

Flood Prevention and Management in the Western Balkans: what are the needs in the context of (further) implementing EU Floods Directive?

After the severe floods in the Spring 2014, the European Commission proposed to strengthen the region's capacity for flood prevention and management and to reduce the risk and the severity of the consequences of future floods. As part of this exercise, the Commission ordered an analysis on the status of flood prevention and management in general, and specifically on the status of implementation of the Floods Directive, in the region. This document was presented at an international conference in Sarajevo on September 28th 2015.

As the floods in Spring 2014 demonstrate, the region is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Flood events that were previously 'once in a lifetime' have become both more frequent and more violent and the region needs to prepare for these becoming more likely.

The analysis deals with the floods management needs in the Western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo*, Montenegro and Serbia). It discusses structural and non-structural measures as well as various projects and initiatives. This analysis was also intended to facilitate financial support for such measures, whether from the EU or from international partners.

The implementation of the Floods Directive in the Western Balkans countries is not homogeneous. One of the main concerns is the **fragmented organisational set-up**, poor co-ordination and the lack of resources, which result in weak authoritative bodies without the capacity to enforce legislation. Full implementation of the Directive in the entire region is therefore not likely to be achieved before 2025. This situation encourages irresponsible land use in flood hazard areas, which increases the risk of floods and the extent of the resulting flood damage.

Flood hazard and risk assessment, as well as **mapping**, constitute the crucial elements of the Directive. This lengthy process has started in the region. The human capacity and experience as well as the information and data required are not readily available. None of the countries' data collection and management methods meets the desired requirements. At regional level, risk-mapping exercises have been carried out by the River commissions (**International Sava River Basin Commission, ISRBC** and the **International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, ICPDR**) and would need to be further detailed at national level.

Co-operation, data and information exchange at regional level can be facilitated by the ICPDR and the ISRBC, and the Drini Core Group of the Drini Memorandum and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

The report also assessed **173 specific structural projects** proposed by the Western Balkans. 92 of these were classified as "no-regret" projects, i.e. investments at the top of the list, with the greatest impact and efficiency. The estimated total budget of "no-regret" projects is EUR 388 million, which implies a funding gap of EUR 245.9 million. As a consequence of the small size of many of the Western Balkans countries and the length of rivers in the region, the majority of the 173 planned structural projects have some regional relevance.

As for the specific recommendations mentioned in the report, in order to achieve sound flood protection and management in the Western Balkans, the countries should implement the following actions.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

- Develop and adopt their **Floods Directive implementation plan and programme** whilst also **accelerating the full transposition and implementation of EU Floods Directive and Water Framework Directives**. Strengthening **organisational structures and enforcing legislation must be a priority**.
- Take steps to **incorporate flood management issues into all other sectoral policies**, such as urbanisation, urban and rural housing, agriculture or dam management, but particularly **land use in sensitive areas**.
- Start as soon as possible the **flood hazard and risk assessments and mapping**. Both of these exercises are at the basis of the Floods directive.
- Prepare and adopt **flood management strategies and flood risk management plans**, at the national and local level. A final **prioritised structural investment list** for each country has then to be developed. This list should include "no-regret" investments measures as well as short and long term investments plans to be revised after the flood risk mapping process is finished and flood management plans have been prepared.
- Develop **early warning and hydro-meteorological monitoring** systems.
- Meet the requirement to have **knowledgeable and dedicated staff at regional, country and local levels**. Emphasis is to be given to **disseminating information, possible actions in emergencies and activities related to flood control**.
- Strengthen their **regional and cross-border cooperation in flood management planning and design** and use existing structures to foster more efficient interventions and data sharing.

On this last point, the **ISRBC and ICPDR** should take on this role and be supported politically and financially.

On their side, the European Commission, the International Financial Institutions and other funding sources should consider **prioritising funding measures** to support the implementation of the Floods Directive. These would focus on the preparation of the flood hazard and risk maps as well as the development of national flood strategies and countrywide flood risk management plans.