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Local Turn in Knowledge Production About Post-Conflict Societies: The Case of the Balkan Peace Index

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ABSTRACT

The notion that peace can be measured has been heavily criticised in peace and conflict studies. The critique has even produced an alternative approach based on local voices and participatory methods, where peace is understood as a subjective category. Still, alternatives have not been successful in translating contextual knowledge into meaningful policies. By relying on the 'local turn' and the Balkan Peace Index, the article tries to answer whether the contextual knowledge of local researchers could be used in producing an index that is policy-relevant yet still grounded in local realities of countries where the measurement is taking place.

Introduction

In some ways, indicators are like witchcraft.
Witchcraft is the power to guide the flow of
supernatural forces for good or harm. (Merry 2011, 92)

In today's world, there is a constant need to measure and compare every aspect of our lives. Whether it is the quality of the food we eat, the speed of the internet we use, places we want to live or work or the university we wish to attend, there are the Michelin Star Index, Speedtest Global Index, World Best Cities Index, Shanghai Ranking and/or Digi-Nomad Index to provide us with an abundance of information, help us evaluate and compare various categories, and offer us the ideal choice for our current dilemma.

The same goes for global governance, which has become almost unthinkable without measuring and ranking. As Cooley (2015, 2–3) observes, we have established global indexes to measure 'human development, quality of life, hunger, business environment, budget transparency, aid transparency, environmental performance, democracy, media freedoms, civil society, and economic freedoms'. Furthermore, since its foundation in 1945, the UN has organised and implemented over 70 peacekeeping missions, 12 of which are still active with more than 90,000 active personnel (Williams and Bellamy 2021). In all of them, almost every single aspect of a mission is meticulously planned, evaluated, re-evaluated and measured (Autesserre 2014; Mac Ginty 2017). Similarly, various IOs, INGOs, think tanks and CSOs have flocked to the peace-measuring pond, offering

their take on the measurement of various aspects of peace, from the state's capacity to provide for its citizens, media freedoms, security sector reforms, corruption, and elections, to more global issues that are concerned with the quality of peace, state of democracy or conflict risks. It seems that for every social phenomenon out there, there is someone who will scale it and turn it into an index.

So far, these endeavours have attracted many critiques among so-called ordinary people (Mac Ginty 2021) and academics. For 'folks back home' indexes are just another technocratic exercise that has no impact on their daily lives and their struggles. For academics, critiques that rest on universalistic aspirations of peace indexes and unequal power relations between those measuring and those being measured have more weight but similar meaning. Consequently, this article explains the principles and methodology behind the development of the Balkan Peace Index (BPI), an index tailored for evaluating levels of peacefulness across seven countries in the region now known as the Western Balkans. Built on the foundation of the 'local turn' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; see also Džuverović 2021) in Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS), the BPI places a concentrated focus on a specific region where local researchers possess in-depth knowledge of the domain, are proficient in the local language, and can actively engage with the resident population. The methodology of the BPI represents a convergence of internationally recognised indexing methods and participatory approaches derived from on-the-ground field research. Furthermore, the objective of the BPI extends beyond a snapshot of the current state, emphasising actionable insights for improvement and pre-emptive measures against the potential deterioration of the state of peace in one country.

The research is situated within the broader debates about the local turn in PCS. Starting from the critique of liberalism and its top-down and technocratic peacebuilding blueprints, the main focus of this debate is on local infrastructures for peace and communal forms of peacebuilding, but also on empowering local researchers who possess contextual knowledge (see Hunt 2023). However, even with all the progress that has been made during the last decade in this respect (see Ejdus 2021), the change is still very much nominal. The latest research suggests that local researchers do participate more in these debates but have almost no impact on theory building or conceptual advances when it comes to peace and peacebuilding. At the same time, 15 per cent of the world population (coming from the global North) still produced between 72 and 90 per cent of the knowledge about peace (see Johnson et al. 2023). This research, and the BPI itself, are trying to at least make a dent in what seems to be an impenetrable wall protecting Western knowledge production.

Accordingly, the first part of the article lays out the main points as well as critiques regarding peace measurement. The second part offers insights into the existing peace measurement alternatives. The third part is dedicated to the Balkan Peace Index, with the main aim of showing how this index could contribute to the ongoing debate on how to evaluate peacebuilding efforts and, at the same time, listen more to local voices. The discussion opens some questions that may be asked if the BPI is to be used for policy-making and other similar purposes. This is followed by final thoughts and considerations.

Peace indexes and their critique

As stated, the efforts to measure and quantify peace have been widespread in PCS. For instance, Cooley (2015) identified 95 indexes in this field, while Bandura (2008) mapped

no fewer than 178. All these indexes are based on different sets of indicators (see Table 1), with the Eirene Peacebuilding Database identifying 3381 indicators used in peace measurement (Baumgardner-Zuzik et al. 2020). Among all these indexes, Fragile States Index and Global Peace Index (GPI) are the most recognised. The Fragile States Index measures twelve social, economic, and political/military indicators for 179 countries. Every indicator is scored on a scale of 0–10, and the total score for the country is the sum of the scores for twelve indicators. Similarly, GPI has 23 indicators classified under three categories (domestic and international conflict, safety and security, and militarisation) which are weighted on a scale of 1–5 for 163 countries (Nair 2016). The Positive Peace Index (GPI sub-index) produces a score for eight pillars and 24 indicators that assess the presence of attitudes, structures and institutions that make peaceful societies (Morgan 2014).

A range of studies has delved into the importance and the use of these and other similar indexes. Zucker et al. (2014) have developed a psychometric index, the so-called PEACE scale, to measure an individual's level of peacefulness which should serve as a monitoring tool in evaluating the peacebuilding impact in conflict-affected regions. Klein, Goertz, and Diehl (2008) suggested the use of a peace scale with rivalry as one pole, pluralistic security community as the other pole, and low-level conflict, negative peace, and positive peace in between. Each state of peace/rivalry is based on empirical 'anchor cases', such as US-USSR relations during the Cold War (an example of rivalry) or France-Germany relations after 1957 (an example of a pluralistic security community). Kollias and Paleologou (2017) used the GPI and KOF Globalisation Index to examine the nexus between peace and globalisation by looking at 132 countries over a five-year period. In a similar vein, Voukelatou et al. (2022) used information extracted from the Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone digital news database to show how it can be used as proxy for measuring GPI at a monthly basis. Finally, Nair (2016) compared the GPI and the World Peace Index and examined the implications of these evaluations for South Asia, the main finding being that naming and shaming of countries goes hand in hand with policy proposals that come out of these indexes.

As expected, the notion that peace can be measured and quantified has also been heavily criticised over the years. There are three main lines of argument in this respect (Table 2). The first stream of critique is not disputing the possibility of measuring peace, but is rather criticising how it has been done by focusing on the technical aspect of the process. The second one has to do with the technocratic and bureaucratised nature of this endeavour, where something as complex as peace is turned into numbers, indexes and quintiles. Finally, the third, and more potent critique, analyses how indexes are re-imposing hierarchies and unequal power relations between those that are measuring and those that are being measured.

The first critique is of a more technical nature. It focuses on better data quality, higher reliability, new guidelines, and capacity building for better monitoring (Stave 2011, 6–7). It also stresses the importance of proper data collection in hazardous and hard-to-access areas, better coordination between key stakeholders and more transparency (see Read et al. 2016, 6). Brusset et al. (2022) add a temporal dimension to this critique since the dynamic nature of the peace often leads to a mismatch between metrics designed during the project cycle and the situation after the project is implemented when this design might not be relevant any more. Additionally, long-term societal changes

Table 1. Peace indicators and indexes.

Indicator	Index
Conflict intensity &Violent conflicts	INFORM, Global Peace Index, Conflict Barometer, Human Freedom Index, Global Conflict Risk Index
Political violence	The Legatum Prosperity Index, Global Peace Index, Political Stability Index
Terrorism and violent extremism	The Legatum Prosperity Index, Global Peace Index, Human Freedom Index, Global Terrorism Index, Political Stability Index
External interventions	Positive Peace Index, Fragile State Index
Development deprivation	INFORM, Fragile State Index, Human Development Index, Multidimensional Poverty Index, Human Development Report
Inequality, Social gap	GINI Index, INFORM, The Global Conflict Risk Index, Gender Inequality Index,
Unemployment	The Global Conflict Risk Index, World Bank's Worldwide Development Indicators
Corruption	The Global Conflict Risk Index, Positive Peace Index, World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Corruption Perception Index, Democracy Index, Gallup World Poll, Nations in Transit
GDP per capita	The Global Conflict Risk Index, Positive Peace Index, World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators
Poverty	Multidimensional Poverty Index, Human Development Index, World Development Indicators
Homicide rate & Violent crime	The Global Conflict Risk Index, The Legatum Prosperity Index, Global Peace Index
Illegal immigration	Migration Governance Indicators Migrant Integration Policy Index
Military expenditures	Global Peace Index, Global Militarisation Index
Arms proliferation	Fragile State Index
Personal freedom	Social Progress Index, Freedom in the World, Economic Freedom of the World, The Human Freedom Index
Inclusion, group grievance and discrimination	Social Progress Index, Positive Peace Index, Fragile State Index
Gender inequality	Positive Peace Index, Women, Peace and Security Index, World Development Indicators, Social Progress Index
Governance effectiveness	INFORM, The Global Conflict Risk Index, Positive Peace Index,

Table 1. Continued.

Indicator	Index
The rule of law	Freedom in the World, World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report, Bertelsmann Transformation Index Positive Peace Index, Fragile State Index, Freedom in the World, Rule of Law Index
Freedom of expression and association	Electoral Democracy Index (V-Dem), Freedom in the World, Human Freedom Index, Freedom on the Net Social Progress Index
Electoral process	Electoral Democracy Index (V-Dem), Freedom in the World, Human Freedom Index, Election Vulnerability Index
Freedom of press	Positive Peace Index, Human Freedom Index, World Press Freedom Index Vibrant Information Barometer
Polarisation and radicalisation	Positive Peace Index, Fragile State Index
Environmental health	Environmental Performance Index, Ecological Threat Register, World Development Indicators, Social Progress Index
Air pollution	Social Progress Index, Environmental Performance Index
Sustainability of the energy sector	World Energy Trilemma Index

Table 2. Peace index critique.

Type of CRITIQUE	PROBLEM in
Technical	data and its quality
Technocratic	bureaucratic and standardised knowledge
Epistemological	unequal knowledge production

require measuring even after the project is completed which is almost never included in the project programming (2022, 4–5).

The second critique relates to the so-called technocratic turn which, according to some authors, has not brought much good to the PCS. There are three key reasons for this (Mac Ginty 2013a, 57–58). The first is the standardisation of the ways peace and conflicts are analysed. To be quantifiable, conflicts need to be viewed and interpreted in the same way, or, if that is not possible, in the most similar way possible (Guelke 2014). With this approach, conflict pre-history, context, people and their agency, foreign actors, etc. are completely obliterated, and conflicts are seen only as numbers that go up or down depending on the year and indicator in question. Ultimately, indexes ignore specificity and context, favouring standardised knowledge (Merry 2011; see also De Coning 2018). Secondly, the technocracy ingrained in measuring peace is fused with bureaucratic and material culture (Mac Ginty 2013a, 57). As Mac Ginty points out (2013b, 22), the peacebuilding sector 'has been subject to the introduction of practices, technologies, assumptions and norms which have prioritised bureaucratic methods over previously adopted

approaches'. In this process, it is the benchmarks, rankings and aggregated data that become important. Thirdly, for peace indexes to be produced many professionals must be employed. As a result, most of the people engaged in the evaluation are not peace researchers but rather experts from fields outside of the social sciences, which are becoming essential for producing such an index. Data scientists, programmers, mathematicians, statisticians and data visualisation experts possess 'expert knowledge' and will ultimately decide how an index will look and which indicators it will include or exclude. Peace researchers can collect data and hope that they meet a statistically significant threshold.

Related to the technocratic turn is also a critique of donors who move closer to the business sector, forcing researchers to adopt business-based means of accounting for their accomplishments and frame their analysis along 'evidence-based', 'results-based' and 'best-practice' discourse (Denskus 2012). Ballesteros (2021) research shows donors consistently avoid organisations that can do peace work, instead defaulting to actors who possess organisational structure to respond to donors' accountability requirements. It is because of these assumptions that donors and their grant-making process become harmful to peace efforts (Duckworth 2016), as seen, for example, in the case of the USAID and its funding scheme in the field of reconciliation (Neufeldt 2016).

The third critique is quintessential for the point critics of peace indexes are trying to make. As Merry (2011, 85) suggests, indexes are not only a technology of knowledge production but also of governance wherein indicators constitute a system of examination that reaffirms structures of hierarchy and authority. They are created by those who possess expert knowledge and are located in the global North, where this knowledge resides and where these indicators are designed and labelled. Following this point, Löwenheim (2008) shows how indexes and various rankings create unequal power relations between those who are creating the rankings (the examiner, i.e. the global North) and those that are being examined (the examinee, i.e. the global South). In this nexus, the examinee is responsible for positive, or more often negative, index results and classifications, while the examiner is purely exercising expert knowledge in the quest for certainty and objectivity (see Barnett 2012). By defining the relationships in these terms, responsibilisation (Löwenheim 2007) falls upon those who are being measured and not upon those who are measuring. The irony is not lost in this process.

Löwenheim (2008, 263) concludes that freedom of choice (to participate or not to participate in the rankings) is a false one. Since the index, and the appropriate ranking, is the ultimate 'seal of approval' in global politics, the examined states have no choice but to try to improve their positions and scores on various indexes. These states are painfully aware of authority structures produced by hegemonic states, IGOs and INGOs. However, they cannot change things in any way since the examination is presented as a purely technical, impartial and objective endeavour created for their own benefit. In this relationship, the advice given by those who develop indexes and rank others is not 'an advice which one may safely ignore' (Mommsen 1958; cited by Löwenheim 2008, 265).

How to fix peace measurement

After presenting the most important critiques of peace measurement, what follows is the question of alternatives to this worldview that has become so widespread and entrenched within the global professional peacebuilding community. As with the

critiques, three possible alternatives are working on different levels (see Table 3), allowing the possibility of synergy among them.

The first possible change is in better defining *what* is being measured and what kind of *data* is used in this process. Caplan (2019, 104–125) believes that for peace to be measured correctly, we need to know what it actually means. Is it a measurement of the absence of violence (negative peace), or structural inequalities and exploitation as well (positive peace)? Similarly, Brusset et al. (2022) note that peace is contextual, complex and multi-level process, the definition of which varies depending and the mandate of those who measure. To circumvent this problem, the authors suggest using Interpeace multi-stage design model where participatory conceptual design with local stakeholders is paramount. Next to this is a collection of data and its continuous reassessment in a manner that could be described as adaptive measurement and monitoring process (Alliance for Peacebuilding 2018). It is of utmost importance that data is evaluated and re-evaluated, added or removed, depending on whether it is useful in achieving the initial goal, measuring peace in a specific country or a region. This is followed by devising realistic and measurable benchmarking targets. However, this is easier said than done. Stave (2011, 6–7) notes that these efforts are faced with a myriad of problems, such as bias in the selection of indicators (intentionally choosing those that will show progress rather than setbacks or failures), collection of bad data or not collecting data at all (such as in conflict and hard-to-access areas), or a monitoring process that relies exclusively on quantitative data. Still, even with all this, better conceptualisation and data collection do prove to be areas in which meaningful progress could be made.

The second change is related to the bureaucratised nature of peace measurement. In other words, we should be able to change *how* we measure peace. Caplan (2019) suggests using ethnographic and ethnographically inspired methods to assess and re-assess peace. The same is suggested by Millar (2014), Autesserre (2014) and Nair (2021). This is no surprise since ethnography has been emphasised in PCS as a valuable instrument for giving a voice to the locals (Macaspac 2018; Millar 2018). These methods 'give more nuance and contextual detail, are often best placed to formulate a more holistic understanding of a concept for a given community' (Firchow 2018, 58). On a more operational level, there have been proposals for methodologies such as Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (Bush 1998, 2003) or Aid for Peace (Paffenholz and Reychler 2007) that would look at the wider context in which peacebuilding is taking place and try to identify structures that would decrease the likelihood of a violent outbreak or prevent a relapse into a violent conflict. However, these are only some of the options. As will be seen in the case of the Balkan Peace Index, other qualitative or mixed-methods approaches are also possible in trying to improve peace measurement.

Adapting index methodologies is one step further in solidifying the long-term change in how we measure peace. However, it remains in the realm of top-down approaches where peace is created by 'peace gatekeepers' for the benefit of the

Table 3. Peace measurement alternatives.

Type of CRITIQUE	Type of CHANGE	CHANGE in
Technical	Short-range	data
Technocratic	Medium-range	methodology
Epistemological	Long-range	knowledge production and ownership

locals. The third approach tries to overcome this barrier and introduce a 'paradigm shift' (Kuhn 1962) when it comes to *who* is measuring peace and for *whom* peace is being measured.

The local turn in PCS has been the dominant paradigm in recent years, emphasising the move from a state-centric to a people-centric approach. Part of these efforts are attempts to replace, or supplement, existing top-down indexes with bottom-up ones (Mac Ginty 2013b), which will be able to include local voices that are not represented in mainstream debates on peace (see Džuverović 2018). Everyday Peace Indicators or EPIs (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017) currently hold the most prominent place in these efforts. EPI is a community-level index whose indicators are created by the communities in which the survey is conducted, not by policy experts and peace researchers (see Firchow 2018, 54–68). This makes it possible to get a highly contextual story of a community where peace is perceived (and lived), dramatically differently from the picture portrayed by top-down indexes. In this interpretation, peace is identified with shops that are open throughout the night, the absence of barking dogs, or the possibility of urinating outside at night (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017, 10).

What is the advantage of these kinds of indexes? Mac Ginty believes them to be an answer to other indexes that are 'precisely wrong', meaning that they correctly employ different methodologies and research techniques, but can never catch and reflect 'the richness of the situation on the ground' (2013b, 24). EPI tells another story (see Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017, 17–18). Firstly, it might show how wrong international policies and donor strategies are towards one country or region. Mismatch in local and international interpretation in the post-conflict setting should be an alarming sign to international community that they do not understand what is happening on the ground. Secondly, community indicators are less abstract and thus able to better show subtle differences among and within countries. Finally, EPI can reveal sub-state variations in data and provide a better explanation of why one country is not what it might seem if analysed on a national and sub-national level.

However, there are *con* arguments to this kind of approach to peace measurement as well. Although EPI provides a lot of rich ethnographic data about local communities and their understanding of peace, its 'ethno-quantification' and very high contextual dependency make it largely incommensurable for policy-oriented purposes (see Goodale 2024). In this respect, EPI does provide deep understanding of how communities understand peaceful change, but this understanding remains in the realm of a community without many prospects for the actual change on the ground. Also, local here applies to one side of the equation. While the local population does provide data on peace, everything else – from the methodological design to funding and dissemination – is done somewhere else, far away from the local realm.

Looking at the information presented above, it seems that we know what the prevailing problems in peace measurement are (data reliability, bureaucratisation and top-down approach) and what needs to be done to improve it (data collection, methodologies and local ownership). However, the existing alternatives go only so far to amend the situation. The problems of policy relevance and power imbalance in knowledge production still remain to be addressed. In search for answers, a look over the fence into a local backyard might prove to be useful.

Could the Balkan Peace Index be a solution?

The Balkan Peace Index[1] is part of a larger project[2] dedicated to the local monitoring and indexing of peace in the Balkans (now framed by the politically coined term the 'Western Balkans'[3]), led by the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade. The project aims to introduce a local turn in measuring and evaluating peace in this post-conflict region, with the BPI being the showpiece of these efforts. The Index contains seven domains with indicators that are both quantitative and qualitative, and it does not rank countries but rather positions them on the so-called peace continuum.

The *domains* (Political Violence, Socioeconomic Development, State Capacity, Fighting Crime, Political Pluralism, Environmental Sustainability, and Regional and International Relations) derive from contextual knowledge of local researchers and their understanding of what matters for peace in the Balkans. Although these domains may seem generic and applicable to any other post-conflict country or region, their contextuality comes from indicators and sub-indicators the domains are made of. For example, the poverty rate among the Roma population, social mobilisation against mining and water exploitation, or foreign influence on country's legislature are not relevant for other countries, but when it comes to the Balkans, they are essential for understanding the peace dynamics inside the region.

The *continuum* determines the overall quality of peace in a respective country. The BPI classifies countries along the peace continuum composed of five intermediate points: Violent Conflict, Contested Peace, Polarised Peace, Stable Peace, and Consolidated Peace. One country is associated with a single category, which helps to understand a country's position along the peace continuum. The continuum approach allows to observe what could be improved to reach absolute peacefulness or what could lead to violence. In addition, the employed methodology (see the section below) provides actionable insights on areas for improvement, as well as potential pitfalls to prevent deterioration of the score. This is something not easily achieved with a ranking approach.[4]

So why is the Balkan Peace Index so important for the paradigm shift in peace measurement? As previously discussed, there are three possible alternatives to the present peace indexes, working on three different levels. The BPI tries to encompass all of them by making not only technical but also epistemological changes in how we measure peace in the Balkans (see Table 4).

Short-range change (data)

There are two types of data needed for compiling the BPI. The first type of data is required for determining the values of each domain, indicator or sub-indicator. The second type is data needed for composing the peace continuum.

When it comes to domain and indicator data, the BPI – like many other indexes – relies on existing databases, such as the World Bank (WB) or Global Debt database, but also on regional sources like the Western Balkans Securimeter or the Roma Inclusion Index. It is important to note that regional databases are often overlooked by global indexes that have universal coverage and look for data that include as many countries as possible, thus often ignoring local sources of information. Also, the BPI extensively uses data from national statistical offices that are, in the case of the Balkans, most often published only in local languages and are, therefore, inaccessible for those who do not speak the

Table 4. Balkan peace index.

	Balkan Peace Index
Data (Short-range change)	- Primary data (Balkan statistical offices, interviews, focus groups, surveys) - Secondary data (databases, regional and local reports, local media outlets)
Methodology (Medium-range change)	- DEX software - Focus groups - Interviews - Surveys
Ownership (Long-range change)	- Designed by local researchers - Local funding - Contextual knowledge - Local ownership

languages of the region. In addition to that are reports and analysis of local CSOs, as well as those of local media outlets, again, almost exclusively in local languages. All these sources do not necessarily contradict the findings of existing global indexes or English-based sources, but they do provide richer data that can contribute to fine-grain analysis for each of the domains.

More importantly, the BPI domains do not rely only on quantitative data. They include qualitative data as well. This data is obtained from interviews with local experts on particular issues or indicators relevant to the BPI. In that respect, an interview with a person from the Ministry of Interior or Social Welfare, who does not speak English or any other international language but has decades-long fieldwork experience, has influence in deciding the value of a domain or an indicator. The same goes for Roma health mediators who most often possess expertise that comes not from their formal education, which they usually lack, but from their extensive field experience. Consequently, what is important is the fact that an expert's domain knowledge is not necessary a formal one. They (experts) are people who are recognised by researchers (and their respective networks) as those who are able to interpret data in a meaningful way, based on their real-life experience.

The second type of data is needed for the compilation of the peace continuum. The collection of this data also allows for a greater role of the local population in the BPI design. Their involvement is achieved via country-based surveys with the first pilot phase tested in Serbia with the idea of spreading this nation-wide consultation to other Balkan countries.[5] In the survey, respondents are asked to weight the importance of each of the seven domains thus deciding how much each of them contributes to the peace in their respective country. In this case, State Capacity is seen at the most important domain, followed by (lack of) Political Violence and Regional and International Relations and the other four domains, with Environmental Sustainability being the last on the list. Subsequently, these responses are then fed into the BPI and each domain is assigned the value corresponding to the survey results. By doing this, the BPI is able to incorporate attitudes of the local population into the Index itself, and to add a participatory trait to its design.[6]

Finally, the survey data is validated via focus groups based on the representative sample. Focus groups are conducted across the country, in the major cities but with equal representation of the population from urban and rural parts of the country

(the same goes for gender and education background). The main aim of validation focus groups is to confirm survey findings regarding the relevance of each of the seven domains. Also, follow-up questions about the level of analysis (local, sub-state, state and/or region), are introduced and discussed with each of the participants.

Data collected in the manner described in this section is only one part of the equation. The Balkan Peace Index is also using an innovative methodology wherein researchers who collect data, and possess domain knowledge, are able to guide the process of index compiling. The next part explains this method, and how it is employed.

Medium-range change (methodology)

As already stated, the change in index methodology may include the use of different qualitative or quantitative methods. Unlike other indexes, The Balkan Peace Index is an algorithm-based index. It employs the DEcision eXpert (DEX) method for the evaluation of its domains, indicators, and sub-indicators.

What is exactly DEX method? In a nutshell, it is a multi-criteria decision-making method that is a very compelling method for creating a context-sensitive and context-oriented index (see Bohanec 2022). In this respect, it has several key features (see Trdin and Bohanec 2018). Firstly, it is a qualitative method, which means that the researcher uses word descriptions instead of numbers or quantitative data. For instance, the researcher can use values such 'bad', 'medium', 'excellent', 'low', or 'high' to represent its utility or value to the problem at hand. The usage of qualitative values (based on gathered data and domain knowledge) can bring some advantages. For example, instead of having a linear scale where a higher value is either better or worse, one can define scales in a different manner. Thus, the scale can be U shaped (both low and high values are of 'high' value, while medium values are associated with 'low' value, and vice versa). Having the scale defined gives DEX another benefit. One can enforce monotonicity of the values (higher values on the scale must result in the same or better outcomes), which can be hard with numerical values with U-shaped utilities. However, it must be acknowledged that the qualitative scale has its downsides as well, the most notable one being the loss of some data during the process.[7]

Another property of the DEX model is that it is a hierarchical model. The DEX model consists of hierarchically structured attributes, where the structure represents the decomposition of a problem into smaller and potentially more manageable sub-problems. In this research, the root attribute is Balkan Peace Index (corresponds to the node y in the Figure 1) with a given set of categories. Our goal is to assign a class to each country. However, we cannot do that simply because many criteria influence the decision on what class to assign. Thus, we divide the problem of assigning the class to a set of smaller sub-problems. Those are, namely, positive (Socioeconomic Development, State Capacity, Political Pluralism, Environmental Sustainability, and Regional and International Relations) and negative (Political Violence and Fighting Crime) peace domains, that are further divided into a set of indicators and sub-indicators. The bottom-level indicators and sub-indicators are called elementary nodes (corresponding to x_1, x_2, x_3, and x_4 in Figure 1). Those attributes do not depend on any other attribute, and we simply assign their values based on data that is collected.
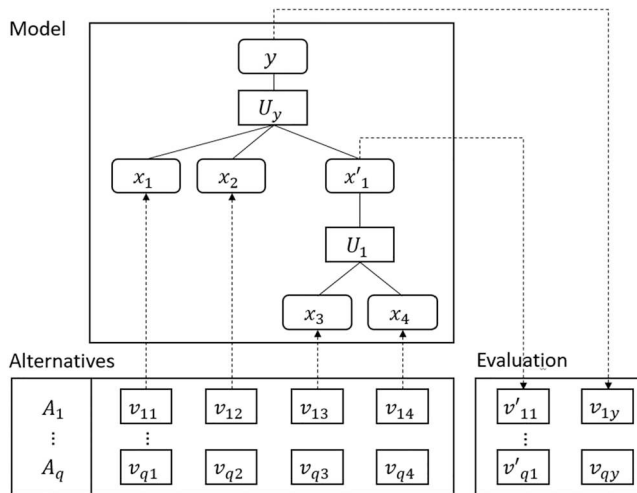
Figure 1. General concept of DEX models (Radovanović, Bohanec, and Delibašić 2023).

Finally, the DEX model is rule-based, which means that attributes higher in the hierarchy are not observed in nature but are calculated based on the values of the attributes lower in the hierarchy (for example, x'_1 in Figure 1). These rules are in the form of IF-THEN, meaning that values of input attributes lead to the value of the output attribute. More specifically, one needs to define a decision table for each non-elementary node (those that depend on other attributes) by defining all possible IF-THEN rules. In other words, for every combination of input attribute values, one needs to assign an output value. Decision rules offer significant advantages in decision support systems. The use of decision rules ensures transparency in the process by making it easily understandable, and consequently fostering trust and clarity among researchers and stakeholders. Decision rules are also highly adaptable, allowing the researcher to incorporate domain knowledge and available data. Also, decision rules allow automation of the decision processes, ensuring consistency and reducing the potential for human errors. Finally, the usage of decision rules allows for traceability of the decision process. One can see what the effects of each attribute in the decision process are.

Having the qualitative scale for each attribute and the hierarchy, one can define a complete set of rules, thus covering all possible scenarios for the classification. This ensures that model is complete and can make a classification on every occasion. Compared to other approaches, this is an advantage of the DEX method, and, in addition, this property is considered to be one of the most needed in the decision support systems (Bohanec 2022).

Once we have the hierarchy of attributes, the qualitative scale for each attribute, and the complete set of decision tables, we have a DEX model. This means that we can utilise the DEX model for classification and what-if analysis. The evaluation of alternatives is defined by collecting the values of elementary attributes (corresponding to v_{11}, v_{12}, v_{13}, and v_{14} in the Figure 1). Those values are propagated up to the root attribute (Balkan Peace Index in our case) through the application of decision rules. More specifically, values are propagated bottom-up by applying previously defined decision rules. As a result, we obtain the classification of the alternative (in our case, country).

However, the benefit of the DEX model is not only in its interpretable and traceable model but also in its ability to investigate the effects of changes. By changing each basic attribute by one value down and up (if possible), independently of other attributes, one can investigate the effects of change on the classification. This kind of sensitivity analysis allows researchers, but also policy makers, to focus their efforts to improve the classification, or to prevent deterioration of the classification. In other words, this DEX feature allows pinpointing of where (and how) a change needs to occur in order for a country to make meaningful progress in one of the domains.

Long-range change (ownership)

The change in index ownership is the cherry on top regarding the BPI. As Löwenheim (2008) points out, indexes are created by researchers from the global North for those that are situated in the global South. There is yet an index to be made by countries such as Ghana or Albania that will rank developed countries based on the humanitarian or development aid they provide to the rest of the world. Even bottom-up indexes are made by global North examiners, as Löwenheim (2008) calls them, with the local researchers' role largely reduced to subcontracting or collecting data. For example, Project Mostar, part of Everyday Peace Indicators, is run by a researcher who is not from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but from Western Europe. Even the call for the position emphasised that the call was open for the positions of 'two local and one lead facilitator', thus underlining the fact that the lead facilitator cannot be a local. Therefore, the problem is not only who is being asked, but also who is asking the question.

The BPI is different from other indexes in this respect, with the entire research team, from the principal investigator to the junior team members, consisting of people who live their lives in the Balkans, and who work alongside people who are the subject of their research. The BPI design, its accompanying methodology, and data collection have all been done by local researchers who control the research process from the beginning until the very end. The guiding principle is that local researchers are better equipped to understand local realities than those who reside outside the region. However, it is not only about better understanding the reality. It is also about controlling the process of knowledge production about the region, which is seen from outside as a perpetual 'powder keg' where primal fears and instincts guide identity politics.[8] If there have been regions plagued by stereotypes and simplifications, with detrimental consequences to their post-conflict development, the Balkans would surely be one of them (see, for example, Kaplan 1993). Respectively, this and other similar endeavours[9] are trying to reclaim its position in knowledge production about the Balkans, its past but also the present.

It is important to note that this is not a universalistic index. It also does not have any ambition to be something like that in the future. It is an index about one region, designed in a way that is appropriate only for studying the Balkans. Indexes about other regions would almost certainly need to employ different methodologies and epistemologies in assessing their internal peace dynamics. The BPI benefits from the contextual knowledge of its researchers who are able to discover hidden transcripts (Scott 1991) that elude researchers unfamiliar with the local context. In this respect, drinking coffee and chatting in a café in Belgrade, meeting people in the public library in Sarajevo, or walking while

talking with people in Tirana helps researchers not only to interpret collected data better but, more importantly, to give the context in which this data is collected.[10] The researchers engaged in the BPI have spent their lives in the Balkans and have had experiences that can be used as a corrective mechanism in interpreting collected data (Frechette et al. 2020). Not many indexes can say the same for their researchers.

Finally, as seen from the index critique, the issue of funding should not be overlooked. For years, the PCS has been witnessing the spread of so-called pathologies in peacebuilding (Heideman 2013), where donor agenda-setting and a bureaucratic mindset led to ineffective or even counterproductive peacebuilding results. The BPI is largely absolved from this issue with the funding coming from the Scientific Fund within the region and being dependent on research innovation and not on benchmarks, milestones or baseline studies. This makes a great difference in the donor-researcher relationship, as it is not constrained by donor agenda-setting (Edmunds and Juncos 2020), but allows for a more conceptual rather than a project (stage) way of thinking about peace measurement. All in all, the power relations in the case of the BPI are not as unequal as they might be in other indexes, with local researchers being able to choose what and how they will research.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

As seen from the above, there are three levels of change that work together in the BPI. Starting from the bottom, the Index seeks to incorporate local data and insights from the local community into peace measurement. This is not the case with global indexes which use quantitative data and English-based sources as the prevailing types of information for determining the values of indicators. Next, unlike other indexes, the methodology of the BPI represents a convergence of internationally recognised indexing methods and participatory approaches derived from on-the-ground field research and the observations of researchers. This includes the use of decision support systems, surveys and focus groups, but also the employment of meta-ethnography (Podder 2022), which is not simply aggregation of data but also its interpretation with the aim of revealing hidden meaning behind data and stories. Also, built on the foundation of the local turn, the BPI places a concentrated focus on a single region (the Balkans) where researchers possess in-depth knowledge of the domain, are proficient in the local language, and can actively engage with the resident population. Again, this is not a trait of global indexes where domain experts assign values to a range of countries and regions without even being in any of them, knowing their context or engaging with the local population to include their voice in an index. Finally, the whole process of index compilation, from the conceptual design to data collection and evaluation, is in the hands of local researchers, a characteristic not present in any other existing peace index.

Potential pitfalls of the Balkan Peace Index

The portrait of the BPI presents an index that may look to be bulletproof. However, that is not the case, and there are several problems that lie before the BPI.

It was said that the BPI relies on the contextual knowledge. However, that may not be good enough for policymakers who need, in the end, to implement the changes this index is preaching. Policymakers often prefer mainstream indexes, due to their simplified perception of reality which could be easily translated into policies. For example, the Serbian Minister of Finance is very proud when he says that compared to 2000, Serbia

has made a jump from 51st to 11th position on GovTech Maturity Index, which shows 'how much Serbia has changed, and how much progress it has made in the sphere of digitalisation and modernisation of public governance, all for the good of its citizens and economy' (B92 2022). He and those like him prefer numbers that say going up means good, going down means bad, and negative trends should be avoided by any means necessary. Policymakers ask for quick and (preferably) easy solutions and recommendations, and not some peace continuum. What are they to do with this kind of data? For them, what is important is not what is precisely wrong, but what is precisely right about a country.

The situation with practitioners is quite similar. Ragandang (2022) rightfully notes that while scholars and researchers easily access the practitioners' field, it is the opposite for the latter group, who has many problems accessing the scholars' field which is seen as an 'impermeable metropole'.[11] In a similar vein, Hunt points out that, due to the contemporary political economy of academia and the constant need for publishing strategies which include more outputs, scholarship becomes saturated with jargon, making findings almost inaccessible to practitioners. As a result, the relationship between the two groups is characterised by a growing sense of distance and frustration (Hunt 2023, 9). The same criticism might be attributed to the BPI. It is not yet clear if practitioners can associate their activities with concepts such as 'contested' or 'polarised' peace. These concepts (and their accompanying descriptions) might be too theoretical for people working in the field. The fuzziness of the peace continuum might lead practitioners to not be able to detect when the situation on the ground is ripe for moving from one state of peace to another. Subsequently, one might ask the following question: If practitioners cannot understand how the BPI measures a change, why would they bother to use it as an instrument in their work? Or is the BPI for research purposes only?

There are issues on the academic side as well. The question that surely will be asked is what is it that is so novel about the BPI? There are already examples of indexes, such as Freedom House, where local researchers are included in data collection and compilation of indicators. Also, if an index is dominantly made by local researchers and not the local population, could it really be called a local index, or this is just another euphemism for masking what is essentially a top-down index that tries to claim local ownership for academic purposes?

One must admit that all these critiques have a point and suggest important issues that need to be taken into consideration. Still, some answers to the abovementioned critiques can be provided at this stage of the BPI development.

As already explained, policymakers prefer information over narrative, along with to-do and checkbox lists. Since the BPI is based on a DEX method which is an interpretable and traceable model, it can easily provide very concrete and data-driven policy proposals with lists of steps that need to be done to improve the situation in the fields of seven domains or to prevent deterioration of conditions in any of them. This applies for each of the countries but also to the region as a whole. In this respect, there is also one hidden element of the BPI. It has been said that the index does not rank the countries in the Balkans, but it does put them in comparison. For countries that used to be part of one (Yugoslav) state for more than seven decades and have gone through bitter civil wars, regional rivalry is not an unknown. It is safe to assume that Serbian policymakers will not be pleased to see Croatia scoring better on most of the indicators. The same goes

for other Balkan countries. It is also a reasonable assumption that policymakers might be willing to improve the position of their country by implementing recommendations coming out of the BPI. This type of relations could also be seen as an act of regional responsibilisation, where BPI researchers act as examiners and local policymakers as the examinees.

For practitioners, the abundance of data might not be as interesting as it is for policymakers. For them, the country narratives might prove to be more useful for fully understanding why events take place in the way they do in the setting in which they operate. They might also be interested in looking at the regional dynamics and how other countries perform in sectors relevant for their line of work. Also, methods employed in collecting data and compiling the BPI make the findings easily interpretative, thus avoiding the impermeable metropole practitioners often complain about. For this group, the narrative part of the BPI might prove to be useful in connecting their work experience with wider state and regional developments.

The academics are probably the most demanding crowd to please. When it comes to the BPI, the most important issues are probably those of novelty and ownership. The short answer to the first question is yes, other indexes do include local researchers in their compilation. However, local researchers do not develop methodologies for these indexes or have any say in what indicators are relevant for their respective country or a region. They also give qualitative (or quantitative) assessments of various indicators, but it is not up to them to provide the final score for the indicator or an index. This is reserved for experts from the headquarters who are detached from the local context. Finally, local researchers are completely detached from their colleagues from other countries and regions, which prevents any sort of peer-to-peer exchange. When all is summed up, it does not sound so local.

The second question is more intriguing. If the BPI is not fully designed by the local population, how can it claim local ownership?[12] In this case, the main line of argument is that the local population and local researchers are not the same categories, and that they somehow differ. The author of this text (and most probably other BPI researchers) would disagree with this kind of criticism. What are local researchers if not part of the local population? Their expertise is combined with the lived experience of the location in which they reside. Their expert analysis is upgraded by the contextual understanding that is part of their everyday life. In this respect, it is very difficult to separate everyday knowledge from expertise by making the claim that just because they are experts, researchers are not locals. It seems very difficult to claim that an index that is co-created and developed by the local population and local researchers, funded by local donors and intended for local policymakers, is not a local index. If this is true, then the entire debate about the local turn and, more broadly, the 'Global IR' (Acharya 2014), seems pretty much pointless.

This is, as many will probably agree, a highly romanticised defence of the BPI where each criticism is fended off by calling upon concepts such as the 'local turn', 'local ownership', 'knowledge production' and other similar terms. The truth is that many other, maybe even more potent, criticisms could be raised without being able to always provide answers to all of them. However, it can also be argued that the BPI is trying to introduce 'measurement disruption'[13] in ongoing peace evaluation with insistence on the change in narratives (why peace measurement is done in the first place), actions

(how peace measurement is conducted), and mentality (who should be evaluating and for whom). If this is the case, this effort should be considered as one of the alternatives to existing problems and prevailing approaches to peace evaluation.

Conclusion

Since we live in an era of the 'tyranny of mathematics' (Burton 2014, 3), where everything can be measured and quantified, it should also be possible to develop better metrics for peace. However, this improvement in measurement should not be only for the sake of measurement, but for a better explanation of everyday reality. Consequently, the under-pinning principle of this shift should be 'a recognition of the vital importance of the con-textual knowledge for the insights it affords into local conflict-relevant dynamics and their implications for devising appropriate strategies for the maintenance of peace' (Caplan 2019, 124; also De Coning 2020).

The case of the Balkan Peace Index, analysed in this article, shows that the never-ending quest for contextual knowledge does not necessarily exclude quantitative data and expert opinions in defining and assessing peace. The two can work side-by-side, where the meth-odological blindness is compensated by local expertise and contextual knowledge. It is only by combining these two approaches that critique, and more importantly, failures in design, can be avoided or corrected. This model also resonates much better with the policy community who, in the end, need to make systemic changes. By avoiding 'barking dogs' analogies for every single region, it will be easier to prove to those who hold power that positive change is not the inevitable statistically significant improvement, but the actual impact on lives of those who live in conflict-affected societies.

The Balkan Peace Index is the next step in measuring peace where we do not 'pull data or people' but ask people what they think about data. However, whether this step is enough to effect any meaningful change is yet to be seen. The BPI needs to keep produ-cing relevant data about the region, while future research should provide a more nuanced understanding and offer better methods on how to capture Balkan hidden transcripts. If we are successful in both, we will be able to avoid what Mac Ginty (2013a) describes as 'precisely wrong' indexes where data is correct, but the big picture is completely misleading.

Notes

1. Balkan Peace Index (https://bpi.mindproject.ac.rs).
2. MIND – Monitoring and Indexing Peace and Security in the Western Balkans (https://mindproject.ac.rs).
3. The term describing the group of countries and territories consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia. Croatia is also often included in this group, although Croatian policymakers (and the public opinion) strongly oppose the notion of this 'membership', especially after the country joined the European Union back in 2013 (see Petrović 2014).
4. Another issue with the ranking approach is the fact that two countries on the ranking scale could be both very similar and very dissimilar, requiring one to observe the scores before making conclusions. However, scores are often calculated using the weighted sum approach

meaning that one criterion can be compensated with another one. In the BPI criteria cannot be compensated (i.e. violent conflict within a country).

5. The survey in Serbia was conducted on a representative sample of 1213 respondents and included equal distribution among gender, rural and urban population, groups with different educational attainment and of different ages (18 and above).

6. The survey showed that the local population associate peace primarily with the level of state and the region (in total 45.5%), and not with sub-state or a local level (25.5%), as indicated by some bottom-up indexes. However, these findings should not be surprising, keeping in mind that peace in highly contextual, which is also indicated by the local turn debate (see Džuverović 2019; Ramović 2018). In the case of the Balkans, geographical location and the historical prevalence of Eurocentrism, in combination with series of interconnected civil wars (1991–2001) and intensive statebuilding that followed has influenced this kind of thinking where state and the region bear more importance (see Petrović 2014). For regions that experienced different historical and socio-political developments, other, sub-state, levels might be more appropriate level of measurement (see Autesserre 2021, 123–153). In this respect, case-sensitive analysis seems to be the most appropriate way forward.

7. The proposed method works with qualitative ordered scales meaning that every indicator and sub-indicator must be presented as a value that belongs to a set of predefined categories of known order. For example, the poverty rates, according to World Population Review, are 23.2%, 16.9%, and 18.3% for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, respectively. However, one can notice that in the BPI Serbia is categorised as *High*, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia have an *Average* poverty rate. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is better than Croatia, we categorised them as having the same poverty rate. The data and the relation are lost due to categorisation. However, the difference in values is subtle and does not affect the final score.

8. For some of the typical representation of the Balkans see: Todorova (2008).

9. See also projects 'Yugosplaining the World' or 'The Yugoslawomen+ Collective'.

10. For more about these ethnographic methods see: Kleinman (2006), Bedwell and Banks (2013), O'Neill and Roberts (2019).

11. He describes practitioners as 'testing animals whose actions and responses in working in the ground are being observed, interpreted, and debated by the scholar' (2022, 269).

12. Interestingly enough, this criticism comes from researchers from the global North who are designing and supporting, but also largely controlling the participatory indexes.

13. In line with Mac Ginty's (2021) concept of conflict disruption.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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