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## Devastating floods in Bosnia and Serbia call for implementation of EU supported extreme weather adaptation policies in the region

0 comments

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*Over the past few days, an unprecedented natural catastrophe has affected considerable portions of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia.*

*“Not enough attention is given to the irreversible process of climate change that is affecting the world. Bosnia and Serbia, poor countries in the European context, have reduced capacities to react to and handle dire consequences of extreme weather events, and the poorest communities are often the most vulnerable to these ‘invisible’ risks”, argues **Sonja Avlijaš***



*Map of floods affecting Serbia and Bosnia – from [www.blic.rs](http://www.blic.rs)*

As states of emergency were declared in Bosnia and Serbia on May 15 due to severe flash flooding, drowned lives, devastated communities and houses buried in landslides have been just some of the heartbreaking images witnessed over the past few days. The ‘worst ever’ cyclonic rainfall has led to the overflowing of several rivers which have burst into towns and villages, with water levels rising by 1cm per minute in some of the most affected areas. The astonishing speed of flooding gave people no time to react.

With rescue efforts initially supported by Russian and Slovenian emergency teams, national and local authorities have been ordering evacuation of whole towns and villages (the rest of the EU started sending assistance as states of emergency continued into the weekend). More than 25,000 people have been evacuated from their homes in Serbia alone, while 95,000 were without electricity due to the flooding of electric plants. Bosnia is faring even worse, with one third of the country’s territory and over 1 million people affected by the floods. The death toll in the two countries has risen to at least 35, with casualties expected to rise. Thousands of houses and agricultural crops

have been wiped out by overflowing rivers and over 3,000 landslides, but the material damage cannot be estimated until the water recedes, which might take more than a week. The silver lining of this cyclone named 'Tamara' has been the impressive response of volunteers and the amount of humanitarian assistance delivered by residents of the unaffected areas.

Unfortunately, there is nothing special about the Balkans when it comes to this unprecedented natural disaster. 2014 started with an exceptionally high number of **extreme weather events**. This winter saw the 'worst ever' storms and floods across the UK, while North America faced exceptionally severe snow storms and agonisingly low temperatures. And let us not forget the uncontrollable fires in California which, in combination with fierce winds, have led to the coining of the term '**firenadoes**'. These events, that are arguably becoming both more frequent and more menacing, have been devastating lives, economies and the environment.

A **growing body of evidence** is pointing to a connection between extreme weather events, natural catastrophes and climate change. Rising sea levels are affecting rivers and their likelihood of inundation, even without the storms. **Evidence** also points to a more recent increase in stormy weather patterns, as well as amounts of rainfall. Consequences of such catastrophic weather events are also expected to grow, with The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicting significant increase in **weather-related mortality**, as well as rising health concerns, due to factors such as widespread destruction of food supplies or outbreaks of disease as a result of breakdowns in sanitation services.

Every year the World Economic Forum releases a **Global Risks Report** that covers global risks of highest concern in the year to come. In 2014, extreme weather events have become the second biggest risk in terms of likelihood, coming second only after income disparity. This risk was

not even featuring among the top five in the previous years. In terms of impact, climate change is listed as the second biggest risk for 2014, coming only after fiscal crises. Unemployment and underemployment feature 'only' third in terms of likelihood and fourth in terms of impact, in spite of the global devastation in labour markets that the Great Recession has caused. This is a further indicator of the alarming nature of the extreme weather phenomenon, although extremely high unemployment in Bosnia and Serbia is a major problem that compounds these countries' problem of vulnerability to extreme weather events.

Climate change is one of the top five priorities of the EU's Europe 2020 strategy, and as such also a priority for all governments that are negotiating EU accession. **Recognising** that 'action is needed to protect people, buildings, infrastructure, businesses and ecosystems' in April 2013 the European Commission adopted the **EU strategy on adaptation to climate change** and set up the **European Climate Adaptation Platform**. This strategy goes beyond policies to reverse the process of global warming, such as promotion of energy conservation, energy efficiency or low-emission cars, and focuses on improving warning mechanisms, adapting infrastructure to more severe weather conditions, adapting insurance mechanisms to the context of natural and man-made disasters, and even introducing more resistant agricultural crops. The strategy aims to ensure that at least 20% of the European budget throughout the forthcoming **Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) 2014-2020 is towards climate-related expenditure (to be approved by the European Parliament). The EU is also the largest donor of climate finance to countries beyond its borders, including through the Instrument for Pre Accession (IPA) geared towards candidate countries.

In spite of this global surge in extreme weather events, these floods, as well as the severe February snowstorm that affected northern Serbia, have created fertile ground for conspiracy theories, such as blaming

environmental hazards in the Balkans to a U.S. military-funded project called the High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), located on remote tundra in Alaska. In all of its absurdity, it gets worse, since **the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church has suggested that God is punishing the Serbian people because of the gay parade that took place in September 2013**. Unfortunately, a lot less attention is given to the less 'entertaining' but real, irreversible process of climate change that is affecting the world. Both Bosnia and Serbia, poor countries in the European context, have reduced capacities to react to and handle dire consequences of extreme weather events. Furthermore, while everyone affected stands to lose from such catastrophes, the poorest communities and households are often the most vulnerable to these 'invisible' risks, because of the poor quality of their housing and more precarious locations of their dwellings.

A number of people have refused to evacuate and are being labelled as irresponsible for jeopardising the rescue efforts. But what could lead these people to be so 'irresponsible' towards their own lives? Leaving behind their property, and even animals in rural areas, represents irreversible harm for many, who will have lost everything to the floods. As they know too well, from their experiences of war, sanctions and sheer poverty, once the emergency is over, their unaccountable governments rarely compensate them for what they have lost. The failure of post-socialist transition to develop effective property insurance markets in the region compounds the problem of compensation following destruction of private assets.

In practice, climate change is not seen as a priority by government or media in an economically distressed country like Serbia, which is trying to tackle fiscal problems, harmonisation of its relationship with Kosovo and reform of the public sector all at once. Following March 2014 elections, Serbia set up a new government that put agriculture and environmental protection into one Ministry, led by an agronomist.



However, there seems to be a narrow understanding of what climate change and environmental protection is about. Nobody is expecting any Balkan government to seriously influence the global debate on climate change of course. But they do need to systematically address the consequences of extreme weather events by generating policies and programmes that can help people to adapt to the changing weather patterns and the growing risks associated with them. This would require investment into more resistant infrastructure and public services to deal with emergencies and their aftermaths. It would require more, rather than less, public employment as well as inclusion of the affected communities into formulation of these policies. And it would jeopardise current government plans to cut public expenditure and reduce public sector employment. Serbia and Bosnia need the EU with its financial instruments and its structured approach in order to cope with these growing challenges. This agenda is even more important than the unemployment problem, because protection of assets represents the basis of sustainable livelihood strategies for most. Otherwise, states of emergency, rescue efforts, TV cameras and even the Russians, will come and go, while people will stay to deal with their losses on an ad hoc basis from one storm to the next.

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