

The Balkan floods and the break-up of Yugoslavia

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At least 44 people have died and tens of thousands have been left homeless in the worst-ever flooding to hit the Balkans.

Three months' worth of rain fell in three days last week, causing the River Sava to burst its banks. It rises in the Alps of western Slovenia, forms the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and continues through Serbia to the capital Belgrade, where it joins the Danube. Thousands of landslides have been reported, destroying roads, railway lines and entire villages.

At least 27 people have died in Bosnia, including nine from the northeastern town of Doboj, devastated by what the regional police chief called a 3-4 metre high "tsunami" of water. About a third of the country is under water, affecting more than 1 million people.

The chairman of the Bosnian three-man presidency, Bakir Izetbegovic, declared that his country faced a "horrible catastrophe... We are still not fully aware of its actual dimensions."

In Serbia, 12 bodies were recovered in the flooded town of Obrenovac, about 20 miles from the capital, Belgrade. More than 25,000 people have been evacuated and many more remain stranded.

The Nikola Tesla electricity plant in Obrenovac, which supplies most of Belgrade, is threatened, as is the coal-fired power plant at Kostolac, which provides over 20 percent of Serbia's electricity needs.

Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said, "What happened to us happens once in a thousand years, not hundred, but thousand."

It is clear that the severity of the floods has been compounded by the fall-out from the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, the Bosnian War (1991-95) and the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999. Political tensions between the Balkan countries and the

economic disaster, worsened by the 2008 global crisis, have continued to take their toll.

These factors have been ignored in most news reports, with comment limited to the danger from the exposure of some of the 120,000 landmines that remain from the Bosnian War and the disappearance of signs warning of minefields. Some 500 people have been killed by mines since 1995. Some reports also quote Sarajevo Mine Action Centre official Sasa Obradovic, who said, "Besides the mines, a lot of weapons were thrown into the rivers, lying idle for almost 20 years." But that is as far as it goes.

In 1972, the Yugoslav government first attempted to monitor and control the River Sava, the country's most important inland waterway, linking Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. Its Sava River Basin Management Plan was one of the first in the world and attempted to reconcile the differing demands of the various republics—hydroelectric power in Slovenia, navigation for Croatia to its large inland port at Sisak, and agricultural needs in Bosnia and Serbia. Levees and reservoirs were built and waterways dredged. Further plans to improve navigation, prevent flooding and tackle pollution were drawn up in the 1980s.

However, these were thwarted by the break-up of the Yugoslav Republic and its descent into war. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US and Germany both set about dismantling Yugoslavia by recognizing the breakaway republics of the old federation—Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia—as independent sovereign states. The US was intent on exploiting the power vacuum created by the Soviet collapse to project its power eastward and gain control over the vast untapped reserves of oil and natural gas in the newly-independent Central Asian republics of the

old USSR. The European powers, led by Germany, were anxious to stake their own claim.

Following years during which flood protection measures were ignored and infrastructure left unrepaired, numerous initiatives and commissions have been created to coordinate action, but these have borne little fruit as a result of the continuing economic and political situation.

In 2001, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the then-Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Croatia and Slovenia signed a “Letter of Intent” to set up “the Sava River Basin Initiative” to “utilize, protect and control the Sava River Basin water resources in a manner that would enable ‘better life conditions and raising the standard of population in the region’, and to find appropriate institutional frame [sic] in order to enhance the cooperation.”

A few years later the International Sava River Basin Commission was established. The River Sava, the largest tributary of the Danube, was also included in the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, which “commits the contracting parties to join their efforts in sustainable water management, including conservation of surface and ground water, pollution reduction, and the prevention and control of floods, accidents and ice hazards.”

In 2004, the United Nations weighed in with its “Development of Sava River basin Management Plan—Pilot Project,” saying, “There is a need of co-ordination, integration and data exchange for the whole basin. This includes co-ordination of operations in the Sava basin’s retention areas and water reservoirs to avoid the coincidence of floodwaters as well as the maintenance of high flow conditions in the Sava and Drina. National emergency plans, flood forecasting and intervention plans are essential in case of accidents.”

It called for the reconstruction of flood protection embankments and a new early warning system, which had been destroyed during the war.

Nearly 10 years later all that has really materialised is the Sava’s inclusion in the new European Flood Awareness System (EFAS), which came into operational service in 2012. Flood prevention and maintenance largely remain in the hands of national governments, which see these activities as low priority or easy targets when imposing austerity measures.

According to the book *Water and Post-Conflict*

Peacebuilding, published earlier this year, the Sava River basin still remains “less developed than other river basins in Europe, water management suffers from inadequate institutional structures, inefficient operations, lack of water and sewage treatment plants and reduced financial capacity.”

Disputes continue over building hydroelectric power plants on the river and its tributaries. Large ships are still unable to navigate the top third of the river due to erosion, obstruction from bombed bridges, destruction of navigation infrastructure and mines due to the Balkan War and the NATO bombing of Serbia. The oil embargo on the country also gave rise to “severe deforestation” and soil erosion, increasing the risk of flooding. Sanctions prevented its scientists from attending international conferences.

Water and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding points out that a unified approach to the Sava River has also been thwarted by political tensions. The Montenegrin government has refused to take part in discussions over its future since its split from Serbia in 2006. Authorities of the two component parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina—Republica Srpska and the Croat-Muslim federation—hardly speak to each other and, in 2009, the Serbian government filed a lawsuit in the World Court accusing Croatia of genocide during the Balkan War in response to one filed by Croatia in 1999.



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