



The Impact of Environmental Issues to Security in the Balkans

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Abstract

Significant global and localized environmental threats may adversely impact human security in the Balkans. NATO has been addressing security challenges related to the environment for many years. The aim of this article is to identify environmental factors and the way how they affect in Balkan security. Water sources seem that create tension between states. From the other side, environmental pollution, including those that are linked to climate change can pose risks to energy security. As a result, the paper treats the necessary of regional cooperation in order to avoid potential conflicts and guarantee stability in Balkans.

Keywords: Security, Pollution, Cooperation, Risks, Stability

1. Introduction

The Balkans countries are at a turning point in the development of their economies, societies and environment. Among the key issues facing especially Western Balkans as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia (as well as the territory of Kosovo under UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99) are the pace of their integration with the European Union and the prospect of future membership. European integration represents an important opportunity and also a challenge in terms of reforming national institutions, policies and laws. The region's economies face the task of shifting from their industrial past to advanced, post-industrial economies. National policies moreover need to address changing consumption patterns and the growth of consumerism driven by societal reforms and shifts, which will have a growing impact on the region's environment.

Environmental problems are now prominent political issues as a consequence of the increased scale of consumption and pollution in modern high-energy societies, which has caused large decreases in primary forest cover; biodiversity losses; depletion of fish stocks; land degradation; water pollution and scarcity; coastal and marine degradation; the contamination of people, plants, and animals by chemicals and radioactive substances; and climate change and sea-level rise. The USA has identified environmental degradation as a national security issue.⁸ Among else, it has established the US Army Environmental Policy Institute, which supports the Millennium Project, i.e. an official task to identify and report on emerging environmental issues with potential security or treaty implications⁹ and the Environmental Hub in the Department of State.

Behind the headlines of war and the aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic, Balkans is being drawn into a black hole of deepening twin crises in security and the environment. Indicators of insecurity are rising, while indicators of

⁸ Marc A. Levy, *Is the Environment a National Security Issue?*, 1995

⁹ Geoff Dabelko, *Environmental Security at the 2006 International Studies Association Convention*, 2006

environmental integrity are sinking. The mix is toxic, profound and damaging; and institutions with the power to find solutions, including governments, are waking up far too slowly.¹⁰

2. The Ways in Which Environmental Issues Affect in Balkans Security

The Balkan region is vulnerable to a range of environmental issues that have significant impacts on security. These issues include pollution, deforestation, climate change, and natural disasters such as floods and droughts. The following are some of the ways in which environmental issues affect security in the Balkans:

- a) Economic insecurity: Environmental degradation can lead to economic insecurity in the region. The degradation of natural resources, such as forests and rivers, can reduce the productivity of agriculture and other industries, leading to unemployment and poverty. This can result in social unrest and even conflict.
- b) Human displacement: Climate change and natural disasters can lead to the displacement of people in the region, as well as the movement of refugees and migrants. This can create tensions and lead to conflicts between different ethnic and social groups.
- c) Health concerns: Environmental issues such as air and water pollution can cause health problems for people in the region. This can lead to an increase in medical expenses and decreased productivity, which can have an impact on the economy and social stability.
- d) Transboundary issues: Environmental issues in one country can have transboundary effects, impacting neighboring countries. For example, pollution from factories in one country can flow into rivers that cross borders, affecting the health of people in downstream countries. This can create tension between countries and lead to conflicts. As a result, environmental issues in the Balkans require international cooperation and coordination. Many of these issues cross borders, and addressing them requires collaboration between countries and regional organizations. Failure to address these issues can lead to further instability and insecurity in the region.
- e) Energy security: The Balkan region is highly dependent on energy imports, which can be affected by environmental issues such as climate change and extreme weather events. This can lead to disruptions in energy supply and increase the risk of energy insecurity.
- f) Natural disasters: The Balkan region is prone to natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and droughts. These disasters can have devastating impacts on communities, including loss of life and property, displacement, and economic disruption¹¹. They can also exacerbate existing social and political tensions and create new ones.
- g) Biodiversity loss: The Balkan region is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including many endangered species. Environmental degradation, including deforestation and habitat destruction, threatens this biodiversity, which can have long-term impacts on ecosystems, food security, and human well-being.
- h) Migration and conflict: Environmental issues, including climate change, can be drivers of migration and displacement. This can lead to increased pressure on already strained resources and social systems, potentially leading to conflict between different groups.

In this context, environmental issues in the Balkans have significant impacts on security, including economic insecurity, human displacement, health concerns, transboundary issues, and energy security. Addressing these issues requires collaboration and cooperation between countries in the region, as well as with international organizations and stakeholders.

3. Disputes Over the Management of Natural Resources

States have different uses for such resources as forests, water, pastures and land, and want to manage them in different ways. Knowing about these different needs and interests can help to inform successful management so that everyone benefits as much as possible. However, such differences can also lead to conflict when:

- there is competition over material goods, economic benefits, property or power;
- parties believe that their needs cannot be met;
- parties perceive that their values, needs or interests are under threat.

¹⁰ Margot Wallström, *Environment in Peace, Security in a new era of risk*, Stockholm, May 2022

¹¹ Eduardo Cavallo; Ilan Noy, *The Economics of Natural Disasters*, December 2009

Sometimes it is best to monitor a conflict without intervening. Such conflicts are problematic, but are unlikely to become disputes and are not dangerous. At other times, however, if a conflict is ignored, or attempts to manage it fail, it can grow into a dispute or some other form of confrontation. A dispute occurs when a conflict over a specific issue or event becomes public. A dispute can be a fight, an appeal to authorities, or a court case. The difference between disputes and conflict is important. All disputes reflect conflict, but not all conflicts develop into disputes. Some conflicts may develop into disputes quickly. Others remain latent for a long time until triggered or aggravated by something new, such as a development project or the arrival of outside interests.¹²

Disputes over the management of natural resources are a common occurrence and can arise due to a variety of factors, including conflicting interests among different stakeholders, limited availability of resources, environmental concerns, and political factors. One common source of disputes over natural resource management is related to access to resources. For example, in some countries, disputes may arise between local communities and multinational corporations over the use of natural resources such as land, water, and minerals. These conflicts may be related to issues such as the displacement of local communities, unequal distribution of benefits, and damage to the environment.

Another source of disputes over natural resource management is related to environmental concerns. For example, there may be conflicts between conservationists and developers over the use of natural resources such as forests, wildlife, and marine habitats. These conflicts may be related to issues such as habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Political factors can also play a role in disputes over natural resource management. For example, conflicts may arise between different levels of government, such as between national and local authorities, over the allocation and use of natural resources. Conflicts may also arise between different interest groups, such as between industry associations and environmental groups, over the regulation of natural resource use.

To address disputes over the management of natural resources, various approaches may be used, including negotiation, mediation, and legal remedies. In some cases, collaborative governance models, which involve the participation of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes, may be effective in resolving conflicts and promoting sustainable resource management. Community-based natural resource conflicts may occur at the local level, but often involve regional, national or even global actors. Community-level conflict might involve government agencies, domestic and multinational businesses, politicians, international development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

A dispute may also break out at different levels. At one level, the main issue could be access to or control over the resources that people depend on. At another, the dispute could relate to more deeply rooted issues such as recognition, rights, identity, or the ability to participate.

The intensity of conflict also varies greatly - from confusion and frustration among members of a community about poorly communicated development policies, to violent clashes among groups over resource ownership, rights and responsibilities.¹³

As this paper shows, community-based natural resource conflicts are often very complex. There are usually many causes and many interconnected issues, making it hard to identify the key issues in the conflict.

4. Growing Competition Over Natural Resources

Natural resources are increasingly subject to intense competition. In most cases, several factors are responsible for this, including:

- demographic change (e.g. population growth, migration and urbanization);
- market pressures (e.g. increased commercialization, intensification and privatization of local economies, growing integration of national and global economies, economic reforms);
- environmental changes that force people to alter their livelihood strategies (e.g. floods, recurrent droughts, altered river flows, changes in wildlife migration).

These forces can push states to exceed the sustainable harvesting limits of renewable natural resources (forests, water bodies, grazing areas, marine resources, wildlife and agricultural land). In areas where the number of people is increasing, resources often need to be shared among more users with different interests. These users range from farmers seeking access to agricultural land, pastoralists requiring pasture resources for livestock, and city dwellers requiring more meat, fish and cereals.

¹² <https://www.fao.org/3/a0032e/a0032e04.htm>

¹³ Buckles, D. (1999) *Cultivating Peace: Conflict and Collaboration in Natural Resource Management*. IDRC/World Bank.

Securing access to resources can become state's greatest concern when those resources are scarce. Water scarcity in arid or semi-arid regions is a key example. As freshwater is necessary for life, but cannot be made or grown, access to water may serve as a focus of dispute.

As a result, environmental issues can exacerbate existing political instability in the Balkans. For example, disputes over the management of natural resources such as water can lead to political tensions between countries and even armed conflict. This instability can have significant implications for regional security and stability.

5. Some Conflicts of Natural Sources in Balkan

The Balkan region has a complex history of conflicts related to natural resources. The region is rich in natural resources such as forests, water, and minerals, and has a diverse ecosystem that supports a range of economic activities, including agriculture, tourism, and mining. However, disputes over natural resources have often been a source of tension and conflict in the region.

One of the most significant sources of conflict in the Balkans is related to water resources. The region is home to several major rivers, including the Danube, the Sava, and the Drina, which are critical for irrigation, hydropower, and transportation.

The Danube river is shared by ten countries, including several Balkan countries such as Serbia, Croatia, and Romania. Disputes over water management, pollution, and navigation have led to several legal challenges and conflicts between these countries. For example, in 2016, Croatia filed a lawsuit against Serbia at the ICJ, accusing Serbia of failing to prevent and remedy environmental damage caused by the Danube river.¹⁴ The case is still ongoing. However, disputes over water use and management have often led to conflicts between countries and local communities. For example, the construction of hydropower dams on the Drina river has been a source of conflict between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia¹⁵. The two countries have disagreed over the management of the river, with Bosnia and Herzegovina arguing that the dams have caused flooding and ecological damage, while Serbia argues that they are necessary for energy production. In 2010, Bosnia and Herzegovina filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Serbia, accusing Serbia of violating its obligations under international law related to transboundary water management. The case was eventually settled through a compromise agreement, which included the establishment of a joint commission to manage the river.

Similarly, disputes over water use have also arisen between countries in the region. For example, the construction of the Fierza Dam in Albania, which diverted water from the Drin river, led to protests and tensions with neighboring countries, including Montenegro and North Macedonia.

Another source of conflict in the Balkans is related to mining. The region has a rich history of mining, with significant deposits of minerals such as copper, gold, and coal. However, mining activities have often led to environmental degradation and negative impacts on local communities. For example, the construction of the Jadar lithium mine in Serbia has been a source of controversy, with local communities and environmental groups arguing that it will cause significant environmental damage and displacement of local communities. Similarly, the proposed opening of a gold mine in the Krumovgrad region of Bulgaria has also been a source of conflict, with local communities and environmental groups raising concerns about the potential impacts on the environment and public health.

Forests are another important natural resource in the Balkans, particularly in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro. However, illegal logging and unsustainable forest management practices have led to conflicts between these countries. For example, in 2017, Bosnia and Herzegovina accused Montenegro of illegally logging its forests along the border, leading to tensions between the two countries. In response, Montenegro denied the accusations and launched its own investigation.

Minerals and energy resources, such as coal and gas, are also important natural resources in the Balkans. However, disputes over mining and energy development have led to legal challenges and conflicts between countries and local communities. For example, in North Macedonia, plans to build a new coal-fired power plant led to protests and legal challenges by local communities and environmental groups, who argued that it would cause significant environmental damage and harm public health. Similarly, in Kosovo, disputes over ownership and management of coal mines have led to tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

Overall, disputes over natural resources in the Balkans are complex and multifaceted, and require a collaborative

¹⁴ Thomas Bickl, *Prospects for Judicial Settlement of the Danube Border Dispute Between Croatia and Serbia*, 2021

¹⁵ Ivan Rajković, "Rivers to the People: Ecopopulist Universality in the Balkan Mountains", 2020

and integrated approach to address¹⁶. By promoting transparency, accountability, and open dialogue, and investing in sustainable resource management practices, it is possible to reduce conflicts and promote sustainable resource use that benefits all members of society in the region.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, environmental issues have significant implications for security in the Balkans. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that involves regional cooperation, international assistance, and a focus on sustainable development and green growth. Overall, disputes over natural resources in the Balkans are complex and multifaceted, and require a collaborative and integrated approach to address. By promoting transparency, accountability, and open dialogue, and investing in sustainable resource management practices, it is possible to reduce conflicts and promote sustainable resource use that benefits all members of society in the region.

It is important to recognize that disputes over natural resource management are often complex and multifaceted, and require an integrated and holistic approach that takes into account economic, social, and environmental factors. By promoting sustainable resource management practices and involving all stakeholders in decision-making processes, it is possible to reduce disputes over natural resource management and promote a more equitable and sustainable use of natural resources.

In addition to the approaches mentioned above, technology and innovation can also play a role in resolving disputes over natural resource management. The advances in renewable energy technologies and sustainable agricultural practices can help to reduce the demand for non-renewable resources and promote sustainable resource use. Similarly, the development of new technologies for monitoring and managing natural resources, such as satellite imagery and remote sensing, can help to improve the accuracy and efficiency of resource management practices.

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