

Natural disasters and pollution are exposing government negligence and institutional failure in the Western Balkans. Activists must hold political elites to account.

The earthquakes that continue to roil Albania as of this writing, the largest of which caused the deaths of 51 people and left thousands more displaced, has rightfully re-focused attention on the intersection of politics and the environment in the Western Balkans - that is, the trend in which a lack of political accountability has for years exacerbated the economic and human costs of natural disasters and a changing climate.

The events in Albania, for instance, have brought to the fore questions concerning illegal or otherwise haphazard construction in the country, but this is very much a regional phenomenon.

Cost cutting, code and zoning violations, inexperienced labourers - the list of factors contributing to a veritable epidemic of unsafe construction is as long as it is alarming. No one who has spent any amount of time in any major urban centre in the region, but especially in suburban and rural areas, can have failed to see numerous examples of this phenomenon.

In fact, there is a veritable cottage industry of social media groups devoted to tracking such examples, albeit in often comedic fashion.

The Albanian earthquakes should make clear, however, that this is no laughing matter. After all, the Western Balkans has not only recently become seismically active.

Like the quake that struck near the Albanian coastal city of Durrës in the early hours of November 26, 2019, the infamous 1969 Banja Luka quake was a 6.4 in magnitude. In 1961, Skopje was devastated by a 6.1-magnitude earthquake that killed 1,100 and remade the entire edifice of the city. And far smaller quakes have been a regular occurrence throughout the region for decades.

Nor is the overall lack of disaster preparedness across the region anything to smirk about. The 2014 floods which affected large swathes of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia - the worst in more than a century - should already have been a wakeup call; both in terms of overall lack of emergency capacities across various administrative regions in all three countries, and the even more profound lack of capacities to deal with the growing realities of climate change. Little has changed in the five years since, even as seasonal floods have only grown more severe.

Air quality critical

Much the same could be said about any number of climate or environmental factors in these countries. Wildfires are becoming more frequent and more destructive every year all along the Dalmatian and Montenegrin coasts, and are increasingly spreading to the interior of the region, especially Herzegovina's dry badlands.

And then there is the hazardous air quality throughout the region, with particularly egregious rates of air pollution in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Skopje, and Pristina making regular international headlines. After all, in a global context, these are tiny cities - with a population of barely four million inhabitants put together. And yet they have air quality indexes on a par with massive Indian and Chinese super-cities that are likewise major industrial hubs. Clearly, the issue here is not the booming economic capacities of these Western Balkan polities. No, as with the broader question of disaster preparedness, the issue is one of government negligence and institutional failure.

Air quality in the region is reaching critical levels because governments have refused to regulate industrial polluters, to make clean fuels affordable for consumers, especially home heating, nor have they done very much to encourage the development of renewable energies, or even public transportation.

But local governments have not merely failed to regulate air quality.

Bosnia's recent decision to turn to a Chinese development bank to finance a massive expansion of Tuzla's notorious coal-power plant illustrates that there is an element of malign self-interest at work here.

Political elites and their associates and donors in the construction and energy industries are working together to prevent meaningful regulatory and environmental reforms from being implemented. Why? Because dirty fuels and lack of regulation means more cash in their pockets.

Green shoots

Clearly, there is a systemic problem here and, likewise, there is an urgent need for a major shift in government policy. But much of the same could be said of any of these issues: earthquakes, floods, wildfires etc. Each of these requires governments willing to devote resources and expertise to soberly assess the risks, to work diligently to mitigate the effects, and to thereby save lives.

That this has largely not taken place can be easily dismissed as yet another failure of the

Western Balkan political elite, another aspect of their habitual disregard for the welfare of their own citizens, even as they drone on about their atavistic nationalism.

But one need not be as cynical as all that.

Since the start of this decade, we've quietly watched the emergence of a small, but well-organised green movement in the Western Balkans.

To date, it has traditionally organised in the context of specific struggles, in specific communities. But as climate change and wholesale institutional failure to deal with environmental factors begins to deliver greater and greater economic and human costs to the region, we may yet see something more cohesive emerge. Or, rather, we must work to ensure that precisely this occurs.

Citizens, policymakers, and activists in the region can no longer treat climate and the environment as some fringe, First World concern.

The most devastating effects of such negligence are being seen precisely in underdeveloped and peripheral regions like the Western Balkans.

And while the effects of climate change and pollution are only further exacerbated by long-standing issues with corruption and democratic backsliding in the region, the basic health of the local biosphere, much as local capacities to deal with natural disasters, represent another opportunity to hold political elites to account.

Simply, these must become conversations of immediate public concern. Lives depend on it.

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