



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:
The Flooding in Croatia:
The Damage and Reaction of the Authorities
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The Flooding in Croatia: The Damage and Reaction of the Authorities

Summary

This article will address the topic of flooding that hit Croatia during mid-May. The damage that occurred targeted mostly the area of several counties in Central and Southern Croatia, including Karlovac County, Sisak-Moslavina County, and Zadar County, with some cities and towns being seriously affected. The response from regional and local authorities, as well as emergency services, was timely; however, the material losses were still significant, which made Prime Minister Andrej Plenković promise that the Government will provide every necessary help needed to those who have suffered the most.

Introduction

During several consecutive days in mid-May, Croatia faced heavy rainfall which caused massive flooding in some parts of the country. The swift reaction of regional and local authorities was at hand, while the Government also provided the necessary aid to contain what could have become a natural catastrophe. According to the reports of Croatia's State Hydrometeorological Institute (DHMZ), in the 24-hours period that ended at 8 AM on 15 May, approximately 256.4 mm of rain fell in the area of Gračac, a municipality in Zadar County, which is the highest amount recorded ever since 1960¹. If measured in the 17 day-period, Gračac suffered 4 times larger amounts of rain compared to the usual standards. Apart from Zadar County where the danger of flooding was the result of high levels of Zrmanja River, Karlovac County and Sisak-Moslavina County in Central Croatia ended up having the same situation as the result of high levels of Kupa and Una River, respectively. In the latter county, in the city of Hrvatska Kostajnica, 300 members of the Croatian Army had to be mobilized to provide help to the local population.

A Historical Overview of Flooding in Croatia

Unfortunately, flooding in Croatia happens every few years, albeit not so massive as was the case this May, while the danger of rising levels of rivers predominantly related to the area

¹ Davies, Richard. 2023. Croatia – Flooding in Multiple Counties After Record Rain, Authorities on Alert as Rivers Rise. FloodList <https://floodlist.com/europe/croatia-floods-may-2023>.

of Central Croatia, which geographically consists of, one could say, Western parts of Slavonija region and the counties in the south and southeast of the capital. If looking at the history, the most dangerous and recent flooding was in the May of 2014 when the Slavonija region was the first victim of the natural catastrophe, especially Vukovar-Srijem County, Požega-Slavonija County, and Brod-Posavina County. In total, 2 human lives were lost and approximately 11.500 cattle suffocated, along with massive financial losses and agricultural damage accumulated. Vukovar-Srijem County faced the most threatening situation due to the overflow of the Sava river which put many villages in jeopardy, while fire brigades from all over Croatia were coming and assisting the local authorities and population to save their homes and property. As far as the capital is concerned, the largest flooding was in 1964 which caused one-third of the city being struck by high levels of the Sava River. Overall, 17 people lost their lives, 65 were injured, 40.000 lost their homes, while more than 10.000 apartments were destroyed². These terrible consequences in the subsequent years led to the restructuring of the city defense system with the most important being the one of the Sava riverbed in the part where the river runs through the city.

The May 2023 Flooding in Central and Southern Croatia

This year's floodings again targeted, one could say, the critical area of Central Croatia, even though, as mentioned in the introductory section, Zadar County in Dalmatia region and Lika-Senj County, which could be interpreted as part of the country that connects Central and Southern Croatia, also suffered considerable damages. The city of Karlovac and surrounding areas witnessed the rising levels of the Kupa River, an issue that occurs every time after a few days of rain; however, this time the streets and roads were submerged, making it impossible for the local population to get out of their homes, up to the point where their houses and basements were overflowed with water. In the city of Hrvatska Kostajnica, Sisak-Moslavina County, local authorities declared an emergency after the levels of the Una River rose significantly in the period of one night³. Measured in centimeters, from 14 May to 17 May, the Una River rose from less than 200 cm to 450 cm; therefore, signaling the red alert since 400 cm is considered to be a level that must not be crossed. Other smaller towns in the county were also flooded, such as Ilova, Kutina, Borovac, Matijevići, and Dvor. In Southern Croatia, Zadar County, it

² Hrvatske vode. 2020. 56 godina od velike poplave u Zagrebu <https://voda.hr/hr/novost/56-godina-od-velike-poplave-u-zagrebu>.

³ Davies, Richard. 2023. Croatia – Flooding in Multiple Counties After Record Rain, Authorities on Alert as Rivers Rise. FloodList <https://floodlist.com/europe/croatia-floods-may-2023>.

was reported that “the flooding caused power outages, prompting closure of schools [...] the Civil Defence, along with other emergency teams and the Red Cross, swiftly intervened, setting up flood defences and distributing essential supplies”⁴.

The Solidarity of People and Reaction of the Government

Luckily, every time a situation like this happens, whether that be flooding, wildfires, or like in 2020, devastating earthquakes, the people from all over Croatia show their readiness to react and provide aid to those in need; thus, helping the competent authorities and local population to mitigate the damage. Without going much into detail and questioning to what extent the actions of the citizens are coordinated and/or harmonized with those of local authorities, for example, if the collected aid is regularly distributed and not merely left at some depository, it is praiseworthy to underline the solidarity that takes place in such a situation. Some could say that solidary should be manifested every day toward everyone who faces unpleasant events or living conditions, which is definitely true; however, people being as they are, one should show gratitude even when help is provided in these crises. Apart from the people, as soon as the flooding in May became a country-wide topic, members of the Government were sent to visit the areas of Gračac and Obrovac in Zadar County, as well as towns in Central Croatia; a symbolic gesture, but necessary to send a message that victims are not alone. Among them were Minister of Interior Davor Božinović, Minister of Croatian Veterans Tomo Medved, and Minister of Defence Mario Banožić, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković who promised that the Government will assist the regional and local units to address the damage, while he also underlined the climate change as a factor that contributed to flooding.

⁴ Davies, Richard. 2023. Croatia – Flooding in Multiple Counties After Record Rain, Authorities on Alert as Rivers Rise. FloodList <https://floodlist.com/europe/croatia-floods-may-2023>.

Conclusion

Taking everything into account, one could argue that this year's flooding was properly mitigated by the emergency services and competent authorities, within what was possible considering their powers and resources. Unfortunately, some damage that was done such as destroyed agricultural land fields will take time to be repaired, but hopefully, decision-makers will find a way to compensate for the financial and material losses of people who earn for their life from such businesses. Ultimately, the defense system has showcased its readiness which was not always the case, but past experiences have enabled the transfer of lessons that were applied during this May. With climate change heavily impacting our lives, we could only hope that the upcoming situations will result in minimal losses of any kind.