



## Book Review

**Neven Andjelic. 2022. *Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans*, Cham: Springer (European Union and Its Neighbours in a Globalized World 5). 200 pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-91073-0 (eBook), € 117.49**

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In *Covid-19, State-Power and Society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans*, Neven Andjelic uses quantitative measures to offer an impressive account of how state-society relations and democracy evolved across different regions of Europe. The author focuses on how countries reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby shaping various aspects of society and politics. In doing so, Andjelic embarks on an ambitious methodological journey. He unravels hitherto undertheorized aspects of democratic backsliding by combining 20 indices and constructing an original index to classify 45 countries into open, fairly open, opening, suppressed, and closed societies. As the author notes in the preface to the volume, such an approach may seem “unthinkable” and risky but—and here I concur with Andjelic—the exercise may be quite useful analytically as, so far, scholars of the Western Balkans have not compared antiliberal trends across Europe.

Indeed, we know that everywhere the pandemic has been instrumentalized by various populist politicians, interested in undermining liberal democracy and maintaining their grip on power. As Andjelic observes, the public health crisis only “accelerated and strengthened tendencies and trends that were already present and developing before the virus spread” (1). In this sense, the pandemic resembles a critical juncture, an extraordinary historical episode, that temporarily disrupts politics-as-usual across Europe in several unusual and worrisome ways.

First, as the author pertinently notes, governments across various political regimes adopted anti-Covid-19 policies, which often infringed on human rights, weakened democratic processes, and abused individual freedoms for the sake of public health. More open societies experienced the same pressures as authoritarian states and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the author highlights the absence of any correlation between authoritarian tendencies and the suspension of democratic principles during the crisis (29–33). Next, it seems that everywhere legislatures and judiciaries either suspended or surrendered their prerogatives to the executive branch, a process which, combined with the war-like rhetoric accompanying the new public health measures, eroded well-established democratic practices. Moreover, as Andjelic remarks, the pandemic has undermined the neoliberal

economic models that emerged during the last globalization wave. Border closures, lengthy domestic lockdowns, travel restrictions, and generous emergency economic programs all illustrate how state interventionism is necessary to uphold the dominant neoliberal order in times of crisis (11).

Second, the countries of the Western Balkans, which the author knows very well and explores in depth, lack strong institutions and democratic traditions, rendering them more vulnerable to populist and dictatorial temptations. Such trends have already been confirmed by a number of quantitative indices, such as the Pandemic Backsliding Index (V-Dem Institute) and the Covid-19 Government Response Stringency Index (Oxford University) presented in the book.

Third, readers will find Chapter 8 particularly refreshing as it describes various instances of pandemic-related antidemocratic practices. While reading this chapter, one is reminded of Foucault's description of the seventeenth-century plague against which new technologies of discipline and surveillance were developed, leading to the emergence of the panopticon. Indeed, the governments of the Western Balkans mobilized their societies in the struggle against the virus, suspending the usual economic routines, introducing curfews, banning outdoor activities during night hours, and preventing aged individuals from leaving their homes. Canton 10 in Bosnia-Herzegovina even prohibited fellow citizens from crossing into its territory (146). In Serbia, anti-lockdown protests were violently suppressed, while in Montenegro some citizens were detained for spreading misinformation on social media (151). Criticizing governments for their mistakes in handling the pandemic became risky. Indeed, the author raises a critical point when he writes that "the new situation and the lack of knowledge and expertise made it challenging to distinguish between fake news and real news critical of the authorities" (152). The spread of conspiracy theories posed an additional challenge. Andjelic describes instances in which Serbian officials spread the erroneous belief that the virus is part of an economic war waged by the West on China, pointing out that such and other conspiratorial theories were quite popular among the population of the Western Balkans (152–3). Another problematic practice concerned the violation of the right to privacy, as some states such as Montenegro publicized the names of infected persons, generating online stigmatization campaigns.

The volume does a great job in dissecting democratic backsliding processes during the pandemic amidst the global rise of populism. Indeed, one cannot but agree with the author's claim that during the early stages of the crisis the anti-elitist rhetoric portrayed mainstream parties and the media as "enemies of the people", promising the consolidation of the sovereign nation-state and of "the people" in their imaginary battle against the external forces of globalization. In this sense, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit politicians in

the United Kingdom, as well as like-minded figures from the Western Balkans have adopted the same tactics, exacerbating societal anxieties and capitalizing on emotions such as nostalgia, anger, and fear.

One minor comment refers to the classification of countries on the openness scale. Perhaps readers from Eastern Europe may be justified in maintaining a dose of skepticism when they find out somewhat surprisingly that Ukraine has been cataloged as a closed society akin to Belarus and Russia (19), while the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has been placed in the same basket with the authoritarian leaders of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, and Turkey (171). However, this methodological point does not influence the argument laid out in the book as the author displays a profound knowledge of the democratic backsliding transformations unfolding simultaneously across Europe and beyond.

Overall, the book is well written and deserves much praise for highlighting the complex relationships between state power and society across the familiar Western European context as well as in the less-studied countries of the Western Balkans. In all, Andjelic's account represents a valuable addition to the field of comparative democratization studies.