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# International cooperation in disaster risk reduction in the region of South Eastern Europe<sup>[2]</sup>

**Abstract:** Different kinds of natural and anthropogenic disasters are increasingly numerous in modern “risk society”, while their consequences are larger and larger, often exceeding the possibilities of responding to them not only at the local, but also at the national level. All this calls for various forms of international cooperation in disaster risk reduction and emergency management. Apart from global organizations, an important role in disaster risk reduction is also played by institutional organizational forms in the EU and some of its regions. In the region of South Eastern Europe, generally prone to crises, there is only one regional initiative – Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI) and International Sava River Basin Commission (Sava Commission). It is certainly both necessary and possible to improve the existing institutional arrangements and to devise other ones to raise the capacities of these countries

**Keywords:** disasters, international cooperation, region of South Eastern Europe, DPPI, Sava Commission

## 1. Introduction

In the literature on crisis management it is often emphasized, in line with Benjamin Franklin’s statement, that crises and disasters are inevitable just as taxes and death.<sup>[3]</sup> It is certainly confirmed

on a large scale by entire human history, which may be seen and followed as history of various crises and disasters. In that respect, modern post-industrialist information society is not an exception in the progress of human knowledge and technology (practically power) unprecedented in

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[3] The original statement ascribed to US statesman Benjamin Franklin is: “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”. Available at: <https://www.dr.sanders.com/two-things-are-certain-in-life-death-and-taxes/>

history so far. The threat of crises and disasters is not smaller nowadays; on the contrary, it may be said that crises are becoming more and more numerous and diverse by their nature. Today we witness increasingly frequent natural disasters (floods, droughts, extreme weather conditions, pandemics etc.)<sup>[4]</sup>, the consequences of which are larger and more destructive. According to the data for the two-decade period (1985–2005), on average more than 200 million people worldwide were affected by disasters on an annual basis. According to national and regional reports about the application of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015,<sup>2</sup> during those 10 years disasters continued to produce grave consequences all over the world: more than 700,000 people lost lives, more than 1.4 million people were injured, while about 23 million people lost their homes. In addition, from 2008 to 2012, about 144 million people were subject to relocation due to disasters (Milosavljević, 2015, p. 52).

Modern crisis management requires international cooperation, particularly having in mind the types of threats we encounter, which go beyond borders, escalate rapidly and travel through interconnected infrastructures and, thus, call for cooperative responses. Regardless of the robust resources of individual countries, certain types of crises will exceed national capacities and test different collective arrangements at national and regional

levels for the common prevention, preparation, response and recovery (Barzanje, Ekengren, and Rhinard, 2018).

## 2. Global efforts in disaster risk reduction

In the above-mentioned context, the Organization of United Nations globally dedicates special attention to crisis and disaster management.<sup>[5]</sup> The UN and its specialized agencies play a significant role in the prevention, as well as reaction to serious natural crises and disasters (civil emergencies), as well as in the recovery after these events. Within the UN, there are 14 specialized agencies and a large number of special program and fund offices. Of particular importance for risk reduction in disaster management are, first of all:

- WFP – The World Food Programme is aimed at combating worldwide hunger permanently accompanying crises and natural disasters;
- WHO – The World Health Organization plays a key role in the event of health crises, such as epidemics of dangerous diseases, and follows global health trends and transnational threats to human health;
- UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency helps to take care of refugees since the waves of

[4] Although they are manifested as natural disasters, they partly have an anthropogenic cause, i.e., they are caused by the man's exploitative approach to the nature which existed and has remained in the basis of the capitalist order, as well as the Western/Europe-centric view of the world and nature, in which the human being has an ontological priority of the master of the nature (from the Bible to Marx and Engels).

[5] On this occasion we will not deal with the UN role in social crises, i.e., in peace-making and peace-keeping.

refugees are always accompanied by different types of crises;

- UNICEF – Unite for Children, the UN Agency dedicated to the protection of children in general, and particularly in crisis situations;
- OCHA – The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is in charge of international humanitarian aid;
- IAEA – The International Atomic Energy Agency is aimed at safe and secure nuclear technology and its use for peaceful purposes.

es. The Agency helps countries to improve their nuclear security and to prepare for responding to emergency situations;

- WMO – The World Meteorological Organization monitors the state and changes in the Earth's atmosphere, its interaction with the oceans, the climate etc. Under its leadership, a contribution has been made to the protection of lives and material goods in the event of natural disasters, the preservation of man's environment and improvement of economic and social welfare



Berkasovo, Serbia, October 2015.

Photo: Shutterstock

of all sectors of society in the fields such as food and water resource safety (Kešetović, 2008).<sup>[6]</sup>

Moreover, the UN organized three world conferences in Japan on disaster risk reduction, focusing on disaster and climate risk management in the context of sustainable development – in Yokohama in 1994, in Kobe in 2005, and in Sendai in 2015.<sup>[7]</sup> These conferences gathered officials and other stakeholders (NGOs, civil society organizations, local authorities and representatives of the private sector) from the whole world to speak about how to strengthen the sustainability of development by disaster and climate change risk management. The Third World Conference adopted the applicable Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

### 3. Cooperation in risk reduction within the European Union

The UN allots great significance to the matters of disaster prevention and protection ever since the very beginning of its activities since the European countries have been subject to various types of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, avalanches, floods, forest fires etc., as well as disasters caused by human action. That is why EU member-states

pay special attention to the preparations for protection, rescuing and providing help in disasters. The starting premises of the cooperation within the European Union in the field of civil protection were determined in Rome in May 1985, at the First Ministerial Meeting on Cooperation in the field of civil protection within the EU, when the framework was made for activities covering the preparedness of civil protection participants in 15 member states and help in interventions in case of disasters. All initiatives in the field of civil protection at the EU level were implemented by the subsidiary principle, based on the treaty signed in Maastricht, with the aim of supporting and uniting civil protection efforts at national, regional and local levels and creating conditions for action of all participants (governmental and non-governmental) in the protection and rescue and mutual cooperation of the member-states. In that respect, in the field of civil protection 10 resolutions, 4 decisions of the EU Council and 1 directive of the European Parliament and EU Council were made, including many regulations in the field of protection from industrial disasters and sea pollution (Kešetović, 2008).

In the last decades, a wide range of negative events occurred in the EU, causing devastation of human lives, property, environment and cultural heritage. From 1980 to 2020, natural disasters

[6] For more details, see: Mladan, 2012.

[7] The conferences in Kobe and Sendai were, at the request of the UN General Assembly, coordinated by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), established in 1999 to ensure the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. UNDRR is led by a special representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) for disaster risk reduction and has more than 100 employees in its seat in Geneva and five regional offices. UNDRR coordinates international efforts for disaster risk reduction and reports about the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. It holds biannual Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction.

struck almost 50 million people in the EU and cost the member-states on average 12 billion Euros per year. In addition, the EU is expected to undergo even more extreme events with increased exposure and vulnerability to disasters because climate change brings more extreme weather conditions, the sea level rise and changes in the geographical distribution of some contagious diseases. Continued urbanization and development in dangerous regions threatens an increasing number of people and material goods. Urban environment increases risks of disasters, e.g., floods, heat waves or epidemics. Environmental degradation in Europe also reduces globally the eco-system capacities of protecting us from the effect of disasters. In the past years, increasing instability in the neighbourhood, geopolitical tensions and diversification of enemy groups have been recorded, which has led to increased security threats such as terrorism, cyber and hybrid threats. In that complex context, it is crucial to have arrangements for efficient disaster prevention, alleviation, preparedness, response and recovery. The EU develops policies in different fields focusing on the prevention and reduction of disaster risks with the aim of reducing the effect of harmful events while putting an emphasis on increasing the resilience of the EU's infrastructure, eco-system, society and economy.

The key role in disaster risk reduction and emergency management is played by the EU Civil Protection Mechanism as a unique system framework which connects European civil protection in the segment of the prevention, preparedness and response to large-scale crisis events and emergency situations.

In the EU, protection of people, property, environment and cultural heritage from multiple threats is primarily national responsibility. However, the EU complements, supports and coordinates national actions and promotes cross-border cooperation related to these matters. The EU has a wide range of policies and funds aimed at strengthening collective safety and resilience to harmful events.

The European Commission and the EU member-states have devised the following five goals of disaster resilience in order to direct work towards the prevention of disasters and preparedness:

1. *Anticipation.* – Improve risk assessment, anticipation, and disaster risk management planning. Complexity and interdependence of risks encountered by the EU give importance to the identification of vulnerability in critical sectors and anticipation of dangers and threats.
2. *Preparedness.* – Increase risk awareness and preparedness among the population for reducing disaster risks.
3. *Alerting.* – Enhance early warning systems so that messages about the oncoming danger at the national, regional and local levels should promptly reach the right people.
4. *Responding.* – Strengthen the EU Civil Protection Mechanism's response capacity so that the EU can offer larger help in filling critical gaps and avoiding further worsening of the situation when the capacities of a country are overburdened.



5. *Security*. – Ensure a robust civil protection system that functions with no disruptions during and after disasters, when it is most needed. Further actions cover updating plans and procedures for continuity of work and ensuring coordination and exchange of information among sectors, including providers of critical infrastructure.<sup>[8]</sup>

The key role in disaster risk reduction and emergency management is played by the EU Civil Protection Mechanism<sup>[9]</sup> as a unique system framework which connects European civil protection in the segment of the prevention, preparedness and response to large-scale crisis events and emergency situations. The Mechanism is based on the Treaty of Lisbon, Articles 196 and 214, in which the EU commits to provide help to all victims of natural disasters or catastrophes caused by human action all over the world, but also to develop and coordinates the civil protection systems of the member-states. It was established in October 2001 according to 2001/792/EC Council Decision with the aim of ensuring coordinated action of the member-states and other states in joint disaster prevention, disaster risk reduction, acting on the protection of people, material goods, cultural values and critical infrastructural facilities and removal of disaster consequences.<sup>[10]</sup>

Moreover, apart from the efforts in risk management, at the EU level there is also a whole series

of regional security arrangements within which the countries in some European regions unite for the sake of managing disaster risks jointly, e.g., the Višegrad Group, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the Baltic Sea Maritime Cooperation and the Danube Commission.

Here we will also mention the NATO as the North Atlantic military alliance whose functions include crisis management, i.e., “civil emergency planning” and which gathers most EU member-states.

#### 4. International cooperation in disaster risk reduction in the region of South Eastern Europe

In the West Balkan region, despite the fact that the countries making it are exposed to numerous risks,<sup>[11]</sup> with limited capacities for managing them, there is practically only one organization which includes all the countries in the region and one international commission dealing with certain security aspects related to the Sava as an international river. Moreover, besides these two organizations, there is also a number of bilateral arrangements and treaties on cooperation between certain countries of the region in the field of emergency situations.

[8] For more details see: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/european-disaster-risk-management\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/european-disaster-risk-management_en)

[9] Visit the Mechanism’s website at: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en)

[10] For more details about the Mechanism, see: Mladan, 2012; Dragišić & Novaković, 2022.

[11] The main risks are floods, fires, earthquakes and hazardous materials. Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for SEE Europe (2001)

#### 4.1. Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe – DPPI SEE

In November 2000, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe launched the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE) in an attempt to contribute to the development of a cohesive regional strategy for disaster preparedness and prevention. In 2008, DPPI SEE was developed within the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as a regional intergovernmental organization to facilitate cooperation and coordination of the SEE countries in preventing and responding to natural disasters and disasters caused by human factor, particularly when they have cross-border effects. The Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe is devised as a regionally-owned initiative which tries to provide the framework for the South Eastern European countries<sup>[12]</sup> so as to develop programmes and projects that lead to the strengthening of capacities for the prevention and response to natural and technological disasters. The Initiative also gathers the donor countries and international governmental and non-governmental organizations for the purpose of coordinating current and future activities and identifying unfulfilled needs in order to improve efficiency of the national disaster management systems within regional cooperation. The comprehensive goal of DPPI SEE is to encourage regional cooperation and coordination in disaster preparedness and the prevention of natural disasters and disasters caused by human

action, or technological disasters in South Eastern Europe, without creating new structures or levels of bureaucracy.

The main activities of DPPI refer to the building of the member-states' capacities through organizing training, exercises, conferences and the implementation of various joint projects aimed at improving preparedness and prevention within disaster management.

Important achievements refer to help in project preparation, while related activities are aimed at supporting the SEE countries to prepare feasible project proposals and strengthen regional cooperation by ensuring a coordination platform and current international methodology through training for the project management cycle.

Support to the region's capacities has several forms through the activities of DPPI SEE. It is necessary to mention the following project and trainings:

- “Development of DPPI capacities for disaster risk reduction in South Eastern Europe”. This project is aimed at creating sustainable capacities in risk reduction and developing a multiplication effect by initiating groups of trainers from the region who are capable of long-term monitoring of the project's goals and results.
- The Disaster Management Training Programme (DMTP) consists of workshops, seminars, courses, trainings and conferences. Events take place in many countries of South Eastern Europe; the organization is voluntary, while funding activities is usu-

[12] The members of the Initiative are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey, while its seat is in Sarajevo.

ally divided between the host country and the DPPI SEE budget. The project is aimed at improving disaster preparedness and prevention through education and training on disaster management, as well as through training and practising disaster responses with the aim of strengthening cooperation of all participants in the activities of protection and rescuing, harmonization of the participants' activities for the purpose of eliminating potential failures and promoting the understanding of national and international principles related to disaster management.

- Through the "Project to support the establishment of joint flood emergency response units in SEE", the participating countries with their operational capacities establish regional cooperation and coordination in disaster preparedness and prevention for regular exchange of information about water and flood management. The participating countries, supported by donors and RCC, establish, equip and train flood emergency response units in the SEE region.
- *Trilateral border crossing protocols/procedures* were developed between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro. The main goal of the project is initiating preparations for ensuring a legal and operational framework to be used for quick border crossing in joint interventions and providing mutual assistance in emergencies, including forest fires.
- The general goal of the project entitled "Joint fire brigades between Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro" is the improvement of preparedness, prevention and response to open fires in the coastal region, regardless of the state borders, with the jointly exercised quick response to fire extinguishing by advanced fire-rescue units of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro. Within the project, eight teams for emergencies have been formed and 72 firefighters have been trained and equipped.

- The main technical goals of the "Seismic Map Project" are the preparation of adequate integrated seismological and seismic-tectonic data bases and the production of seismic hazard maps for the region, aligned with the European standards, as well as the realization of the programmes of technical and scientific training of young scientific personnel in the national seismological centres in the region.
- The project "Capacity for disaster risk reduction through regional cooperation and cooperation in South Eastern Europe" is aimed at disaster risk reduction related to natural hazards in the Western Balkans and Turkey, in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action, building capacities of national and local authorities and promotion of a coordinated approach in disaster risk reduction. The specific goal of the project is enhancing regional cooperation in disaster risk reduction in the Western Balkans and Turkey and promotion of aligning their disaster risk reduction methodologies, plans and strategies to open the road



for potential preparation of a harmonized and mutually accepted regional disaster risk reduction strategy in South Eastern Europe.

- The programme entitled The DPPI SEE and UNISDR/CADRI (the United Nations Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative / Human capital development in training for disaster risk reduction) is aimed at supporting the development of capacities for disaster risk reduction at all levels within the governments in the region of South Eastern Europe and organizations in order to improve their ability to understand better and manage different disasters facing the region nowadays. The programme is also aimed at creating a group of professional trainers of attendees who will function as the main resources for training on disaster risk reduction in the region.

DPPI has developed into an efficient consultative and coordination mechanism which improves disaster preparedness and prevention in the event of natural disasters and disasters caused by human factor in South Eastern Europe. It has proved to be a relatively applicable tool for regional cooperation, particularly regarding prevention and preparedness in the field of disaster management and, in that respect, it has been recognized and appreciated by the international community and international organi-

zations (EC, UN), which constitutes the foundation for further strengthening of regional cooperation through the implementation of different projects aimed at building the member-states' capacities in disaster management. The role of DPPI SEE in emergency management should be reflected in internal coordination between the member-states of DPPI SEE and international donors. DPPI SEE encourages the existing cooperation with the NATO, the UN and other internationally recognized organizations as a key partner for successful implementation of own activities in the region and today is considered a reliable regional partner dealing with cross-border affairs and problems. The DPPI SEE member-states also recognize this fact and try to further promote the values of the initiative. Through various projects and activities, DPPI SEE is promoted not only at the national, but also at the regional level as a desirable form of multilateral cooperation (Kešetović and Samardžija, 2014).

#### 4.2. International Sava River Basin Commission / Sava Commission

The International Sava River Basin Commission (ISBRC) or the Sava Commission<sup>[13]</sup> is an international organization<sup>[14]</sup> founded for implementing the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin (FASRB)<sup>[15]</sup> in order to fulfil the following goals: establishing an international regime for navigating

[13] Visit the Commission's official website at: <https://www.savacommission.org/default.aspx?id=1719>

[14] The member-states are Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, the seat of the Commission is in Zagreb, and its official language is English.

[15] After the breakup of the SFRY, the Sava became an international river and four countries through which it flows began negotiations for establishing a suitable framework for cross-border cooperation in order to ensure sustainable use,

the Sava River, establishing sustainable water management and undertaking measures for preventing dangers and their consequences, including dangers from floods, ice, droughts and accidents involving hazardous materials.

After the Framework Agreement came into force on 29 December 2004, the first founding session of the Sava Commission was held on 27 June 2005, while the Sava Commission's permanent secretariat began operating in January 2006. The Sava Commission serves as a permanent work body in charge of implementing the Framework Agreement, the preparation of the Action Plan for the Sava River basin and the adoption of necessary legal documents and accompanying protocols. Although initially it was not founded for solving security matters and crisis management, some of its functions and activities are related to these issues.

In the field of civil security, the Sava Commission's activities are mainly related to the exchange of information and data between the signatory countries, including the activities on making the foundation for the application of the EU Directive on floods. The Commission's activities are chiefly related to preventive and preparatory aspects of crisis management. The focus is on environmental threats, including the prevention of floods, droughts and hazards from ice, as well as accidents

involving water pollution by hazardous materials and reduction of negative consequences of these events.

Having in mind that the Sava Commission is the first international/cross-border system for co-operation in that region, its activities mainly involve the exchange of information and data collection, as well as the activities aimed at creating and preparing the foundation for the implementation of the EU Directive on floods. However, the Sava Commission has no operational role in crisis management. So far, its activities in the field of civil security and/or flood management, accident prevention and control etc. have been primarily focused on the aspects of prevention and preparedness in crisis cycle management. This includes the establishment of the Geographic Information System (GIS), hydro-meteorological data and information exchange systems, the development of integrated systems for flood forecasting and early warning, and the preparation of the Crisis Management Plan in the event of water pollution. In fact, the participating sides are already connected through the Accident Emergency Warning System (AEWS), including the Danube Basin Alarm Model (DBAM) and the alert mechanism that connects civil protection institutions/bodies (Principal International Alert Centers (PIAC), developed within the Danube Commission.<sup>[16]</sup>

protection and management of the water resources in the Sava River basin, as well as to improve the standard of living in the region. As the key turning point in this process, the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin (FASRB) was signed as the first development-oriented multilateral agreement in the post-conflict period after the Dayton Agreement and the Agreement on Succession Issues.

[16] The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). For more details about the Commission, see: <https://www.icpdr.org/>

All activities of the Sava Commission are performed by the civilian personnel. Cooperation has been established with the member-states' institutions in charge of the implementation of the Framework Agreement, as well as with other national institutions, i.e., agencies, offices, services, institutes and universities. Since the Sava Commission has no operational role in crisis management, it has no own means for responding to crises and it does not use the member-states' civil and/or military means.

The Sava Commission has a cohesive character and with its activities contributes to the efficient approach of the member-states to the question of certain challenges and successful realization of joint projects. The Sava Commission is primarily a platform for information exchange, reporting and building of the member-states' capacities (Kešetović, Samardžija and Skazlić, 2014).

## Final notes

Despite the fact that in recent history they have encountered a large number of crises and disasters which exceeded state borders, the countries of South Eastern Europe have, first of all, based on the external (European) initiative, managed to

establish only one regional supranational organization aimed at reducing disaster risks, improving preparedness and better coordination, cooperation and response in cases of grave threats posed by natural and anthropogenic activities. Unlike the countries in this region, some others, such as the Baltic region, established a whole series of regional organizations aimed at preventing and managing different types of crises. One of the probable reasons for this state is also the fact that the SFR dissolved in the civil war and that there is still distrust between some of its members, i.e., no reconciliation has been achieved as in some other regions worldwide after armed conflicts. However, the experience with the floods in 2014 shows that there are both empathy and solidarity between former Yugoslav countries, as well as readiness and inventiveness to find extra-institutional forms of cooperation and to relatively quickly make *ad hoc* arrangements for crossing state borders and delivering relief. In any case, political decision-makers had better think about establishing new and improving the existing supranational arrangements for disaster risk reduction and emergency management, primarily because all projections indicate that the oncoming time will be full of different security challenges, risks and threats.

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