

A Critical Approach to Global Performance Indexes (GPIs): Evidence from Türkiye

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Introduction

With the spread of globalisation, there has been a rapid increase in the number of indexes measuring and ranking the performances of countries in certain issues related to political, economic and social fields. International institutions and transnational bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, consulting firms, and major media outlets started to issue dozens of indexes periodically. Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Index*, Transparency International's *Corruption Perception Index*, the Center for Systemic Peace's *Polity V Index*, the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) *Human Development Index*, and the World Bank's *KKZ Governance Indicators* are some of the well-known examples of Global Performance Indexes (GPIs). These ostensibly easily understandable and accessible indexes have grabbed the attention of decision-makers, researchers, journalists, and the general public. Nevertheless, GPIs have been subjected to several critical assessments in terms of legitimacy, methodology, content, transparency, and politicisation of the subject matter since their proliferation on a global scale. Criticisms of GPIs

are generally shaped by two strands of thought. The first is the "resentment" of developing countries that did not experience the expected increase despite the improvement in their performance. In other words, developing countries bring criticisms on the grounds that their progressive attempts in policy-making and implementation are not counted accordingly when they are graded and ranked. Therefore, they are understandably sceptical about the accuracy and validity of GPIs. Second, these indices have been critically examined in terms of methodology, content, and legitimacy. This paper challenges the dominant perception of GPIs as a methodologically and contextually flawless source of information about a country with a particular focus on Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Index* by combining these two strands of critique. A case study is presented through the periodical assessment of Türkiye's performance in the sub-categories of the index in the main part of the discussion. Content-based and contextual critiques are explored by way of examples taken from Türkiye. The organisation of the paper is as follows: (I) The Global Context of Proliferation of GPIs, (II) Critical Approach to GPIs, (III) Türkiye and Freedom House, and (IV) Concluding Remarks.

The Global Context of Proliferation of GPIs

Three major characteristics of the global context in which Global Performance Indexes (GPIs) proliferated will help us better understand the theoretical basis of the critiques that will be presented in the next section. First, GPIs that evaluate and rank countries on the basis of regime type and several factors related to politics and economic performance reflect the post-WWII international order designated mainly by the Western bloc led by the U.S.¹ As opposed to Soviet socialism, values centring around democracy, freedom, liberties, and free market economy were set as standards and norms that define the characteristics of the Western Bloc. Political and economic forms of liberalism, therefore, have been packaged as universal norms and values according to which countries were expected to arrange their political and economic affairs. The post-WWII international order was designated to support this set of values through institutionalised practices of policy-making both domestically and internationally. This is the broad global context of the Cold War in which the ideational pillars of GPIs were conceptualised and standardised by Western countries.

Second, both the volume of and access to information have increased along globalisation, in which localisation replaced established patterns of centralisation. Previously, most of the datasets involving countries' demographic features or economic performance were provided mainly by central authorities and official sources. Together with globalisation, however, this pattern has shifted mainly towards a more fragmented and localised forms of information collecting. NGOs, think-tanks, and consulting firms developed their own tools for data collection and processing them via new computer programs. In this new information age, therefore, data on countries, which was historically difficult to obtain, became relatively easy to both collect and process. These developments have undoubtedly paved the way for producing periodic assessments based on dozens of indicators. Abstract concepts such as democracy, freedom, rights and justice, were transformed into indexable data points format and assigned scores according to the periodic performances of the countries. It should be noted that while the initial attempts to mea-



¹ GPIs score and rank countries according to many qualifications related to the political, economic, and social realm. A liberal set of values in the political and economic field in the post-WW2 international order form the basic evaluation criteria of GPIs. Regime types (democracy and degree of authoritarianism) and civil rights and freedoms (such as right of assembly, freedom of press, freedom of expression, internet freedom, etc.) are two dominant aspect of GPIs evaluation that is examined here through the example of Freedom House. Liberal democracy is taken as the main standard according to which countries are evaluated and individual rights and civil liberties are most effectively realised.

sure and quantify these concepts date back to the seminal works of Huntington, Lipset, and Rostow during the 1950s and 1960s², the age of globalisation manifested itself with an ever-growing tendency to develop these works by adding new concepts to become measurable, and making rather complicated studies. For instance, in 2011, the OECD developed Better Life Index consisting of 11 topics such as housing, income, jobs, environment, health, education and so on. The UN Sustainable Development Solution Network began to publish the World Happiness Index in 2012. Similarly, the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) annually publishes a Global Liveability Index based on assessments of stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure.

Third, one major development in the age of globalisation that acted as a push factor for GPIs was what Brown (2015) has referred to as the "dissemination of neoliberal reason" to all aspects of our life. The "neoliberal" aspect of globalisation is meant to be an increasing trend of economisation of hitherto non-economic domains of life as referred in a work by Çalışkan and Callon (2009). Here economisation does not imply anything related to economics but entails the rise of a tendency to reduce everything into numbers and quantifiable forms. Neoliberal reasoning brought new incentives in individual reasoning for taking institutions, regimes, cities, and even feelings as quantifiable entities.

For instance, universities as public institution could be scored and ranked according to their post-graduation job finding performances, number of citations, and academic symposiums. Similarly, even individual happiness and life expectancy have become concepts that can be measured in the same way as GDP per capita. This neoliberal reasoning then led to the emergence and ramifications of new actors that are able to influence the decision-making processes of sovereign states. The structuring of the era of globalisation with this neoliberal reasoning was not limited to the quantification of institutions, regimes or different elements of individual life. More precisely, when this trend of quantification combined with the proliferation of new actors that can influence the decision-making processes of sovereign states, GPIs have become effective tools of global governance. Transnational organisations, NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, and epistemic communities can be given as examples of these newly emerged actors in the context of globalisation. These actors operationalised different indexes in line with their own priorities and criteria of assessment, in order to take part in global governance. Therefore, the spread of information, ease of compiling data, quantification of abstract concepts through a different set of data analysis programs, and emergence of new actors as the influencers of decision-making bodies led to the proliferation of indexes, and especially the GPIs on a global scale.

A Critical Approach to GPIs

Several notable critiques have been made of GPIs. Some have questioned their impartiality in that those who prepare these indexes act according to their embedded prejudices against the country examined. For instance, a detailed examination of cross-time and cross-country data revealed that liberal democracy indexes and freedom indicators include statistically non-negligible errors, some of which could be attributable to judge-specific methodological bias (Bollen and Paxton, 2000). In another study, Bollen (1993) stated that it is hard to claim that democracy indexes produce error-free assessments because they have systematic flaws and validity issues. Some have also criticised these indexes in terms of their lack of ability to transform relevant successes of countries to appropriate numerical value. In other words, GPIs have been perceived as a way

of making developing countries stuck in the same position over a long time without improving their respective rankings on a global scale. While these criticisms are seen at first glance as a kind of "resentment" felt by developing countries, there are some cases where they can be held true. For instance, according to Roberts and Tellez (2020), some unsubstantial differences may result in a salient change in the status of the country evaluated. Authors provide a case for Burundi whose score of political rights declined 1 point from 2014 to 2015. The categorisation of the country shifted from "Partly Free" to "Not-Free" due only to one-point score change. One of the problematic aspects of such a small score reduction causing a serious change in the reputation of a country in the international community is that, as stated in the article by Robert and Tellez (2020),

² Behaviouralist trend of classifying and measuring democracy, institutionalisation, political and economic development in social sciences in the 1960s was reflected in the seminal works by Huntington, Lipset, and Rostow. For a detailed account of the subject, see Huntington, S. P. (1965). Political Development and Political Decay. *World Politics*, 17(3), 386–430. Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69–105, and Rostow, W. W. (1959). The Stages of Economic Growth. *The Economic History Review*, 12(1), 1–16.

these countries are exposed to more criticisms from democratic regimes countries, and verbal conflicts in bilateral relations become more frequent than countries entitled "Partly Free". Therefore, statistically insignificant differences are said to have radical outcomes when they come to the context of international politics. Academic criticisms, on the other hand, tend to focus mainly on the issues of legitimacy and methodology of GPIs. We can make a critical assessment of GPIs based on (a) the issue of legitimacy and (b) methodological shortcomings. It should be noted that these points of criticism sometimes act simultaneously and become characteristic of a single case.

The Issue of Legitimacy

Criticisms centring around the issue of legitimacy have to do mainly with the global context in which GPIs started to proliferate and expand their area of influence in the decision-making processes of countries. From the 1970s onwards, the economic structure of the Western countries was reshaped by the idea of the retreat of the state from the economic arena through privatisation and significant cuts in public spending. This new restructuring, which can also be understood as dealing the idea of social state a death blow, was known as neoliberalism. Aside from its economic implications, neoliberalism has also brought about profound changes in the political domain through a novel understanding of politics as governance, which was previously understood merely as a matter of administration and ruling. As a result, an idea of *governance* through which multiple actors could now participate in the decision-making process of centralised governments and bureaucracies began to predominate. To put it differently, neoliberal restructuring of the political arena has manifested itself in proliferation of new non-state actors. State sovereignty began to be challenged by the proliferation of non-state actors such as intergovernmental and transnational bodies, NGOs, think tanks, and consulting firms that are able to influence the decision-making processes of countries. In this fragmented structure, GPIs became an influential tool for exerting pressure and social control through disseminating comparative information (Kelley and Simmons, 2020). Prior the uptrend of global governance through non-state actors, the common perception and understanding of the legitimacy of state sovereignty was not even open to discussion when it comes to decision-making and exerting political authority over certain issues such as a country's legal framework that describes freedom of expression. However, in a globalised world, the legitimacy of the centralised

power of the state was called into question and was affected by the introduction of non-state actors, which constitute decentralised forms of information collection and decision-making. In such a context, then, GPIs as tools for influence started to constitute and then iterate some embedded power relations between developed countries and developing countries by taking the form of informal powers of global governance (Davis et al., 2012). In other words, non-state actors sharing same norms and standards with developed Western countries instrumentalised GPIs as a tool for exerting political pressure on some countries who are not in compliance with the set of values and standards stipulated mainly by Western countries. GPIs can be then considered as soft power apparatuses that are aimed to act as parts of a compliance mechanism.

From an interest-based perspective, political and economic transformations under the new neoliberal architecture of the global system did not engender the same enthusiasm from every country. In essence, the neoliberal system, with its political and economic aspects, was led by Western interests, namely the emphasis on the free market, privatization, a limited state, and the interpretation of individual freedoms and civil liberties according to a historically Western-centric perspective.³ More recently, emerging powers, mainly from the Global South, i.e. BRICS countries or G-77, then began to challenge this neoliberal configuration by voicing concerns over rising inequalities and lack of equitable representation in international platforms. China can be an illustrative case for this point. While it was well-positioned in the economic locus of neoliberal system, i.e. WTO and IMF membership, it did not hesitate to raise its concerns about political aspects of the system. For instance, both China and Russia's votes in the UN Security Council were mostly the same, and against the other three Western permanent members of United States, France, and the United Kingdom. In short, the neoliberal system was not be a panacea for all actors in the international system. In other words, its benefits were not equally distributed among Western and non-Western countries. The spread of the neoliberal model led to the rise of dissident voices among primarily non-Western developing countries, including alternative interpretations of the how the international system should be. Given that GPIs were a product of these developments, they too were not. In this context, GPIs as products exempt from criticisms held by non-Western developing countries.

As the voices of dissent increased, developing countries criticised GPIs on two main grounds. The first was that

³ See: Lottholz, P. (2022). "2: Theorizing Post-Liberal Forms of Statebuilding and Order-Making Globally". In *Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.



BRICS summit in Xiamen. (Xinhua News Agency/ Pool - Anadolu Agency)

the flaws in their domestic political settings resonate a meaning of "Let the one without sin cast the first stone". In its 2021 Financial Report, it is clearly stated that 92% of Freedom House revenues come from the US government.⁴ The report also underlines that if this financial support is cut, it would have a negative impact on many activities of Freedom House. For this reason, it would be naive to think that an organisation that acts against the interests of a country on which it financially depends. Apart from the issue of financial support, which is clearly stated by the organisation itself, it is possible to observe the relationship between Freedom House and the US with other concrete examples. Chomsky and Herman (1994) underscored that the way through which the organisation describes elections and regimes is closely related to US interests. One example that illustrates this close link happened before the 2004 Presidential Elections in Ukraine. Former U.S. House Representative and Libertarian politician Ron Paul criticised Freedom House on the grounds that it acted as an intermediary between United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Poland-America-Ukraine Cooperation Initiative (PAUCI). According to Paul, Freedom House sent millions of dollars granted by USAID to PAUCI to be distributed to several NGOs in Ukraine which were evidently supporting the pro-American presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko⁵. This is illustrative of an important but subtle point; namely that while Freedom House is more often than not perceived as a 'neutral' organisation, in reality it is driven by a particular agenda that, openly or not, often aligns with US interests on particular issues.

Another point related to the global context in which GPIs proliferated is that performance indices constitute the

their assessments. It is equally important to question what embedded power relations these organisations base their analysis on. Such reflective questions will be a good starting point to think critically of the issue of legitimacy. In fact, Freedom House itself does not hesitate to declare its politicised stance as well. To cite its own words, "Freedom House believed that American leadership was crucial if the post-war world were to evolve into a place where democracy was the normal state of affairs, and not an exception."⁶ During the Cold War, Freedom House maintained this idea of "crucial American leadership" in its analyses about US's strategic allies, as in the case that Iran and Indonesia were described "freer" than Eastern Bloc countries such as Yugoslavia (Scoble and Wiseberg, 1981; Steiner, 2012). An illuminating work by Beaumont and Towns (2021) offers a quadruple relational understanding of performance indexes and suggests that GPIs can be seen as "indicator industrial complexes" consisting of referees, coaches, players, and audiences. Here the term "referee" is meant to be those who prepare GPIs such as international organisations or NGOs. "Coaches" are those who provide consultancy services to states which are "players". Audiences include media outlets, the general public, and opposition parties of the state examined. This four-way relational approach perspective provides a useful point for us to better understand the criticisms made in terms of legitimacy. As the referees who prepare the GPIs have the authority to set their own norms and standards, they provide a basis for legitimacy per se. However, the main point is the way the audience, which consists of a wide variety of segments in society, provides legitimacy. As GPIs gain popularity with the media and the general public, the initially narrow scope of legitimacy begins to expand.

⁴ For the full version of the 2021 Financial Report, see <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Freedom%20House%20Final%20Report.pdf>

⁵ To read the full statement by Ron Paul, see https://web.archive.org/web/20121212002804/http://paul.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=217&Itemid=60

⁶ To read the organisation's historical background and the words cited here, see <https://freedomhouse.org/about-us/our-history>

Methodological Shortcomings

Apart from the issue of legitimacy, GPIs can be critically evaluated also from a methodological point of view. Methodological criticisms arise firstly from the very fact that those who prepare these indexes get the necessary information from experts who are thought to be specialised in one particular region or country. Characteristics of these experts oscillate between having a scientific outlook that relies on a value-free, rational understanding of the affairs and having a politicised perspective toward the region or country. This situation of "in-betweenness" has the potential to raise questions and cause suspicions about the subjectivity of experts whose observations lay the foundations of a country's international perception. In a work by Bandola-Gill (2021), it is clearly stated that unless this two-edged feature of those who provide information has a delicate balance, the reliability of GPIs will continue to be uncertain.

The issue of subjectivity as a form of methodological criticism provides us with another insight into how the causal connection between cases and the numerical value given to a country is ambiguous. Freedom House can change the particular group of experts from one year to another. There are no consistent criteria, at least none that are publicly stated, for who will be chosen. Assessments that rely on information provided by experts already carry a risk of subjectivity, which means that observations conveyed by experts can be influenced by their bias against the country examined. A particular group of experts may change from year to year and the problem of subjectivity remains, even the methodology is unchanged. For instance, Freedom House's *Freedom in the World index* consists of 25 questions, 10 of which are for political rights and the remaining 15 are for civil liberties. There are also sub-questions under these 25 questions. Each question has 4-point maximum score. The problem arises when these questions which are open to public access are graded by so-called regional experts whose observations determine a country's overall perception in the world. Even if each of the main questions under the political rights and civil liberties are evaluated between 0-4, it is not known how many points the sub-questions under these main headings are worth. For example, the "Are there free and independent media?" question has 12 sub-questions. Is a country's 4 points from this main question equally distributed in these 12 questions? How can we argue that if it is evenly distributed, each question will not have risk of having an erroneous assessment of freedom of expression

in terms of conceptualisation and operationalisation? Are these observations subject to double-checking? Unless we have genuine knowledge about these questions, it is hard to speak of impartiality, validity, and reliability not only for Freedom House but also for other GPIs. When considered in the context of the conceptualisation of rights and freedoms, the lack of a proper causal link between a set of events in a country within a one-year period increases the risk of subjective bias. The *Freedom in the World Index*, for instance, provides only an overall perception of a country's performance on rights and liberties but does not help us formulate a causal connection between observed cases/events and the points (Besançon, 2003). Considering the study of rights and freedoms as a comprehensive process, it is important to establish a causal relationship between the events in a country within a certain time period and the score given to that country. We cannot fully see this cause-effect relationship in Freedom House indicators, which should be considered a process-oriented study. In addition, we do not know which specific event has a positive or negative effect on the score change.

In addition, the issue of subjectivity as a methodological criticism leads to the lack of comparability over time. Though some organisations publicly provide time-series data, regional experts whose observations lay the foundations of the whole analysis and ranking can change over time and newcomers can have a totally different outlook towards the countries examined. Although there are no major changes in the methodology of GPIs, the problem of subjectivity remains due to the change in people who convey their observations (Arndt and Oman, 2006). It cannot be guaranteed that the newly elected expert group will be impartial in its approach to a particular country. In other words, there is a constant methodological risk that subjective errors can impede objectivity in the evaluation of freedom performance of a country.

Another methodological criticism of the GPIs can be made in terms of face validity and content validity. Face validity means the extent to which a test appears to measure what it is intended to measure. A test is said to have content validity if it includes all aspects of a concept and excludes all irrelevant aspects. Accordingly, it is expected that no additional element or any loophole in the operationalisation process of the statistical study be present if it is expected to have content validity. For the *Freedom in the World Index*, one methodological criticism based on validity can be made regarding freedom of expression and belief, which is the first category of inquiry under the Civil Liberties heading. Although Freedom House endeavours to exempt itself from further conceptual discussion by

attributing definitions to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are inconsistencies here between the concept and the questions which are said to measure this concept. For instance, under the Freedom of Expression and Belief heading, there are four sub-questions, the first of which includes 12 other minor questions to measure the concept. In one of these minor questions, Freedom House asks "Do women journalists encounter gender-specific obstacles to carrying out their work, including threats of sexual violence or strict gender segregation?". In terms of face validity and content validity, this question is methodologically more convenient to be included in a test that aims to measure gender equality in general and gender equality in media in particular. Otherwise, the score to be given in an evaluation in which this sub-question is taken into consideration may lead to under-scoring or over-scoring on the concept of freedom of the press. Since the score values of the questions in the sub-question titles are not clearly specified in the methodology, it is difficult to estimate the numerical equivalent this methodological shortcoming might be. Another example of how some questions do not meet criteria for content validity is about freedom of assembly. In the 2021 Türkiye report, the question "is there freedom of assembly?" took the prohibition of the 700th vigil of Saturday Mothers, a group of women publicly protesting the "disappearance" of their relatives since 1995 as a sign of how freedom of assembly is violated. It is seen that the demonstration, which was banned on legitimate grounds that the demonstrations were held without the permission of the official authorities and that social media accounts associated with the PKK called for support to gather on Galatasaray Square, are exemplified within the scope of the violation of freedom of assembly. The Diyarbakir Mothers, another group of mothers who regularly gather in front of the HDP Diyarbakir Provincial Centre building in order to voice their demands regarding their children kidnapped by the PKK were not presented as an example of how freedom of assembly is actualised in this context. In terms of content validity, the question about freedom of assembly is expected to have a methodologically fair assessment by taking each case with their particular contexts without having selection bias. If freedom of assembly is to be measured by a set of questions, they must include relevant cases and aspects of the concept, not cases which are devoid of their particular context. Otherwise, out of context cases can bring erroneous qualitative assessments, and ultimately erroneous scores in their quantitative assessments.

The last point that needs to be addressed under the methodological criticisms towards the GPIs is about combining state activities and non-state activities under the same

question and category. Freedom House combines state and non-state actors when asking questions about whether individuals enjoy political rights and civil liberties. It is open to debate how accurate results this unifying approach will yield in terms of sampling while making sharp characterisations of a country's reputation on a global scale as "Free" or "Not free". This approach essentially ignores how much the state struggles with the violating acts of non-state actors in this regard and puts them in the same category as the state. For instance, in the explanation of the questions under the heading of political pluralism and participation in the 2021 report, it is stated that there were "anti-Kurdish mob attacks" on HDP offices. The problematic point to be underlined here is that in this analysis, the government was framed in some way as a tacit supporter of mob attacks. In the same paragraph, both the incumbent government and some criminal mobs who were punished by the judiciary for their crimes are mentioned together. In the evaluation to be reached with such an approach, a distinction should be made between who committed what crime and who is excluded so that there is no methodological problem in calculating the score and ranking related to rights and freedoms. Although it is said that the results of these analyses measure whether individuals enjoy their freedom, it is well known how seriously the GPIs affect the reputation cost of a country in the international community. An analysis combining state and non-state actors methodologically overshadows a country's efforts to combat non-state actors in the international community, causing the state to be unfairly associated in the same context with criminal non-state actors. It is not claimed here that non-state actors should not be included in the overall analysis. On the contrary, the activities of these actors should also be specified. However, while specifying these, the issue of how effectively states fight against them should not be ignored, and precise methodological distinctions should be made in analyses that affect the international reputation of the state so much. For this, one of the simplest solutions is that questions can be reformulated or different coefficients and categorisations can be put when state and non-state actors are distinguished. Otherwise, criticisms held by developing countries towards GPIs will continue since timely improvements of countries are not reflected in their respective scores and overall rankings (Rumelili and Towns, 2021).

After a detailed examination of the main arguments for a critical approach to GPIs in general and Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Index* in particular, we can now have a glimpse into the case of Türkiye to understand how our critical approach is manifested.

Türkiye and Freedom House

Freedom House annually publishes Türkiye analysis on political rights and civil liberties. On its official page, questions, answers, analyses, and scores given to Türkiye are available from 2017 onwards. Pre-2017 analyses are not publicly accessible, and there is only an aggregated cross-time and cross-country table with numerical scores and categorisations is available to free access. This section brings the aforementioned criticisms on how Freedom in the World Index examines Türkiye and critically evaluates the index in terms of its way of framing the country.

Content-based and Contextual Criticisms

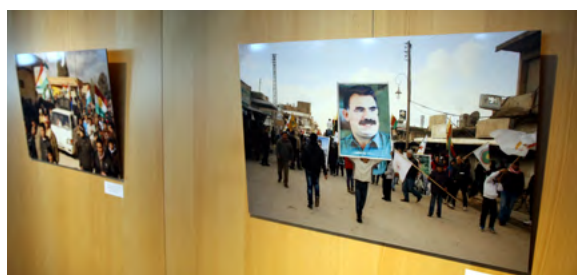
When the Freedom in Türkiye reports by Freedom House are examined, there are several shortcomings that may violate the principle of impartiality and requirements of fair methodological criteria. It is obvious that although the organisation's ambiguity towards the definition of terrorism seems to strengthen its claim of impartiality, this issue causes evaluations that contain numerous contradictions in essence. Here are some of the content-based and contextual criticisms against Freedom House's annually published *Freedom in the World Index*.

First, the framing of the PKK as an outlawed militant political party rather than a terrorist organisation creates a snowball effect in further examination of the issues related to alleged violations of political rights and civil liberties. This approach shapes the public perception in a way that frames terrorists and terror sympathisers as an ordinary segment of the society whose individual rights and freedoms are systematically violated. In all publicly available reports of the Freedom House between 2017-2022, the PKK, which Türkiye has been fighting for many years and defined as a terrorist organisation by many countries, including the EU and NATO countries, is referred to as the "outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party" or "militant Kurdistan Workers' Party". Freedom House persists in this narrative throughout the remaining sections of the text. Why this is an important problem, especially the appointment of trustees to HDP municipalities in the eastern and south-eastern provinces of Türkiye and the arrest of Selahattin Demirtaş as a result of his public speech in 2012 can easily be framed as a so-called violation of rights unless there is a preliminary acceptance that considers the PKK a terrorist organisation. In other words, if events are taken out of their particular context, the common perception of the public tends to understand the issue as an example of a violation



Vote counting starts in Türkiye's general elections. (Gökhan Balcı - Anadolu Agency)

of individual rights and civil liberties. However, in essence, there should be more details need to be addressed to grasp the full context of the issue. For instance, addressing the crowds in Mardin province in 2012, Demirtaş said about Abdullah Öcalan, the founding leader of the terrorist organisation PKK, who has been in prison for 22 years, "If they will not hang Öcalan's poster in Kurdistan, where will they hang it? We will erect statue of him [Öcalan]. Get that in your head," he said. Again in the 2020 Freedom in the World Türkiye report, HDP Co-Chair Figen Yüksekdağ, whose detention was described as an "accusation tactic" by the government against the opposition, said in 2015 "We lean on the YPJ, the YPG and the PYD, we see no harm in saying and defending this. We say whom we lean on."⁷ If these quotes are excluded from the analysis, then, these events are perceived as an authoritarian context in which the opposition parties are systematically suppressed by the incumbent government for no reason.



European Parliament's exhibition promoting terrorist organizations.
(Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

The fact that Freedom House does not label the PKK as a terrorist organisation while the U.S. officially does shows that the organisation is deemed to be independent in its analyses. The organisation claims that the concept of terrorism is a very broad and changes from one context to another. However, such an approach is disconnected from the realities actually experienced by Türkiye. On the one hand, Türkiye has a recorded history of its fight against terrorism in which many civilians were killed by the PKK. On the other hand, cases of violation of human rights by a terrorist organisation are overlooked by the Freedom House which claims to be a firm believer in democracy and freedom. This inner contradiction, then, poses an obstacle for making convincing inferences and assessments about a given country, in this case Türkiye.

The legitimization of terrorism, mentioning the leaders of terrorist organisations with praise and respect, is a matter of debate whether they can be considered within the scope of freedom of expression, although it is up to the judiciary to decide whether the owner of these statements has an organic link with terrorist organisations or not. However, if there were people in any liberal Western democracy who publicly shared their support or sympathy for terrorist organisations and their affiliations, it is debatable whether their statements would still be considered within the scope of freedom of expression. It has been clearly stated in Turkish criminal law that terrorist propaganda cannot be considered within the scope of freedom of expression, and perpetrating the crime through media channels is seen as a reason to increase the sentence. In other words, if terrorist propaganda is made through platforms that are open to the public, such as television, radio, or newspapers, it is legally considered as a matter of aggravation. In the context of the fight against terrorism, the legal context of any country that is being examined should be included in the analysis. In addition, the concept of freedom of speech is itself open to scrutiny, a point that must be acknowledged before any real conclusions can be drawn about a given country's adherence to it in its legal framework.

In the Freedom House 2019 report, the appointment of trustees to HDP municipalities by the Ministry of Interior was considered as a violation of the opposition's political rights. However, it is necessary to have the background information that the HDP's Adnan Selçuk Mızraklı observed a moment of silence for PKK terrorists killed in anti-terror operations, and shouted PKK slogans and anthem at an event in Diyarbakir just four days after he was elected mayor of the metropolitan municipality of Diyarbakir. The process of appointing trustees to replace the persons under investigation is clearly specified in the Law on Municipalities, and the judicial processes of these persons within the scope of terrorism investigations are continuing. Here, for a conceptually convincing analysis, it would be useful to show not only discourse-oriented cases but also concrete examples of the link between the HDP and the PKK. For example, in the Ministry of Interior report on the administrative process of appointing trustees to HDP municipalities, it was clearly stated that many vehicles officially belonging to the municipality were used in PKK terrorist acts or were seized while they were about to be used. Some posters and

⁷ PYD stands for the Democratic Union Party, it is the Syrian extension of the terrorist organisation PKK/KCK. YPG stands for People's Defence Units. It is administered by the military officers of the PKK and has many terrorists who arrived in Syria from other countries. YPJ is one of the extensions of YPG and primarily consists of women. It stands for Women Defence Units. By means of its armed units called People's Protection Units (YPG), the PYD seeks to give the impression of being an organisation that fights against the DAESH terrorist organisation at the world public opinion. As a matter of fact, it is recognised that the PYD/YPG is the PKK/KCK terrorist organisation's wing in Syria and their targets, structure and functioning correspond and it operates within the same structure, as well as it is not a different and independent formation from the PKK/KCK. Contrary to what is being introduced, the PYD is the PKK/KCK's extension in Syria that is registered as a "terrorist organisation" under the list of international terrorist organisations. For a detailed account, you can read https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/kurumlar/icisleri.gov.tr/yayim/teror/PYD_YPG.pdf

pieces of cloth symbolising the PKK were hung on vehicles registered with the municipality. Numerous examples are available in detail in the related report, supported by visual evidence. Following these examples, it can be better understood whether the administrative process of appointment of trustees to HDP municipalities is an anti-democratic violation of rights or a legitimate administrative measure taken by a country to fight effectively against terrorism.



German police lets PKK supporters to stage a demonstration in Düsseldorf. (Mesut Zeyrek - Anadolu Agency)

Numerous examples with respective background information can be provided in this regard. Nevertheless, it is of great importance to reiterate our initial key argument that the predominant narrative of Kurdish oppression and framing of PKK not as a terrorist organisation but as an "outlawed political party" lead to a snowball effect in the prospective analyses, deteriorate the understanding of political rights and civil liberties. This is of particular importance in terms of clearly seeing the conceptual shortcomings related to freedom caused by an uncompromising disagreement in basic values, norms, and terms.

Second, Freedom House's analysis of freedom of the press in Türkiye is grounded mainly by a set of events taken out of their unique context. Its analyses of the freedom of press in Türkiye rely mainly on the incomplete or incorrect information about journalists arrested after the 15 July failed coup attempt, devoid of the legal framework and the context.⁸ In the aftermath of the failed coup, Freedom House's categorisation and scoring of Türkiye radically changed. Its status was shifted from Partly Free to Not Free and its score declined from 38 to 32. Therefore, it can be said that

there is a considerable decline that can be attributed to the post-failed coup attempt period mainly because of the declaration of the State of Emergency (OHAL) in Türkiye. The problem arises when Freedom House or any organisation collecting information about any country from experts does not take the context of this particular information into account when it evaluates the performance of the country. In terms of democratisation in the Turkish context, for instance, Türkiye has deeply suffered from two major obstacles. The first is FETO, which had penetrated the state bureaucracy, public institutions, higher and lower echelons of the army, media, and so on with the purpose of capturing the state. FETO, which placed its own cadres in bureaucratic and military positions over the years, became an important obstacle in the functioning of democratic institutions. The second obstacle was the militarisation of civilian politics through military interventions, memorandums, and strong tutelary institutions. After the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, Türkiye entered into a new institutional phase of "cleansing" the structure of the state institutions and media from FETO and replacing the military's traditional authority over politics with civilian control, a process which had already been initiated by the AKP through set of institutional and legal reforms of demilitarisation before 2016. Although these remarks may seem to be outside of the main topic discussed in this paper, it is important to understand the context that has been systematically ignored by the Freedom House. Otherwise, it will be nothing but taking only a snapshot of particular events and framing them as an example of the violation of freedom. By the same token, it will not go beyond being an out-of-context approach to express the violation of freedom of the press by making groundless claims about people whose judicial processes are still ongoing. It is clearly seen that there are irresolvable differences in understanding some sets of events and socio-political developments. For Freedom House, judicial processes that were started to be operated after the failed coup attempt were a violation of individual rights and liberties. Have these processes been asked Turkish authorities? Or, did Freedom House reports rely upon only the one-sided views of these processes? Having proper information about the context and process, and waiting for the judicial process to finalise should be two main criteria when making an assessment of any country's performance on freedoms.

⁸ The post-15 July process in Türkiye was a comprehensive cleansing of official bodies, institutions, and corporate media outlets from those who were found to be connected to the FETÖ terrorist organisation. A detailed account of the process undoubtedly exceeds the scope of this paper. However, to give a succinct understanding of the issue related to media, it would be useful to examine the case of İlhan Tanır. When he worked for Cumhuriyet newspaper, between 2015 and 2016, Tanır was the Washington correspondent of the website Haberdar, managed by Sait Sefa, a user of Fuat Avni's account, which has been the source of coordinated disinformation on social media for the purpose of moulding the public opinion in favour of FETÖ. The judicial process conducted by the Istanbul 27th High Criminal Court ended up with issuing a red notice for İlhan Tanır.



July 15 Democracy and National Unity Day (Arife Karakum - Anadolu Agency)

Also, defamatory interpretations of judicial proceedings which are still ongoing are open to be affected by subjective bias due to incomplete and erroneous information. For this, it would be necessary for Freedom House to increase its sources of information and avoid unilateralism when it collects opinions and information. In addition to the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA), which Freedom House defines as a partner organisation, more organisations could bring a more accurate assessment of the overall performance of freedom of press in Türkiye. It is worth mentioning that an organisation like Freedom House that identifies itself with being a strong advocate of democracy and freedom should not be one-sided while collecting information used in its evaluations. This can be better understood when the complementary relationship between democracy and alternative sources of information is taken into account. As Dahl (1971) stated in one of his seminal works, alternative sources of information that make public enlightened about the social and political affairs is a quintessential feature of democratic systems. Therefore, organisations like Freedom House that examine rights, freedoms, and democracy should avoid one-sidedness if they seek to yield more accurate and impartial assessments. To give another example of the importance of this, it would be useful to mention the Jin TV case⁹, which is referred to as a violation of press freedom on the official website of MLSA, one of Freedom House's partner organisations. It was reflected in the official indictment that the said TV channel was established in line with the press committee

of the PKK's so-called KCK charter¹⁰ and that it made PKK propaganda through its broadcasts from the Netherlands. Actually, even a simple YouTube search for the content of the broadcasts shows how often terrorist sympathies and propaganda are covered by this channel. It would be helpful to present the following critical approach here. On the one hand, Freedom House ascribes the MLSA as a partner organisation. On the other hand, the MLSA frames the ongoing judicial proceeding regarding a channel that is a propaganda means of the PKK as a part of violation of media freedom in Türkiye. In this case, how can Freedom House reports be said impartial or free from subjective bias against Türkiye? The significance of this example is to reveal how erroneous the reliance on one-sidedness in collecting information is. Instead, Freedom House or any organisation making performance evaluations about any country should proliferate their sources of information. Otherwise, the issue of subjectivity and lack of context will remain an unresolved problem of contextual and methodological shortcomings. Judicial proceedings against persons and organisations affiliated with the PKK are evaluated out of context and presented in a way that they are seen as instances of how the state systematically and arbitrarily violates freedoms of certain groups. Although each judicial process is a very comprehensive process in terms of defendants, witnesses, and evidence, the absence of these details in the analysis of all these constitutes a problem for an organisation that claims to make an impartial analysis on democracy, rights, and freedoms. The image of Türkiye

⁹ Jin TV, a channel that spreads propaganda of the terrorist organisation PKK, was awarded by the Chamber of Architects for its program called "Green Window". The ongoing lawsuit against the Ankara representatives of the Chamber of Architects was then presented by MLSA as an example of violation of rights.

¹⁰ The KCK stands for the Union of Kurdistan Communities. It was founded with the "KCK Charter", which was accepted on May 17, 2005 with the participation of 213 PKK senior executives from the Middle East and Europe. In the Charter, the KCK is defined as a communitarian democratic confederal structure.

described in annually published Freedom House country reports and policy briefs is presented as if it were a dystopia in which journalists were arrested without justification, and put into jail simply because they were journalists. To reiterate the argument mentioned above, it is not possible to make correct assessments about a country with a method that is detached from the socio-political context and relies on one-sided information collection.

Third, one of the points that Freedom House has negatively evaluated in the context of Türkiye in its analysis of political rights and civil liberties is Syrian refugees. It is useful to look at how this issue is addressed in many questions and sub-questions because this issue brings several shortcomings in terms of content and methodology. In the explanation of the question "Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?", Freedom House states "Refugees in Turkey, including an estimated 4 million Syrians, do not have political rights and although some refugees have gained citizenship in recent years, public opinion remains strongly against a path for citizenship." It gives Türkiye 1 point out of 4. Another question asked is "Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?" and it is then stated "Turkey hosts some 4 million refugees, mostly from Syria. While the government has worked to provide them with basic services, many refugee children lack access to education, and few adults find formal employment. Popular resentment against refugees has been rising for years and is felt across the political spectrum." It again gives Türkiye 1 point out of 4 in this question. A question about freedom of movement and travel, the organisation states that Syrian refugees are faced with several legal and practical obstacles. The point given to Türkiye is again 1 out of 4 points.¹¹

For the last question about the equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation, Türkiye is again given 1 out of 4, stating that the large refugee population is especially vulnerable to exploitative employment conditions.

It is evident that the issue of Syrian refugees is utilised as a ground for harsh criticisms against Türkiye's overall performance in individual rights and civil liberties. The scores highly depend on the relevant explanations of the main question and sub-questions. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether these claims can be used against Türkiye which exerted great effort in terms of using financial resources and expanding institutional and infrastructural capacity to alleviate the humanitarian crisis that has been continuing for over a decade. Unless these assertions are supported by concrete examples from multiple independent sources, it seems deeply unsubstantiated to point out that Syrian refugees deeply suffer from violations of individual rights and civil liberties. For example, Syrian refugees in Türkiye have the freedom to visit their families in the regions of Syria that have been made safe by the Turkish security forces during religious holidays, and they can return to Turkish provinces at the end of the holiday. These visits, which can be carried out as part of the voluntary repatriation adopted as one of the UNHCR principles, have been freely conducted in Türkiye since 1999, despite the harsh public backlash. A comparative context would be useful here to understand why Freedom House's narrative of Syrian refugees against Türkiye is questionable. For instance, in UNHCR reports, human rights violations by Greece regarding Syrian refugees from Türkiye or elsewhere have raised serious concerns. The UNHCR has repeatedly warned Greece that pushbacks at the sea and land border are a violation of international law. Although this issue is reflected in Freedom House reports, the scores given to Türkiye on the same questions are lower than those of Greece. The death of



Eid al-Fitr preparations at the refugee camp in Türkiye. (Halil Fidan - Anadolu Agency)

¹¹ In the full explanation, Freedom House mainly states the "difficulty" of enjoying freedom of movement in South-eastern provinces due to Türkiye's fight against PKK terrorism and also states those who were fired or suspended in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. According to Freedom House, these are the defining features of freedom of movement in Türkiye. The score is 1 out of 4. To see the full report, you can visit <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022>

two children by drowning as a result of the Greece's push-back, one of which is 4 years old and the other 9 months old, should be included in the explanation of the relevant questions. Otherwise, it means that there are good reasons to be suspicious about Freedom House's analysis in terms of subjective bias against Türkiye.

Comparative Criticisms

In addition to content-based and contextual criticisms, Freedom House's Türkiye analysis can be critically evaluated from a comparative perspective. The critical method here can be carried out in a way that any evaluation criterion that is described as negative for Türkiye's performance in political rights and civil liberties is either not taken into account when evaluating another country or, on the contrary, is seen as a positive impact. For instance, the state of emergency declared after the terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015 in France, was officially lifted in November 2017. It was extended six times after the attacks. The anti-terror law which was enacted after the lift of the state of emergency contains regulations that make the state of emergency almost permanent. The UN Human Rights Council rapporteurs, who expressed their concerns on the issue, warned that the anti-terrorism bill could lead to "unfair" and "discriminatory" practices for French citizens and especially Muslims.¹² When we look at Freedom House's 2016, 2017, and 2018 reports, there are no serious score reductions, although the state of emergency is mentioned verbally in the evaluations. However, Freedom House's as-

sessments of the state of emergency in Türkiye have been harshly criticised, and the scores given to Türkiye in many civil liberties-related questions have remained 0 or 1 out of 4 full points. It is common practice for governments to take emergency measures in times of crisis. However, if the context and the process are examined, the situation in France under the state of emergency was not as harshly criticised as Türkiye and there were no similar changes in the scores. Both countries experienced two different events that threatened their national security, the terrorist attack in France, and the failed July 15 coup attempt in Türkiye. It is of utmost methodological importance to bring critical assessments in a consistent way for all countries.

One of the points of comparative criticism is about the militarisation and demilitarisation processes that happened in Zimbabwe and Türkiye. Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, resigned from power in 2017 as a result of military pressure. Any report in which militarisation is evaluated as a negative factor in terms of civil rights and freedoms is expected to evaluate the opposite, demilitarisation as a positive factor for the progress of freedom. Although the report scored Türkiye in this question as 3 out of 4, other parts of the Freedom House's report characterise the demilitarisation of civilian politics from military pressures as the purges of soldiers "suspected of disloyalty". It means that although demilitarisation is reflected as a positive effect on the scores, the narrative used in the statements about this process is questionable.

Concluding Remarks

Global Performance Indices (GPIs) can be considered quantitative tools for assessing the performance of countries in the post-WW2 international system in terms of the designated standards of the liberal international order primarily led by the U.S. This paper firstly examined the global context in which the GPIs emerged and proliferated, and then a two-dimensional critical approach was brought in terms of legitimacy-related and methodological aspects. Legitimacy-related criticisms circle around the very idea that GPIs are tools of international control in line with a particular set of norms standardised by Western countries. Methodological criticisms are shaped around firstly the issue of subjectivity in the information collection processes of observed countries and secondly the validity check. After this inner criticism, the paper sought to examine Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index as one of the well-known examples of GPIs by bringing evidence

from its analysis of Türkiye. In this regard, content-based and contextual criticisms focused on the narrative used in reports for assessing Türkiye's annual performance in political rights and civil liberties. Then two examples were given in the context of comparative criticism of the organisation's Türkiye reports. The gist of the paper is the very idea that to achieve more accurate and valid assessments for any country, Freedom House or any organisation preparing GPIs should avoid one-sidedness in information collection processes to prevent subjectivity in analysis, and give special attention to the socio-political context of any country examined. Subjecting information and observations gathered from regional experts to content-based, contextual, methodological, and verification processes can bring more objective analyses that make us closer to the undistorted truth.

¹² To see the full content, see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/567292-france-must-bring-counter-terrorism-law-line-international-rights-obligations>

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