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Deconstructing Layers of Disaster: How the production and deployment of expertise in previous crises shapes the resilience of states against future crises

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RESEARCH ABSTRACT

The 2014 floods in Serbia were the strongest in recorded history. Physical and institutional structures such as explosive remnants of war (ERW) from previous conflicts, lack of flood preparation, and inconsistent communication exacerbated the damage in multiple towns. Today, flood recovery continues as Serbia experiences an influx of thousands of migrants unable to cross into the European Union (E.U.). Each crisis increases demand for experts of crisis recovery and prevention. However, actors such as the state, NGOs, and local residents produce different kinds of expertise that applied in various ways. How these versions of expertise are implemented shapes the recovery process. Therefore, legacies of political and environmental crises, such as conflicts in the 1990s and unprecedented floods, threaten the ways in which both communities and the state recover from new crises that emerge. I explore the impact of such legacies through examining the results of how different actors produce and implement expertise. This research was conducted, against the backdrop of Serbia's path to the E.U. and ongoing migrant situation, in order to develop my dissertation proposal, which will be defended by the end of this academic year. Thanks to the research conducted this summer 2016, my project now

examines the relationships of flood response and recovery in Serbia to understand the ways in which a state undergoing economic transition recovers from and prepares for environmental hazards.

Research Goals for Pre-dissertation Fieldwork Summer 2016:

1) **Confirm research sites:** In addition to Belgrade and Obrenovac, I visited Niš in central Serbia, Bujanovac and Preševo (two towns in the south of Serbia), as well as Šid, Jamena, and Subotica (towns in the north). Post-fieldwork, I will examine the data collected and re-evaluate my site choices based on how I anticipate dissertation research in each site will help me to explore how multiple forms of expertise interact during and after a crisis and the effects of that interaction. Sites in the south were suggested by research participants who were involved in the recovery process from the 2014 floods and are now working with the ongoing migrant situation. Many who were involved in flood response in 2014 are now engaged in some capacity with the migrant situation.

2) **Recruit participants for dissertation research:** I made contacts with and had productive meetings with 1) people who were affected by the 2014 floods and 2) by institutions that are consistently working to help communities fully recover from the flood damage. Physically being in the region allowed me to speak to people (e.g. friends of contacts) with whom I otherwise may not have been able to meet. I now have institutional contacts with two universities as well as an NGO. Further, I have a diverse network of research participants with which to work during dissertation fieldwork.

3) **Further focus research questions:** The visits to various locations, seeing the recovery process from the 2014, and talking with multiple participants regarding flood recovery allowed

me to collect data via interviews and observations, which are now improving research questions regarding what occurs when crises occur in a region that has yet to recover from previous crises.

4) Understand the relationship between the current migrant crisis and post-flood recovery:

Understanding this relationship is an ongoing and complex process. There are local connections such as community solidarity networks as well as certain NGOs were in place because of the floods, which helped with some responses to the migrant situation in 2015. Further, the migrants are often entering municipalities that do not have the physical (or financial) infrastructure to respond to the influx of people. Many municipalities deal with environmental hazards, which are often at a smaller scale than the 2014 floods but occur with greater frequency (UNDP 2016). These environmental hazards (e.g. floods, landslides, earthquakes) pose a threat to both safety and development in the municipalities, which then erodes the capabilities of the municipalities to deal with other crises, such as an influx of migrants.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

1. Interviews:

I conducted four semi-formal interviews with representatives from NGOs based in Serbia conducting work in both flood recovery and the migrant situation, three interviews with academics based in the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade, two interviews with locals who volunteered during the 2014 flood, and one with a translator in a migrant camp. I also spoke to residents of Obrenovac who were affected by the 2014 flood. I asked about participants' experiences during the flood, their understandings of initial post-flood recovery, and about their thoughts of recovery and flood preparation two years after the event. I inquired as to whom each participant considers experts in disaster response and recovery. I noted the

extent to which participants mention the current migrant crisis and/or the internally displaced persons that remain from the 1990s conflicts. We discussed the 2014 initial flood response in many different towns that included Obrenovac, coordination between NGOs, government employees, locals and volunteers, experiences of environmental hazards in the region, and how the threat of environmental catastrophes has previously affected the migrant situation and how it may affect the migrant situation in the future.

2. Archival Work

Obrenovac has a fabricated network of canals that have been used for almost a century. Through research participants, I went through (and helped to organize) pictures that showed the change over time of the canal system. In addition, I also went examined pictures from the most recent 2014 flood that showed the initial response and later (ongoing) recovery process.

I also visited the Archives of Yugoslavia to examine what existed regarding flood recovery. As the summer continued, it became clear that, while archives may supplement my work, the most important methods for my project are interviews and participant observation.

3. Participant Observation and travel

Participant observation occurred throughout my fieldwork, and travel to multiple sites around Serbia provided me with experience and data to make an educated, informed decision about which locations will be most helpful to my dissertation. Prior to this research, I did not consider cities in the south; however, currently I am designing dissertation research to include a city in the southern region in order to provide a more full understanding of the networks of aid regarding environmental hazard preparation and response in Serbia. These visits helped me to see more of

Serbia, and of course to physically see the ongoing prospect of recovery from the 2014 floods and response to the more recent event of the influx of migrants.

- a. *Jamena* is a small town is mostly cleared and visually seemed rebuilt post-2014 floods. According to research participants, some people used the 2014 floods as an excuse to leave this very small border town. Among the new buildings, rebuilt after the floods, there are some abandoned homes damaged by the floods to which people will likely not return.



Figure 1 A town recovered from the 2014 floods. The E.U. sign designates that aid was given for 2014 flood recovery.

- b. *Šid* is the main town in the municipality of Šid (Jamena is also within this municipality). I also visited towns in northern Serbia in June and again in August. In August, the numbers of migrants in Subotica and Šid had grown. This was clear while visiting the towns (there were so many more migrants to be seen), and my observations were supported by the reports I read and research participants with whom I spoke. The town of Šid did not experience much flood damage, but this town is near two main border points with Croatia. In June, driving through the town, migrants were not easy to see. By the end of August, it was clear just by driving through the town that the number of migrants had greatly increased.



Figure 2 A sign visible upon entrance to Subotica that denotes the donors - namely the E.U. - during the 2014 floods. By August, migrants were camping out in the park to the left of the sign.

- c. *Bujanovac and Preševo* are in the south near the border with Kosovo and Macedonia. This area experiences environmental hazards that include extreme floods as well as wildfires, hail. Further, this area is economically recovering from NATO 1999 and the unexploded landmines that remain from conflicts with Kosovo. When I visited the area in mid-June the Preševo camp only had a hundred or so migrants passing through it, however, now there are many more migrants coming into Serbia. While at the camp I watched how multiple aid workers, most of whom were from Serbia, interacted with each other, which lent insight into the ways in which different types of actors engage while working to mitigate one particular situation. The minimal economic activity in this region is a stark contrast compared to Belgrade or even Subotica in the north. However, there are efforts by the local government and the international community to increase the economic viability of the region.¹ There is a new migrant center being built in Bujanovac that will provide aid for migrants leaving Serbia as well as provide some employment for locals.

¹ For details visit <http://www.kt.gov.rs/en/articles/municipalities/municipality-of-bujanovac/>.

- d. **Belgrade** is still the key place in which decisions about policy and crises management are made. While there is still conversation about the floods, much attention has turned to the migrant situation that intensified over summer 2016.



Figure 3 Street messages created by activists in Belgrade also intensified as the summer continued.

- e. **Obrenovac** was the most damaged town in Serbia during the 2014 floods. In the past two years, through government and international aid, the town is mostly rebuilt, with new roads and buildings in and around the main area of town.



Figure 4 The new housing for refugees of the 1990s built behind the original housing that was destroyed during the 2014 floods in Obrenovac.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The 2014 floods brought international awareness to the extent of damage that environmental hazards can pose to Serbia. However, the ongoing threat of environmental hazards has exacerbated the uneven development among municipalities (the local level) as well as detracted from the already fledgling infrastructure (physical and financial) in the state of Serbia.² The current migrant situation has drawn attention and funds (both international and state) from the long-term needs to build resilience against environmental hazards at a state and municipal level. Contributing to the discussion of expertise, three themes became emergent by the completion of this pre-dissertation fieldwork: 1) shifting attention from environmental hazards 2) climate change understandings and 3) the relationship between donors and expertise.

Shifting attention: The relationship between the 2014 floods and the ongoing migrant situation is complex. First, those who worked in response to the 2014 floods now find work that relates to

² For more detailed information please see the UNDP's Report *Risk-Proofing the Balkans* (2016). http://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/library/nhdr/human-development-report--2016--risk-proofing-the-western-balkan.html

the migrant situation. Second, while new migrant camps are being built with state and international funds around Serbia, preparation for long-term capacity building to sustain communities and the state against increasing environmental hazards receives less attention. Capacity building to mitigate future disasters is important to both locals, NGOs, and academics as well as those who work in municipal government. Yet attention to further recovery from past crises and preparation for future disasters is shifting to the very present problem of incoming migrants and the need for financial aid with which to maintain livable conditions for the migrants while they try to enter the E.U. This relationship is exacerbated by the precarious economics (high unemployment, lack of industry) that Serbia has experienced since the events of the 1990s.



Figure 5 A permanent sign atop the Lasta Bus Station in Belgrade stating where migrants can get tickets to Serbia's northern border.

Climate change discourse: Academics and NGO employees invoked climate change as a key factor in the increasing environmental hazards and threatening development in localities where environmental hazards are not considered a primary concern. They note that there is a growing (albeit, still small) awareness of climate change and the potential pressures to communities that it entails. However, there is a concern that climate change is not yet fully engaged with (and arguably implemented into policy and practice) at the local level (this varies by municipality).

The concern about environmental hazards is at times placed aside for a focus on economic development, yet increasingly, local policy makers realize that economic development will not be sustainable without a consistent focus on environmental hazards.

Strong international ties: While research participants most often described an expert as a person who has “50 percent good education/training, and 50 percent good experience,” where the training and experience comes from varies greatly. Donors – especially international donors – play a large role in determining who is an expert and what expertise is implemented regarding environmental hazards and beyond.



Figure 6 One sign of many in the Nis Fortress that demonstrates the ways in which Serbia and the E.U. are connected.

The relationship between international donors and the Serbian government (at both the state and municipal level) is important to attune to as it will be an essential connection in better understanding the networks that shape the ways in which expertise to environmental hazards is applied in Serbia. While international relationships prove fruitful for both Serbia and its international partners, the ways in which expertise is understood in these relationships shapes the direction of response to and recovery from crises that are environmental and political. Deeper

attunement to these relationships will strengthen the ways in which response to and recovery from environmental hazards is implemented by both local and international actors.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The policy implications of this research relate to crises response and management. First, while the ongoing migrant crises is incredibly important, less spectacular events such as torrential floods and other environmental hazards pose a threat to Serbia's capacities to respond to any crises. For the damage, even seemingly small damage, from environmental hazards can erode community infrastructure that are key to resilience, development, and even aiding migrants. Further, the unemployment in Serbia, especially in areas outside of Belgrade, needs to continue to be taken into consideration. As communities recover from events such as the 2014 floods, recovery processes can also consider how to contribute to sustainable economic development as well as ensure that infrastructure is rebuilt.

CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY

I presented a lecture, titled, "Thinking through Space: Layers of geography in the migrant situation in Serbia" upon invitation from the NGO IDC (Initiative for Development and Cooperation) in Belgrade. This presentation offered a qualitative-geography perspective on the shifting migrant situation. Further, this was an opportunity to share how someone trained in the Anglo-American geographic tradition approaches the situation. This approach has similarities and differences with the Serbian geographic tradition.

Therefore, this presentation opened up opportunity for dialogue and engagement with NGO workers, students, and other academics.

CONCLUSIONS

A more concise knowledge of understandings of expertise and relationships between experts dealing with environmental hazards will aid in understanding 1) how to more effectively respond to and prepare for environmental hazards and 2) the ways in which states experiencing economic transition respond to crises. The ways in which Serbia is dealing with multiple crises offers insights into how other countries can utilize their own resources and international relationships to respond to crises and mitigate potentially disastrous events of the future.

Plans for Future Research Agenda

The results of this research will be presented at professional conferences in spring 2017. Further, the results are being used to develop a dissertation prospectus that will be defended in spring 2017. This research creates the foundation upon which I will conduct an in-depth study about the ways in which Serbia, a state undergoing economic transition, responds to and prepares for environmental hazards while dealing with legacies from past political conflicts (e.g. the refugees of the 1990s) and current conflicts far from its soil (migrants from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan).