far. Vladimir Putin usually came a distant second while the other leaders would receive a vote only incidentally.

Restricted movements and social interaction indeed increased our email correspondence with friends and colleagues. The intellectual exchange with Mareike Fröhlich proved crucial in sticking to the original idea of producing the index. Together with Anja Trautman and Manuela Schwietzer at Springer, her opinion and advice provided me with the agility and determination to continue with the project and, eventually, finish it. I am immensely grateful to Mareike, Anja and Manuela. Abdus Salam Mazumder helped me with a technically complex process of submitting the manuscript. Shikha Chopra edited the text. I am grateful to Shikha and a colleague of mine, Kenneth Morrison, who put me in touch with her and with whom I had many lengthy conversations.

James Gow was one of the examiners of my doctoral thesis over 20 years ago. I am lucky that we have stayed in touch, and his ideas, intellectual challenges and advice always helped me to further develop some of the arguments, ideas and thoughts. Friends of mine, Mladen Sančanin and Zoran Stevanović offered not only a friendship but were tortured by drafts of some chapters when I needed critical responses and was afraid to show it to anyone but confidentially to a few friends. Many conversations with Cornelia Sorabji inspired my further thoughts on state and society. Tihomir Loza's expertise in media was often an excellent direction on where to look for further knowledge and information.

My research in the recent past resulted in academic articles published by the *Journal of Regional Security* in Belgrade, Forum za sigurnosne studije (Forum for Security Studies) in Zagreb, and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Sarajevo. Initially, I planned to use large sections of these articles in this book. However, I ended up with

a few ideas and sentences, a paragraph on occasion already published there. My colleagues and editors of these publications provided me with a critical overview and editing that indirectly helped sharpen my arguments here. Hence my gratitude to Filip Ejodus, Ružica Jakešević, Nermin Kujović and Alfredo Sasso. Marko Kmezić helped me access some works published by him and his colleagues that mainly gravitate towards the University of Graz and the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. Duško Zavišić and Dunja Latinović helped access some documents and articles.

My regular correspondence with Vildana Selimbegović, editor of the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodenje*, provided me with additional insight into the societies of Western Balkans. At the beginning of the lockdown, I published one article in this newspaper that was received well and helped me to develop my thoughts presented in the introductory chapter of this book.

The book is based on 20 indices. Permissions to use them were sought and provided by those authors and organisations who required them. Otherwise, they are referenced throughout this work. Of course, I am grateful to all the authors and contributors to those twenty indices:

- Article 19 (2020) The Global Expression Report
- Cato Institute (2019) Human Freedom Index
- Center for Systemic Peace (2017) Global Report 2017
- Civicus Monitor (2020) National Civic Space Ratings
- Economist Intelligence Unit (2019) Democracy Index 2019
- Fraser Institute (2017) Economic Freedom Index
- Freedom House (2019) Freedom and the Media 2019
- Freedom House (2020) Freedom in the World 2020
- Friedrich Neumann Stiftung (2019) Freedom Barometer Index
- Friedrich Neumann Stiftung (2020) Human Rights Index
- Foundation for the Advancement of Liberty (2019) World Electoral Freedom Index
- The Heritage Foundation (2020) Index of Economic Freedom
- Reporters Without Borders (2020) World Press Freedom Index 2020
- Transparency International (2019) Corruption Perceptions Index
- V-Dem Institute (2020) University of Gothenburg. Annual Democracy Report 2020
- V-Dem Institute (2019) University of Gothenburg. Freedom of Expression Index 2019
- V-Dem Institute. (2019) University of Gothenburg. Political Corruption 2019
- The World Bank. (2018) Index of Economic Freedom Score
- World Economic Forum (2020) Social Mobility Index 2020
- World Justice Project. (2020) Rule of Law Index

Some of these organisations continued to observe developments during the pandemic and offer new findings. Many independent researchers, international organisations, governmental and non-governmental and think tanks produced valuable documents resulting from their research. Many works have been consulted. It is

worth noting the project by the Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government that follows stringency measures by governments of the world.

It all comes back to the idea of an open society. Are we happier in the society developed within a state where we do not necessarily know the name of its president and are left to individual existence, or are we more inclined towards the society that glorifies the president of the state, sing songs to honour the leader and enjoys in the imaginary collective mission? The alienation might be unpleasant, even unhealthy, in the open society. However, the dictatorship of the majority in the closed society might be even less pleasant and ultimately dangerous for free minds.

London, UK
October 2021

Neven Andjelic

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List of Abbreviations

AKEL	<i>Anorthotiko Komma Ergazomenou Laou</i> (The Progressive Party of Working People)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
B & H	Bosnia-Herzegovina
BiH	Bosna i Hercegovina (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CNN	Cable News Network
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
DPS	Demokratska partija socijalista (Democratic Party of Socialists)
DW	Deutsche Welle
ECNL	European Center for Not-For-Profit Law
EC	European Commission
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
EU	European Union
FTSE	Financial Times Stock Exchange
HDZ	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (Croatian Democratic Community)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and other sexual minorities
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and other sexual minorities
LSE	London School of Economics
M5S	<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
OCCRP	Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OSCEPA	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly
RAE	Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians
RFE	Radio Free Europe
RT	Formerly stood for Russia Today
SDA	Stranka demokratske akcije (Party of Democratic Action)
SNSD	Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats)
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
TRT	Turkish Radio Television
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
U.S.	United States
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracies
V4NA	Visegrád Four News Agency
VOA	Voice of America
WB	Western Balkans
WB6	Western Balkans Six
WWII	World War Two

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Chapter 1

Instead of the Introduction



1.1 The Shift Away from Liberal Democracy

“COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built,”¹ the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, described the global situation in 2020. When the EU’s Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, conferred to a group of ambassadors in Brussels that “a British government effort to distract from domestic criticism over the handling of the coronavirus crisis may have contributed to London’s decision to backtrack on the Brexit deal,”² it was yet another example of how the pandemic has shifted politics. When the government in a long-established liberal democracy contemplates breaking international law and its own commitments they have agreed to, it is a clear sign that a crisis of this political model has been accelerated by the spread of COVID-19 or has been used by the political elite to justify their abandoning of some of the essential values of liberal democratic regimes.

The pandemic did not change politics and society. It rather accelerated and strengthened tendencies and trends that were already present and developing before the virus spread. Like in the past, major incidents initiated significant changes that would happen regardless, albeit at a slower speed. In 1666, the Great Fire of London forced construction changes and relying on fireproof material like bricks. Cholera in the nineteenth century and a plague, several times in history, changed characters of European cities by shifting values of professions. With fewer surviving city dwellers, works of skilled manufacturers came in greater demand and became more valued. Major rivers running through the cities were not used as sewage canals any more. At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, the invention of cars cleaned streets of horse dung and dirt. Another illness, tuberculosis, urged city planners to plan more open spaces and parks. Pollution and smog forced the shift

¹Guterres (18 July 2020).

²Politico (15 September 2020b).

from coal to gas in the mid-twentieth century. COVID-19 is following the suit. It is revolutionising the way people work, communicate and commute.

Politics and society have already been changed by 2020, or, at least, vital signs were there that significant changes might occur. COVID-19 might be seen as a catalyst for a change that might have been wished for by many in society, but in effect, it is merely an accelerator of the inevitable changes. After all, Trump, Brexiters, Xi, Putin, Bolsonaro, Obrador, Duterte, Modi, Orbán, Erdoğan, Borisov, Rama, Vučić, Đukanović, Izetbegović, Dodik, and Čović have already been in power and doing their best to change societies. Le Pen, Salvini, and Wilders were pushing for changes from the opposition benches. COVID-19 might be their ally in attempts to change politics in Europe.

The state of liberal democracy had been endangered before the pandemic by the growing influence of populist political parties across Europe and the increasing number of regimes that could not be described as liberal. Jan Zielonka even named it a “Counter-Revolution.”³ Political forces on the rise are often described as nationalists. However, they prefer different terms when describing their policies like “patriots,” “sovereignists,” “statists,” or, by those willing to show off their education, “*étatists*.” The diversity of populist political forces is not reflected only in how they describe themselves. It is primarily a politics’ tool that galvanises popular support in reaction to the established elites’ policies. Some authors noted that “liberal democracies are increasingly dominated by highly educated and liberal elites whose backgrounds and outlook differ fundamentally from those of the average citizen.”⁴ The global financial crisis negatively affected the masses and significantly increased support for what is often perceived as anti-elitist forces. They have already existed in society, but the political margins were their supposed destination under the usual circumstances.

Mudde and Kaltwasser remind “that the ultimate source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body, which, if not taken into account, may lead to mobilisation and revolt.”⁵ Mounk argues about the nature of populism that “we must recognise that it is both democratic and illiberal – that it both seeks to express the frustrations of the people and to undermine liberal institutions.”⁶ The change in voting habits of working-class citizens in European democracies “allowed those parties, which have been tainted by their links to European authoritarianism, to claim the mantle of democracy.”⁷ “Since the start of the century,” Edward Luce writes, “the West has forfeited much of its prestige... As Western democracy has come into question, so too has its global power.”⁸

³Zielonka (2018), p. 2.

⁴Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), p. 85.

⁵Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), p. 10.

⁶Mounk (2018), p. 35.

⁷Judis (2016), p. 108.

⁸Luce (2017), p. 104.

To understand the Western Balkans, one needs, in addition to the knowledge of the local politics and society, to accept the global changes and put them into the context of the rule in the Western Balkans. Lack of developed liberal democracy in this region has produced charismatic populist leaders who tend to exercise an authoritarian form of governance. Some European democracies seem to have moved in this direction. This was the context just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

States have reacted to the virus's spread by taking the increased powers and concentrating them internally while initially applying isolationist policies externally. Although these actions have been caused by emergency measures and have generally attracted popular support, there is a question of whether all the states will return to the "status quo *ante bellum*."

1.2 The Rise of Inequality

The support for the concentrated powers might have come out of necessity. However, pre-COVID electoral results in several countries usually associated with a highly developed liberal form of democracy, like Germany, France, Spain, Italy, have been showing a rise of populist parties, many of whom have an authoritarian agenda. A form of neoliberal capitalism, supported by the deregulation at a national level and the unprecedented strength of globalisation processes, has created an economic model that, when powered with the developed liberal-democratic political model and economic forms of neoliberal capitalism, increased profits exponentially. During the pandemic, the state's behaviour seems to have been contrary to its role in the pre-COVID times. Strong powers and isolationist policies have succeeded policies of deregulation and globalisation. The change was potentially welcome by parts of the society who felt left aside by the global liberal order processes.

The economic model of neoliberal capitalism has been accepted in its various forms almost universally. One of the significant results is increasing economic inequality. It is reflected in the increased economic inequality between states. Besides, the inequalities within states have risen. The population is becoming polarised as a consequence. The created inequality has developed the potential for a political power to be gained by a yet to be created new illiberal elite. Another significance to the process has been manifested in the spread of populist movements during the early twenty-first century. Realising that the polarisation further increases inequality and discrimination, regardless of whether it is imaginary or real, the masses turned away from traditional political parties and leaders. They were attracted towards the alternative, most notably presented in the form of the rising populist leaders. However, the privileged elites have managed to establish global domination but are being challenged at a national level. The populist movements are not global but national, which is where the major challenge to the status quo arises.