
3 Months Later: the Balkan Floods in the Media and the (Inter)national Psyche

In May of this year, heavy rain - more than three months' worth of it in only three days - poured down on Southeastern Europe, causing severe flooding and landslides. In Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and parts of Croatia, entire towns were obliterated, entire populations displaced. Damage like this has not been seen since the wars of the 1990s. This disaster caused major setbacks for a region that only recently began to regain stability and rebuild infrastructure. Power plants were endangered, old minefields disrupted, and recently-built and rebuilt homes were destroyed. In a part of the world where few have insurance, the immense damage caused by the floods was a return to square one - losing everything all over again, often for the second time in a lifetime. The impacts of this terrible tragedy linger still today, and yet since the first day of flooding three months ago, the response of the international media has been consistently and troublingly subdued. The magnitude of the disaster, as well as much heartening international collaboration among Balkan and South Eastern European nations have been largely neglected and excluded from the discussion of international current events. This was not the first natural disaster to strike the Balkans although it was certainly the most significant in a long while. Given the rapid and frightening pace of global climate change, it is certainly not the last. Looking critically at the responses of the predominantly Western media and the international community to this disaster indicates the Balkans' current place in the global picture.

The [damage](#) from the floods was unprecedented. Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić [called](#) it "the worst flooding disaster ever." 1.6 million Serbians were affected; 51 casualties were recorded as results of the flooding. An entire third of Bosnia-Herzegovina, an area that is home to 1.2 million people, was significantly impacted, with nearly 9,000 people displaced and 23 casualties. In Croatia, 150,000 people were evacuated from their homes. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [estimated](#) the total damages at around 3 billion Euros. And yet, mainstream Western media coverage was minimal. CNN and the BBC waited until 17 May, three days after the flooding began, to release any breaking news about the disaster.

International celebrities perhaps deserve more credit than two of the largest media organizations in the world for bringing attention to the floods. That CNN and the BBC began to cover the floods in depth at all is largely due to the efforts of Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic, who donated his Rome Masters prize money to flood relief. Djokovic [took the media to task](#) on 17 May for their nearly non-existent coverage of the breaking news of the floods. Actress Angelina Jolie also focused attention on the Balkan floods when on 20 May she [donated \\$50,000](#) to relief efforts in

Bosnia-Herzegovina. Still, the media response seemed subdued and out of proportion with the number of lives uprooted and destroyed. And although many countries stepped in to provide assistance and supplies, monetary support outside of the Balkans was minimal until the end of May when the EU [allocated an additional 65 million Euros](#) to Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for humanitarian aid and reconstruction and relief. Some critics, such as Belgrade-born novelist Téa Obreht, suggested that this global indifference was simply another example in the “[steady progression of abandonment and denigration of the Balkans](#)” which has become all too evident in recent years. Since the wars of the 1990s, the Balkans have been painted as a land of ethnic conflicts, corruption, and crime, beyond the help of the “West”. There is some truth in these assumptions; rescue efforts [were compromised](#) due to a lack of equipment and poor administrative organization in Bosnia and Serbia. But this is no reason to ignore or diminish the significance of the disaster, nor is it a reason to waste time blaming the Balkans for their own difficulty in dealing with it. In its attempt to distance itself from what it sees as an intractable and unpalatable problem, the West began to address a massive humanitarian crisis a few days too late.

It is important to note that on a regional level, the floods gave rise to some positivity and hope. Throughout the Balkans, an area often still portrayed as impossibly divided, flood victims received a helping hand from all corners of former Yugoslavia in an [impressive show of supra-ethnic solidarity](#). Montenegro sent state and volunteer rescue teams as well as emergency supplies. Macedonia, Croatia (much of which was unaffected by the floods), and Slovenia also sent considerable assistance. Many suggested that the aftermath was the [perfect time for collaboration](#) in a formerly politically and socially fractious area. Some reached slightly more hyperbolic conclusions, describing some celebrities’ - most notably Djokovic’s - efforts to raise awareness about the floods as a temporary [reconciliation of “wartime foes.”](#) Others have seen the disaster as a jumping-off-point for the discussion of government incompetence in the ex-Yugoslav republics, pointing to lacking infrastructure, poor foresight, and widespread corruption as clear indicators of an impending [“social disaster.”](#) It is widely believed that the Serbian government did not and does not do enough to predict and prevent potential disasters; most people in the Balkans today do not have the resources to compensate for the government’s inadequacy. However, instead of brushing aside the positivity of a relatively newfound regional solidarity as a distraction from vast systemic flaws, the people of the Balkans should capitalize on the prevailing spirit of collaboration to begin to solve issues beyond the flood damage. In giving 65 million Euros to non-member states Bosnia and Serbia, the EU demonstrated its commitment to and belief in international solidarity and collaboration. Perhaps the Balkans can use the current international recognition of their collaboration as a means to affect a greater change.

But that may already be happening. In Obreht’s article (mentioned above), she laments the ignorance she encounters in the West regarding the ex-Yugoslav republics. In her own words: “You explain that you go back frequently; that yes, Twitter is totally a thing in the Balkans; and of course, it’s quite safe to travel there now -” the list goes on. Obreht and many others have come to the disheartening realization that many people in the “West” are still holding onto their understanding of the Balkans as a war-ravaged, under-developed, backwards wasteland, despite the many strides ahead made in recent years. Of course, modernity is not necessarily an indicator of peace and cooperation in the region, but it does signal progress. While the shared struggle of the floods may have provided an impetus for impressive international and inter-ethnic collaboration, such an

ideologically unified effort to help disaster-stricken areas would not have occurred had the groundwork not been laid before. To say that the disaster united the Balkans is no more accurate than the hyperbolic claims that Djokovic single-handedly unified bitter war enemies with a large donation and an awareness campaign. The floods certainly awakened inspiring feelings of solidarity, but the beginnings of this unity were doubtless already present. It is now time for a discussion of how to use this social progress to tackle other problems that impact both disaster management and everyday life in the Balkans. To dismiss this unity as temporary (as more than one journalist has done) would be antithetical to an already much-maligned region.

It is time for the West, and especially the Western media, to break away from the stereotypes it associates with the Balkans. It is time to acknowledge the great potential of this region, and to allow it the same latitude for growth that is afforded Western European nations, many of whom struggle with many of the same problems - corruption, organized crime, disorganized governments - that perpetuated the stigmatization of Balkan countries. Perhaps the meager media attention on the floods will correct the West's perception of the ex-Yugoslav republics as much as they seem to have united the Balkans. In any case, it would be unwise to assume that nothing has changed; regional identities are shifting, the EU is expanding, and more and more of Eastern Europe is becoming more and more "Western." The response to the Balkan floods is only one example of the West's difficulty in accepting this paradigm shift.

The lessons to be gleaned from the regional and global response to May's floods are many, and they certainly extend further than the Balkans. Governments in the region must improve internally in order to provide better for their countries, prioritizing infrastructure and the health and safety of citizens, [many of whom are uninsured and unemployed](#). They must also continue to work among themselves for mutual improvement. But on an international scale, governments and the media alike must stop neglecting an entire region of the globe due to old and inaccurate assumptions. Three months later, the waters have receded and the window of opportunity for a broader discussion may have passed. Will we have to wait for another disaster for the possibility to arise again? This may happen sooner than we think - floods returned to the Balkans just this month, killing several in Bulgaria, again garnering only a modest media response. The EU's generous support may suggest that it is only be a matter of time before the rest of the Balkans follow Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Slovenia into Europe, but it is hard to believe that this will happen until we put aside prejudices and invite the Balkans back into meaningful international discourse.

*Andy Troska, Harvard College '17
PECOB Staff*