

# Coordination in the Security Sector in Response to Natural Disasters: The Serbia Cases of 2014 Floods and Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT:

This article analyses two different natural disasters, the 2014 floods that hit the Republic of Serbia and several neighboring countries and the Covid-19 pandemic. From the view of coordination in the security sector, these two natural disasters represent excellent case studies, given the entirely different conditions in which the entire national security system had to be engaged.

This study examines the similarities and differences in response to two different security challenges and the effects of the measures taken. We have in mind that these are security challenges that have a common origin – nature. Still, they also have numerous differences, primarily concerning the population and the unequal potential to harm the health of the population, property, and economy.

With this in mind, we assumed that coordination in the security sector had different models in order to provide the most effective response in addressing the challenges. We concluded that the similarities in these two cases manifested themselves at the normative level. Extraordinary circumstances were declared, and certain regulations changed to provide for the most efficient use of security resources. In both cases, the management of the fight against challenges was centralized. Yet, the difference was manifested in the level of that centralization, which was appropriate to the circumstances and ultimately allowed high efficiency in countering the hazards and their consequences.

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## Introduction

In the span of only six years, in 2014 and 2020, Serbia was faced with two security crises caused by natural factors, the scope and intensity of which endangered the entire or a large part of the population. In both cases, in addition to human health and life, property, economic and social life, other everyday activities were endangered to a large extent. These circumstances could not have been prevented nor remedied by regular action of the competent authorities or in the existing normative framework. So, in both cases, emergency measures were applied in terms of both regulations and the use of all available societal resources.

Both of these events are subject to the latest UNISDR definition of disaster risk from 2017, which reads: "The potential loss of life, injury, destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time, determined probabilistically as a function of hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity."<sup>1</sup>

The 2014 floods were a regional security problem in which many countries, which were in normal circumstances at the time, were directly involved by sending expert teams, financial and technical assistance. On the other hand, the pandemic is a global problem in which international coordination takes place between countries affected by the same type of problem. National coordination can also be seen as internal, which occurs among organizations belonging to the same ministry or local self-government unit, and external, which occurs among organizations belonging to different parts of the state apparatus.

The response to natural disasters, as a rule, engages all the resources of a society. In managing the response to a natural disaster, coordination proves to be a critical phase of the management process. Organizations with a significantly different organizational culture and roles in normal circumstances are at work together in the temporal-spatial plane.

Has the response to both of these complex challenges been sufficiently effective, and which of the methods of coordination have been applied in the security sector as the most important in dealing with security challenges and their consequences? We will look for answers to these questions on two levels – normative and organizational. We believe that explanations can be found at these levels as to whether the overall fight against a particular security challenge or individual segments of that fight have been sufficiently effective, and whether certain processes and procedures need to be changed in the future in preparation for similar challenges to make the response as efficient as possible. In the search for these answers, we analysed a large amount of data on the extent of these natural disasters, and especially on their consequences on the lives and health of the population, as well as on the property and economic potentials of the country. In that, we had a particular focus on the scope of engagement of security services from all sectors – Serbian Army, Ministry of Interior, civil services, as well as on their position in the centralized system of defence against challenges, which was applied in both observed cases.

After a brief description of both natural disasters that we observe – the 2014 floods and the Covid-19 pandemic, we will first analyse the meaning of changes in the normative (legal) order, which state authorities resorted to, in order to enable raising capacities for defence against challenges. Then, we will consider the changes in the organizational model within the security services during emergency situations, but also the change in their position within the centralised system of defence against the security challenge. In conclusion, we will outline what changes in both of these complexes have contributed to increased efficiency in dealing with emergencies.

## **The 2014 Floods**

Due to unprecedentedly bad hydrological conditions, not recorded in the last 120 years, during May 2014 huge floods hit most of the territory of Serbia. As a result of the flood, 57 people died, 31,879 citizens were evacuated from their homes, and were placed in 136 temporary reception centres.<sup>2</sup>

The disaster affected 22 percent of the total population in more than two-thirds of municipalities in Serbia. As many as 1.6 million people were directly or indirectly affected by the floods. The total monetary value of the consequences of the catastrophe is estimated at 4.8 % of the GDP of Serbia. The disaster led to a recession in the Serbian economy and caused a decline of 1.8 % in 2014 instead of a growth of 0.5 %, as previously projected.<sup>3</sup>

Catastrophic floods hit Serbia and its two neighbours – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, in the Sava River Basin above all, which in its lower course passes through all three countries.

Given the severe consequences, but also the extent of the floods, which has not been seen for more than a century, it can be said that Serbia was not well prepared to prevent this security risk, although there are global models and databases for such assessments.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, since these floods, Serbia is in the phase of transition from a reactive approach to natural disasters to a proactive approach, which is more focused on reducing risks before disasters occur.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020**

The first case of the coronavirus in Serbia was recorded on March 6, 2020, in a man from Subotica. That was just three months after the first case of a new virus was confirmed in its hotspot, the city of Wuhan in China. In the period of one year since the Sars-Cov-2 virus entered Serbia, a total of 474,807 people got sick and 4,508 died, which is 0.95 % of the population.<sup>6</sup> These are officially verified cases, but the number of infected and even deceased is likely higher, considering that not all patients turned to health institutions for help.

Due to the general danger to public health and due to the risk to which the entire population was exposed, the institutions have introduced emergency measures in order to protect the population from health risk. The whole series of measures, which continue today, was initiated by the introduction of a state of emergency on the entire territory of Serbia on March 15, and abolished on

May 6, 2020, i.e., by declaring a pandemic on the entire territory of Serbia by the Minister of Health.<sup>7</sup>

In various forms, the measures have led to restrictions during the state of emergency on the freedom of movement, the regime of entry into Serbia from other countries, and the organization of economic life, health services, education, culture, sports. Most of these measures remained in force in their original or modified form for a year after declaring pandemic, depending on the current or projected intensity of the spread of the infection.

## **Normative Framework for the Fight Against Natural Disasters**

For both observed cases, the 2014 floods and the coronavirus 2020 pandemic, the Republic of Serbia had a fairly elaborate normative framework, which allowed its institutions enough legal space to take a very wide range of measures to effectively address security challenges.

The legal order envisaged the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and provided sufficient grounds for that, so that the measures that were implemented had an unquestionable legal basis. For both observed cases, the source of law is the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 2006, which in several parts provided for actions in case of extraordinary circumstances. The constitutional provisions (Article 200) were directly applied in the case of declaring a state of emergency in 2020, while in the case of the 2014 floods, in addition to the Constitution, the main legal basis for the introduction of emergency measures was the 2009 Law on Emergency Situations, with its 2011 and 2012 amendments. Given that the scope and intensity of security challenges differed in the two cases observed, both the normative and institutional responses had to be adjusted accordingly. We will explain the main differences in more detail below.

The relatively developed normative framework, however, is not adequately monitored by organizational and technological changes in the system of protection against natural disasters. During these challenges, and above all during the floods in 2014, a number of shortcomings in the technological-operational and organizational subsystem were noticed. At the time of the catastrophic floods, Serbia was just starting to move from a technology-based flood defence system to integrated flood risk management, the essence of which is to minimize their harmful effects and learn to live with them.<sup>8</sup> The objectives of this integrated model are (a) to reduce floods, with the aim of preventing peak flows, for example, improving water retention capacity throughout the basin; (b) flood control, the aim of which is to prevent floods employing structural measures, for example, embankments or retention areas; and (c) flood mitigation with the aim to reduce the impact of floods by non-structural measures.

This delay is clearly stated in the Post Flood Recovery Needs Assessment Report 2014, which recommends: In the long-term, Serbia would benefit from enhancing its capacity to resist, cope with, and recover from adverse natural events. This would require the country to elevate the DRM (Disaster Risk Management) agenda, which encompasses a wide range of activities and measures,

ranging from traditional risk mitigation through structural engineering measures, such as floods protection systems, to preparedness through non-structural measures such as risk-informed spatial planning, enhanced weather forecasting and early warning, and disaster risk financing and insurance solutions.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The 2014 Floods***

On May 15, 2015, the Government of Serbia declared a state of emergency on the entire territory of the Republic, in order to “raise the capacity of engagement of all subjects of protection and rescue, as well as to eliminate the consequences of natural disasters caused by floods.”<sup>10</sup> It did so on the basis of the 2009 Law on Emergency Situations, which establishes the competence of institutions to declare a state of emergency at various levels:

- for the territory of the Republic of Serbia – the Government
- for the territory of the autonomous province – the executive authority of the autonomous province
- for the territory of the city – the mayor, for the territory of the municipality – the municipal mayor.<sup>11</sup>

The government made this decision, because the circumstances on the ground, the large volume of floods in different parts of the Republic, “fit” into the legal provision, according to which a state of emergency is declared when “risks and threats or consequences of natural and other disasters, on population, environment and material goods are of such scope and intensity that their occurrence or consequences cannot be prevented or eliminated by regular action of competent bodies and services, which is why it is necessary to use special measures, forces and means for their mitigation and elimination.”<sup>12</sup> The Government made this decision at the proposal of the Republic Response Team for Emergency Situations on the same day (May 15, 2014). The Sector for Emergency Management, which was established at the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia in 2010, also had a special role in responding to this challenge based on the Law on Emergency Situations.

### ***The Covid-19 Pandemic***

In the first response to the Covid-19 virus pandemic, a state of emergency was declared in Serbia on March 15, 2020, which lasted until May 6. The state of emergency was introduced on the basis of a risk and threat from a pandemic assessment, which the Minister of Defence (in accordance with the Law on Defence, Article 88) submitted to the President of the Republic on March 14.

Considering that the state of emergency due to the risk of spreading the infection could not be declared by the National Assembly, to which the Constitution gives that competence, the constitutional possibility to declare a state of emergency by the President of the Republic, the President of the National Assembly and the Prime Minister if the National Assembly is unable to meet was used.<sup>13</sup>

At the time, this decision was the subject of some criticism from the international community for being too harsh and imposing excessive restrictions on guaranteed civil rights. Still, the fact is that all European countries at the same time or soon afterward introduced identical measures on their territory to protect their population from the spread of infection. Until May 6, when the state of emergency was lifted in Serbia, the same measures were in force in 14 member states of the European Union, and in the remaining 13, emergency measures were in force with the declared state of pandemic. During the same period, a state of emergency was declared in six European countries outside the EU, including Serbia, and emergency measures in addition to declaring a pandemic were in force in six other European countries outside the EU.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, the declaration of a state of emergency has been accepted throughout Europe, without exception, as a normative measure without which an adequate fight for the protection of public health is practically impossible.

### Coordination of Security Services

A normative framework is necessary, but it is not in itself a sufficient precondition for an effective response to natural disasters, which threaten the entire or a larger part of the population. In order for the response to be truly effective, it is crucial to coordinate the use of all available social resources and their potentials in order to eliminate the threat as quickly as possible. In doing so, we will focus on the coordination of security services as a critical phase in the overall management process of responding to the challenge of natural disasters.

In that respect, the observed cases show similarities and differences. Similarities because the nature of the challenge in both cases is such that it is about unexpected risks and endangered health and safety of the population arising from natural factors. And the key difference is in their scope – floods endangered a part of the territory and the population, and the virus pandemic endangered the entire territory and the population. And secondly, the risk of spreading the crisis in case of floods was limited to one part of the territory and population. In contrast, the entire population was exposed to the risk of the Covid-19 virus pandemic.

Accordingly, planning the use of resources, in this case security resources, is crucial to address the challenges effectively. Coordination of the use of these resources was performed at several levels in both observed cases: both internally, within individual institutions (ministries, local self-governments), between organizations within one institution, and externally – among institutions of equal competencies (ministries, administrations). For this coordination to run smoothly, their activities must be centralized and included in a broader system of protection against security challenges, which in both observed cases is based at the state level.

If we observe from the point of view of three types of coordination in resolving crisis situations – hierarchy, network, and market, in both observed cases in Serbia, the first type was applied. Hierarchy is a traditional model in which decisions are made from top to bottom, from the position with the most authority,

and down through various levels of the organization.<sup>15</sup> Some elements of the other two types of coordination—network and market—also existed. Yet, they did not operate independently but were included in a hierarchically organized system, through institutions provided by law and within state structures.

In the case of the 2014 floods and the 2020 pandemic, the police (Ministry of Interior) and the state health service were at the top of the hierarchy, because these two structures, as a rule, act as “first responders” on behalf of the government provide the initial response to natural disasters.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The 2014 Floods***

With the proclamation of the state of emergency on the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia on May 15, 2014, the main operational body for the fight against natural disasters became the Republic Response Team for Emergency Situations. This body held four emergency meetings during the state of emergency, which was lifted on May 23, 2014. Simultaneously with the declaration of the state of emergency, the Operational Response Team of the Republic Response Team for Emergency Situations was formed, which coordinated all activities of local response teams in the Republic of Serbia, handled requests, and organized that all data that monitored the emergency situation be processed and that all teams be provided with assistance. This operational response team was constantly on duty at the headquarters of the Sector for Emergency Management of the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia.

In this way, the coordination of the use of all resources has become centralized when it comes to gathering information and requests for assistance and making decisions on taking concrete measures.

As it was said, the entire structure of the fight against floods, was built around the Sector for Emergency Management of the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia, i.e., the Republic Response Team for Emergency Situations, not only as competent (according to the Law) for managing the fight against this challenge, but as a professional state body, trained to act in emergencies. This structure directly coordinated the use of resources of all parts of the security system during the emergency situation, and here we will deal in more detail with the use of the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia and the Serbian Army.

During the emergency situation, the Serbian Army was engaged in 11 administrative districts, as well as in 50 locations in the city of Belgrade. In addition to that direct engagement, the Serbian Army has taken a number of other measures, which have increased its usual parameters of readiness and activity. It raised the mobility of its units, ordered the readiness of protection and rescue forces, prepared facilities for the reception and sheltering of evacuated people and assets.

During the crisis, members of the Serbian Army were engaged in evacuating the population by land and air, receiving and caring for the endangered, delivering water, food, engineering works on embankments, building bridges, decontamination, veterinary supervision, and landslide remediation.

Out of a total of 31,879 evacuated citizens from the flooded areas, members of the Serbian Army evacuated one-third – 10,299 people, of which 3,442 by air (helicopters), and it accepted about 2,500 evacuated into its facilities. In order to supply the population in the endangered areas, the Serbian Army hired ten helicopters, 41 boats, and three amphibious vehicles. During and after the flood, the Serbian Army decontaminated 353 buildings and over 500,000 square meters of land and roads, built four larger bridges, and removed almost 50,000 animal carcasses during the clean-up of the terrain.<sup>17</sup>

The Ministry of the Interior has put all its organizational parts in the service of responding to floods. About 7,300 members of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior and a large number of vehicles, aircraft, and vessels were engaged in these jobs daily, with the largest number of members activated on May 18, 9,592 members. They were engaged in rescuing the population, rehabilitating water fortifications, supplying citizens with basic provisions, but also on specific tasks such as coordinating the reception and distribution of humanitarian aid from abroad.<sup>18</sup>

The Republic Response Team for Emergency Situations, as well as its Operations Centre, constantly coordinated activities and exchanged information with state services important for flood monitoring, such as the Republic Hydrometeorological Service and public water management companies.

### *The Covid-19 pandemic*

As a country open to global influences, Serbia has faced the Covid-19 pandemic, the first major security risk in a time of globalization where expanded markets and open borders have unknowingly introduced the potential for greater “cascading” dangers and risks.<sup>19</sup>

Given the fact that the Covid-19 virus pandemic posed a security risk to the entire population of Serbia, and that this infection has taken on global proportions (pandemic declared by the World Health Organization), the institutional framework for combating it was found in declaring a state of emergency on the entire territory of the Republic. The state of emergency is, in terms of scope and strength, more normative and factual force than the decision on the emergency situation, which was applied in the case of the 2014 floods. This decision is therefore appropriate to the scope and intensity of the security threat to which the entire population of Serbia was exposed.

Immediately before the decision on the state of emergency and in order to prepare for monitoring and suppression of Covid-19 infection, the Government of Serbia formed two crisis response teams on March 13, 2020: Crisis Response Team for the suppression of Infectious Diseases Covid-19, co-chaired by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health, the Director of the National Health Insurance Fund and the Provincial Secretary for Healthcare. A crisis response team has also been formed to eliminate emerging and prevent the possible harmful consequences of Covid-19 infectious disease in the economy. This response team is co-chaired by the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Minister of

Finance, the President of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, and the Governor of the National Bank of Serbia.<sup>20</sup>

These two bodies will later, during the state of emergency, but also after its expiration, become central state bodies in charge of coordination and use of all social resources in the fight against the pandemic. The members of the Crisis Response Team for the suppression of Infectious Covid-19 from the ranks of the security services are the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Defence, the Chief of the Sector for Emergency Management of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior, and the Chief of the Serbian Army Training and Doctrine Directorate.

During the state of emergency, which lasted from March 15 to May 6, the Serbian Army was engaged in a number of operational tasks given to it by the Crisis Response Team in order to help prevent the spread of the pandemic. Given the pronounced risk of “entry” of the virus from abroad and the decision to close the border crossings for foreign citizens, the Serbian Army was engaged in securing 18 border crossings. Also, members of the Serbian Army were engaged in securing vital health care institutions, social welfare institutions, as well as 20 reception centres for asylum seekers.<sup>21</sup>

In the system of suppressing the spread of the infection and repairing its consequences, military healthcare institutions are also included with their resources, primarily when it comes to the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade.

In addition to regular activities on preserving public order and combat crime, the Serbian Ministry of the Interior was engaged in issuing movement permits during the period of movement ban (curfew), which was a measure that was applied several times during the state of emergency. Among other things, the officers of the Ministry of the Interior were engaged in checking whether the citizens who entered Serbia from abroad adhered to the quarantine measure of 14 days upon arrival in the country.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, the role of the Security Information Service was noticeable in the procurement of medical material, which at that time was in great shortage on the world market. BIA members were sent to several foreign countries to help procure respirators, medical masks, and protective suits at a time when there was a severe shortage all over the world, and especially in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

Also, according to a number of Serbian citizens, who at that time were returning from abroad to their homeland in large numbers, measures for monitoring electronic communications were applied in order to determine whether they respected the quarantine measures. This was especially true of those who came from the epicentre of the pandemic at that time, Italy.

In the later phase of the pandemic, and due to the increasingly frequent violation of the prescribed measures on protection against infection, especially mass gatherings, amendments to the Law on Protection of the Population from Contagious Diseases were passed. These changes gave the Communal Militia the authority to control the prescribed measures, i.e., to impose penalties on violators of these measures in public transport vehicles, hospitality facilities, and other places where mass gatherings are possible. This measure was passed

because, until then, only sanitary inspectors had the authority to impose fines, but they are few in the territory of Serbia for this task.

## Conclusions

Faced with security threats caused by non-military, i.e., natural factors, Serbia was forced to resort to emergency measures to eliminate those threats in a short period of only six years. The purpose of these measures was to engage all the necessary resources in order to protect the population from harmful consequences as quickly and efficiently as possible since their disposal in regular conditions was not sufficient to respond to threats in an adequate manner.

In these situations, Serbia resorted to two different normative and factual palettes of measures, bearing in mind that the scope and intensity of threatening factors in relation to the population, economy, and property were different. While the floods in 2014 endangered a part, although large, of the territory and population, in the case of Covid-19, the entire population of Serbia was endangered.

Hence, in the first case, an emergency was declared, as a normatively and in fact “milder” degree of response to emergencies, while in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, a state of emergency was declared. In both cases, the measures were declared for the entire territory of Serbia.

In both observed cases, state authorities have resorted to centralization and hierarchical organization of the management of the fight against the security challenge as the most efficient way to gather information, as well as to make adequate and timely decisions on measures to counter the crisis.

The difference in these two situations was in the level of that centralization, and that difference was appropriate to the given circumstances. While the Flood Response Team in 2014 was built around the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia and its Sector for Emergency Management, with the great participation of local self-governments, the Crisis Response Team for the fight against Covid-19 was formed at a broader and higher level, which included all departments of the executive authorities, with an emphasis on the role of experts from the health sector.

In both cases, the security services formed the backbone of the fight against threats within the framework of decision-making by the crisis response teams, and especially in the engagement of all their resources on the ground.

At the top of the hierarchical pyramid in both observed cases were the Ministry of Interior (police) and the state health service, as the usual “first responders” and coordinators, on behalf of the government, of other systems in order to eliminate risks.

Security departments coordinated at several levels, thus ensuring the maximum utilization of their human and material resources. In this case also, in accordance with the expressed security threat.

By participating in decision-making at the central level (crisis response teams), they achieved coordination with other state departments and services in order to find the most effective response to the security threat. On the other

hand, they achieved internal coordination between different sectors and organizational units within their institutions in order to respond in the most efficient way to the tasks they were given by the competent authorities in an emergency.

In emergencies, whether it is an emergency situation or a state of emergency, the role of security services exceeds their function and even the powers they have in normal circumstances. In order to raise the level of their engagement during emergency situations, it is necessary to change the normative framework, but that in itself is not a sufficient precondition for their efficient use.

Mutual coordination at various levels (internal and external) is crucial so that all the resources of these services are used in the most efficient way in eliminating the security threat. In the case of Serbia, both in terms of the 2014 floods and in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the security services achieved exceptional quality coordination and thus greatly contributed to mitigating and eliminating security risks and threats. As for the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, Serbia has by far the lowest number of deaths per million inhabitants (757) of the six countries in the Western Balkans region, followed by Albania (840 deaths per million inhabitants) and Croatia (1,849), Montenegro (2,460), Northern Macedonia (2,465) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2,731).<sup>23</sup>

The security services of Serbia have achieved quality coordination in two different normative and organizational environments, thus demonstrating both their own adaptability to different models of crisis response and the ability to adapt their internal resources to the required roles and tasks.

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