

Layers of Inter/national Crises: Assessing environmental risk mitigation in Serbia

May 19, 2017 – September 14, 2017

Belgrade, Serbia

Research Abstract:

This project examines how understandings of environmental risk are produced in Serbia. In May 2014, southeastern Europe experienced the worst flooding in its recorded history. The flood revealed aspects of previous crises yet to be resolved as it displaced thousands of residents and caused landslides that potentially covered cluster munitions from the 1999 NATO bombing. The floods also increased concerns that landslides moved landmines placed in the early 1990s along the border, from Croatia into Serbia. Response to and mitigation of the 2014 flood required experts of flood response and recovery as well as demining experts who represented domestic and international interests. Diverse actors, which include government and NGO employees, local residents, and volunteers who may or may not have expertise related to disaster response and recovery, worked towards recovery from the flood. The May 2014 flood is a pivotal point of this project for it brought ‘past’ crises into the present – through material forms such as landmines and discourses forged through the political processes over the past thirty years - but it also reshaped the terrain upon which new refugees walked. The ‘present’ crisis of the flood quickly became a ‘past’ crisis as the refugee situation expanded. Yet, how is environmental risk understood and addressed in a context where a spectacular, urgent event takes precedence?

Research Goals

My research goals were to collect data that will help me to better understand the ways in which environmental risk is understood and dealt with by multiple stakeholders in Serbia. This funding was especially helpful as it allowed me to begin research in the summer, which provided me with more time to make contacts and visit archives. One of the arguments framing my research is that understanding environmental crisis in the present requires us to understand how past events and relationships formed the space in which environmental crisis can and do occur today (Katz 2008). Therefore, my research requires a blend of qualitative methods that include archival work with materials both historical and current, interviews with both local and international stakeholders, and participant observation.

Through these methods I aim to understand the ways in which understandings of environmental risk are produced in Serbia in the aftermath of the May 2014 floods. Perceptions of environmental risks vary depending on the context and actors involved. I sought to understand whose perceptions of environmental risk were deemed as credible and as to if the valued discernments changed over time. I also seek to understand the role of international organizations in shaping understandings of risk. Further, as international organizations work with both local governments, communities and the national government, understanding how those different knowledges and perspectives shape what comes to be known as environmental risk is key. This summer, my goals were to gather information that was readily accessible (for example, what is easily available in archives) and then to plan how to adapt my research plan to find the remaining materials needed to answer my questions.

Research Activities

Archives

How response to environmental disasters were handled prior to 1989 is important to know, for some aspects of response and preparation during Yugoslavia remained in Serbia and some aspects changed. Thus far, I have collected over 2000 pages of materials from the Archives of Yugoslavia thus far. Visiting the archives helped me to gather materials that I hope will help me to answer questions regarding how environmental risk was understood during the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The question of environmental risk and perception is not something that can be found in one fond or collection in an archive. There is no fond that is only about environmental events such as floods or earthquakes. The events are dealt with via multiple actors and over time, which means that time and patience are needed to go through different fonds. Therefore, I researched the fonds as much as I could online prior to visiting the archives. I also relied on the guidance of the archivists. The materials I collected at the archives to date span the years 1945 – 1978. They deal with different aspects of emergency management, disaster response, and coordination among the republics within Yugoslavia. This sheds insight into the legacy of flood response and preparation in SFRY. I am still going through the materials but here are some points of interest:

There are also references to documentary films throughout the archives. There is paperwork and conversations regarding permission to film the work on the Danube-Tisa-Danube canal in the 1950s and 1960s. These could potentially provide interesting information about understandings of flood risk during SFRY and could complement recent documentaries available online about floods in Obrenovac (in 2014 and before).

Of much interest to this research are pamphlets of guidance for people in BiH and Serbia in 1949 specifically related to the flood defenses. These guidelines are particularly helpful for

they provide a clear directive of what type of knowledge the government provided to citizens who were living with environmental risk. I hope to find additional pamphlets from other years to analyze as well. Below is an example of one paper which lays out the commands for who is responsible for what during a flood and how they should act.

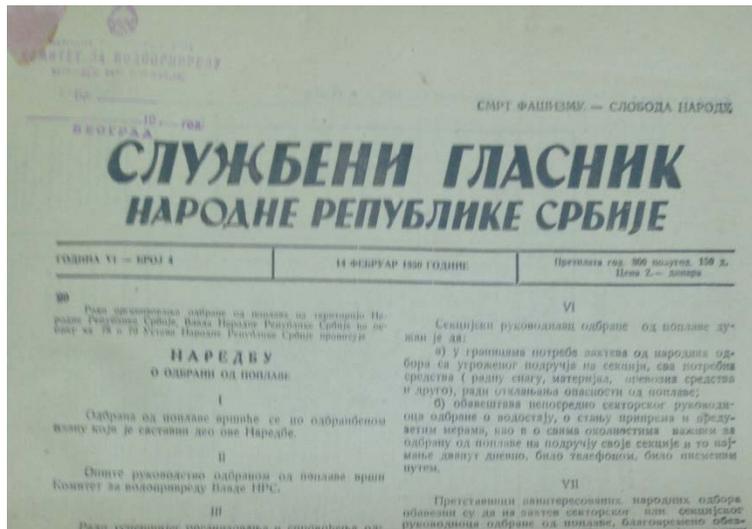


Figure 1 The Official Gazette of the National Republic of Serbia

In the archive, I collected materials that show the discussions between regional governments that relate to flood preparation (such as building canals and barriers) and flood response (such as providing aid after the 1964 flood in Zagreb and the 1965 flood in Serbia). Additional materials from after World War II call for the first community brigades to prepare for floods which called for 66 men and one horse. These teams evolved over time but – according to some interviews and conversations with residents – the lack of these teams during the 2014 floods served as a reminder of some tactics of emergency preparation that were unable to be performed.

Interviews

Interviews are important for helping me to better understand what occurred during the 2014 flood and the process of flood recovery. I have had seven in-depth interviews with

university professors and employees at large international non-governmental organizations. Now that everyone has returned from summer holidays, I anticipate that I will be able to meet with those who were traveling over the summer. I met with participants at their offices or at a café near their offices. Interviews lasted from one hour to four hours. I discussed with participants their backgrounds, their work during the 2014 floods, their work during other environmental events in Serbia, and we also discussed their current research interests.

These interviews have shed insight on the ways in which environmental risk is currently understood in Serbia as well as an understanding of the recent history of understanding environmental risk in the region. Often interviews provide the opportunity to gather additional materials for research. These materials include unpublished materials or materials unavailable online. I also reached out to previous contacts who were helpful in providing contact information for additional potential research participants. The picture below is from a manual that is titled “Reducing the Risk of Natural Disasters in Educational Institutions.” This manual was commissioned in response to the 2014 floods in Serbia. It is specifically to aid elementary and secondary school teachers in finding activities that can incorporate education about environmental disasters into the regular curriculum.

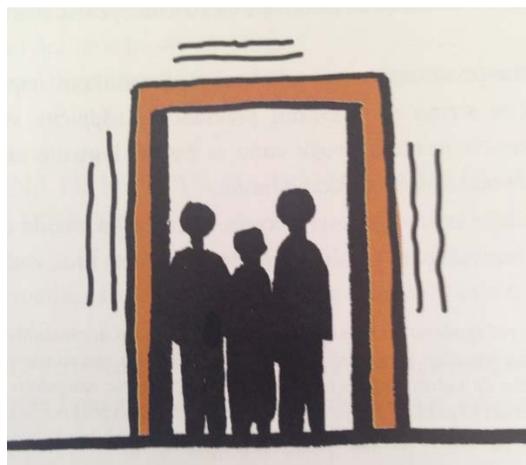


Figure 2 An example of where to stand during an earthquake.

Participant observation

Participant observation allows me to see the process of learning/engaging. It allows for observation of the dynamics of a group and for a more embodied understanding of the events occurring. I was invited to take part in a section of training for professionals who want to learn more about disaster risk reduction (DRR). This was especially interesting as I was allowed to fully participate in a three-day intensive training for a particular software that is useful for expressing and discussing aspects of DRR. Therefore, I was able to meet and talk with participants as well as experience the intensity of the training.

Important Research Findings

These findings are compiled during the beginning stages of this dissertation research. Therefore, findings are very preliminary.

Two aspects of the research that have come to the front as more important than initially anticipated are 1) that DRR is an important language that is used with increasing frequency and 2) education for both children in schools but also adults from different communities to learn about hazards in their regions and how to best prepare for them is growing in the acknowledgement of its value. DRR is the language used by non-government and international organizations along with the national government (e.g. National Strategy for DRR in Serbia 2011). Increasingly, academics are also using that language to discuss environmental risks in Serbia. Additionally, national law is an important factor in determining responsibility for 1) responding to emergencies and 2) preparation for potential environmental hazards.

The size of NGOs also plays a role in how successful they are in dealing with new crises. For example, larger organizations were able to help fund both the refugee situation in the winter of 2015 and maintain their 2014 commitments to flood recovery. This was not the same for

smaller organizations. Further, having flexible donors was and is an important factor in the success of the flood recovery projects.

Interviewees stressed the importance of thinking long-term about environmental risks and recovery from the 2014 floods. Torrential floods are the number one environmental threat in Serbia (Petrović, Kostadinov, and Dragičević 2014). They will continue to occur so it is best to be proactive in the recovery process as well as preparing for and building awareness of future threats. Another theme that came up in interviews is the varied amounts of awareness that people have about the environmental risks with which they live. Educational efforts are invaluable to help people best respond to environmental emergencies.

Participant observation showed that there are myriad reasons why people become involved in learning more about DRR. While there is an aspect of wanting to help others be prepared for environmental emergencies, there is also the very real aspect of a need for employment. Therefore, part of participants' interest in learning more about DRR is the intuition that this additional training will make one more valuable on the job market.



Figure 3 Flood damage circa 1945. Yugoslavia.

Materials from the archives demonstrate that threats of environmental disasters were well known to both residents of disaster-prone areas and to the government. Organizing response, aid, and preparation between republics within Yugoslavia was an important factor. Early on, the government actors believed that by demonstrating control of the rivers they could also highlight the good that socialism could do (correspondence in 1949). Much more analysis needs to be done of the archival materials collected.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Presently Serbia is dealing with multiple events, such as EU accession as well as the refugee situation. Yet, as we continue to, environmental events dangerous to livelihood continue. As the US continues to offer aid to countries, thinking beyond the immediate disaster is crucial. Long-term strategies for aid and donor flexibility to changing situations are important to strengthening the capacities of the countries receiving aid. Maintaining attention on environmental threats – both environmental emergencies and issues such as pollution are important. Pollution may continue slowly and without spectacle, but it does become exacerbated when an environmental disaster occurs (Nixon 2011). This must continue despite other pressing domestic and international needs.

Co-Curricular Activity:

No talks to date have been given. I have spoken with and interviewed people who work in local and international NGOs to discuss their role in the immediate response and recovery process from the 2014 floods.

Conclusions and Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

This summer research was invaluable as it allowed me to begin to form contacts and relationships with people that will continue to shape my research. Between these contacts and the materials collected, I have a strong foundation upon which to complete my dissertation research. For example, I met many people through participant observation at trainings at an aid organizations. With many of these participants I am now beginning to coordinate interviews. Additionally, I am building relationships with those in areas affected by the 2014 flood. The iterative process of discourse analysis of materials will shape how I approach interviews and participant observation and vice versa. I will continue to explore what materials are available at other archives in the region regarding materials from 1970+ that relate to disaster response and recovery. One scholarly publication will come out in early 2018. Future presentations will be in the summer of 2018 at the Royal Geographic Society – International Geographical Union conference in the UK.

Works Cited

- Katz, C. 2008. “Bad Elements: Katrina and the Scoured Landscape of Social Reproduction.” *Gender, Place & Culture* 15 (1): 15–29. doi:10.1080/09663690701817485.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Petrović, Ana, Stanimir Kostadinov, and Slavoljub Dragičević. 2014. “The Inventory and Characterization of Torrential Flood Phenomenon in Serbia.” *Polish Journal of Environmental Studies* 23 (3): 823–30.