

Experts warn that the lack of a systematic approach to flood prevention has left communities that were devastated by the floods of 2014 still living in fear it could happen again. Since dozens died when rivers burst their banks in 2014, Serbia has spent more than 78 million euros on restoring and improving flood defences. Despite all the investments, some communities remain unshielded.

The village of Djeradj sits on the left bank of the Bjelica River in Serbia's West Morava Valley, opposite a state-owned weapons factory that supplies explosive liquids and powders to the Serbian military and for export.

On the morning of June 3 last year, village head Djordje Matijasevic stood on the riverbank. It was raining heavily.

In nearby Guca, where hundreds of thousands of revellers gather for a raucous trumpet festival every August, the river at around 6 a.m. was 65 cm high. Three hours later it stood at 2.29 metres and by midday the water had risen to 4.40 metres.

"They called me from the municipality around nine or nine thirty to move people out, to tell them to move out," Matijasevic, a short 65-year-old man with a moustache, recalled. "Some went, some didn't," he said.

Around midday, the water broke through an old, unfinished embankment in the village "and it flooded," Matijasevic told BIRN. "Everything was under water in 10 minutes."

That day, the municipality of Lucani, where Djeradj is located, was one of 14 Serbian municipalities hit by major flooding, with land, roads and homes inundated by water in a host of towns and villages.

It was hardly a surprise. The Bjelica River has burst its banks almost every year for the past five years.

Like the trumpet festival, floods are an almost annual occurrence, despite the fact that Serbia between 2014 and 2019 spent at least 78 million euros from its own coffers and foreign donations on flood recovery and prevention, according to a BIRN investigation.

The outlay was triggered after epic floods struck the Balkans, including the Morava Valley, in 2014, killing 57 people in Serbia alone.

But only a small fraction of the money has been spent on new flood defences, with the lion's share poured into restoring existing infrastructure. The weapons factory, on the right bank, received additional protection, but work on reinforcing the embankment on the left was only finished much later, too late to halt the waters in 2019. And the embankment on the left remains lower than on the right, effectively sacrificing Djeradj to save the factory and the far larger town of Lucani.

In October 2016, following another flood, the Serbian government under then Prime

Minister Aleksandar Vucic, now Serbia's president, adopted a state programme of urgent flood recovery work to protect settlements and the industrial zone in Lucani municipality, designating the area one of "extremely high risk" from flooding.

The programme called for a wall to be built to protect the weapons factory, 'Milan Blagojevic - Namenska,' - with 1,300 employees the biggest employer in Lucani - and for other defences to be fixed, with most of the work going to state-owned companies.

The entire job cost around 2.37 million euros, a little over half the 4.3 million euros allocated to Lucani municipality in total for the past five years to restore existing flood infrastructure and prevent future flooding. All but 300,000 euros was spent on restoring existing flood defences.

Thanks to the work, the village of Dljina near the weapons factory, which was severely flooded in 2014 and 2016, was protected, but those living on the left side of the Bjelica were less fortunate and the flooding continued.

In August 2017, the government said additional work needed to be carried out at three locations in Lucani municipality, two on the Bjelica and another on the Zapadna Morava River.

The cost was forecast at 899,000 euros, the biggest share to be spent on both banks of the Bjelica. Work began on December 7, 2017 but dragged on into late 2019. It had been finished by the time BIRN visited Djeradj in January 2020.

Srbijavode, the state water authority, blamed a dispute over private land where some of the work needed to be conducted, saying some owners refused to hand over their land.

In August 2018, a month before the deadline for the work to be completed, Srbijavode director Goran Puzovic and the coordinator of the project, Zvonimir Kocic, wrote to the then head of the Lucani municipality, Vesna Stambolic, complaining about unresolved property issues and warning that Djeradj was "certain" to be flooded again. BIRN obtained the letter via a Freedom of Information request.

Milojko Aleksic, a farmer, was one of those whose land the state needed. In 2017, Aleksic consented to the use of one of two plots of land the municipality needed, at an agreed price. "It's now 2020 and I still haven't been paid," he said.

Put off by the experience and by the money on offer, Aleksic refused access to the other plot until after the 2019 floods.

Work was finally completed in January this year, but even with a new embankment, the left bank faces being sacrificed to protect the right, since according to a new tender issued by Srbijavode after the 2019 floods, the defences on the left are lower than on the right, where the weapons factory is located.

Srbijavode argued that, with the new defences, Djeradj could only be flooded in the event of a disaster on the scale of 2014. The company conceded it had prioritised the right bank, where the town of Lucani is located as well as the factory.

“The construction of embankments for the protection of Djeradj settlement on the left bank can negatively affect the achieved degree of protection of Lucani and the industrial complex,” Srbijavode told BIRN.

Matijasevic, the Djeradj village head, expressed understanding.

“In my opinion, it’s better to flood 18 houses than to flood [Milan Blagojevic] Namenska,” he told BIRN. “The municipality of Lucani lives off Namenska. It’s the source of income for 1,300 workers. That’s quite normal.”

Documents obtained by BIRN show that, although local authorities in Lucani were aware of the problem with the embankment in Djeradj and forecasts of heavy rainfall, it was not discussed at Crisis Staff meetings before the June 3, 2019 floods.

This is despite the fact that, in late 2018, Serbia’s interior ministry identified six “worst-case scenarios” for flooding – two were in Lucani, including the village of Djeradj.

Environmental ‘negligence’

Most of the 78 million euros spent since 2014 went on maintenance of existing infrastructure.

Part of the money is managed by Serbia’s Public Investment Office, which funnels it to local authorities and public companies like Srbijavode.

Public Investment Office director Marko Blagojevic said the work was carried out under the principle of “build back better”, whereby existing infrastructure is restored in such a way as to actually increase its effectiveness.

“Care was taken to apply this principle in every case where possible,” Blagojevic told BIRN.

“No new facilities are built, but existing facilities are made more resistant to existing risks”.

Prior to 2018, he said, most money was spent on big rivers, but the focus has since shifted to smaller rivers which come under the jurisdiction of cash-strapped municipalities such as Lucani.

Mirjana Todosijevic, a professor at the forestry faculty of the University of Belgrade, said that smaller rivers in Serbia all face similar problems – overpopulation, “urban chaos” in the river basin, low levels of afforestation, inappropriate use of land, unregulated logging and lack of investment in maintenance.

Todosijevic welcomed the work done so far on the Bjelica embankment and in landscaping small watercourses that run towards the river. “But,” she said, “it is much more important

and cheaper to work on prevention.”

According to Todosijevic, flood protection should be a continual process, the kind that requires more work and investment than the Serbian government or local municipalities are providing.

“The main problem is certainly the lack of investment in systematic protection against environmental pollution, as well as inappropriate, I would say negligent, behaviour towards the environment,” she said in a written response to BIRN.

“Local government, which has been given the powers to manage the so-called second-order watercourses (small torrential streams), are not financially capable of meeting all the requirements this problem imposes.”

The state body ultimately in charge of flood defences, the Republic Water Directorate, did not respond to a request for comment.

Blagojevic explained that his office has a mandate to work in those areas already affected by flooding, where a natural disaster has been declared and funds from the Public Investment Office can be released for reconstruction.

In all other situations, responsibility for preventing flooding falls to Srbijavode and local governments.

In 2018, Blagojevic said, his office was able to redirect larger funds to local infrastructure, sums that Serbian municipalities can usually “only dream about.”

“We are now dealing with local watercourses in those cities and municipalities where floods have been recorded, as well as the completion of works on first-order watercourses,” he said.

“And that’s it from us until the next flood.”

Source: balkaninsight.com