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CLIMATE CHANGE AS A SECURITY ISSUE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract: *Climate change is a global challenge with direct environmental, political and socioeconomic repercussions for countries and peoples around the world. It is a direct threat, for example, to the territories of some states due to rising sea levels or fires and droughts, but is also a "threat" or a "risk" multiplier, undermining food security, energy security, economic security and access to fundamental natural resources, while also impacting the health of individuals and communities. This article deals with the connection between climate change and security and the security risks that climate change poses. It elaborates on the theoretical approaches to treat climate change as a security issue and argues that climate change, which is a multidimensional problem, should be seen, inter alia, as a security issue. In this context, the article also focuses on the risks and perceptions of climate change in the Western Balkan countries.*

Keywords: *Climate Change, Climate Security, Human Security, UN Sustainable Development Goals, Western Balkans.*

Introduction

At the 2021 open debate in the UN Security Council on climate and security, acclaimed natural historian and biologist David Attenborough stressed that "climate change is the biggest threat to security that humans have ever faced", warning that "[if] we continue on our current path" – that is, on the path on not abiding by the Paris Agreement commitment to limit global warming to 1.50 C – "we will face the collapse of everything that gives our security – food production, access to fresh water, habitable, ambient temperatures and ocean food chains" (Security Council Report, 2021, p.1). According to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "we are in the fight of our lives […] and we are losing"; we are forming a "collective suicide pact" if we proceed with our insufficient efforts to tackle climate change (United Nations, 2022). He has emphasized on many occasions the linkage between today's "climate chaos" and tomorrow's conflicts (Ibid), between climate change and its impacts and the maintenance of international peace and security (United Nations, 2024; United Nations, 2021a). Similarly, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stressed that climate change "not only exacerbates

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threats to international peace and security; it is a threat to international peace and security." (United Nations, 2011).

These statements clearly point to two interrelated things. Firstly, climate change is an actual, global challenge with direct environmental, political and socioeconomic repercussions for countries regardless of national borders or sovereignty. As one of the central global issues of the 21st century, climate change represents a completely new and indistinct threat to the global climate system upon which the entire humankind depends. Climate change effects need to be mitigated fast, mainly because humanity has reached a point in which climate change poses an increased risk to people, the economy, infrastructure, ecosystems, societies and international relations. Serious consequences are foreseen, like a temperature increase from 2 to 5 0 C which will lead to the melting of the glaciers on the North and the South Pole and the increase of the sea level which will directly affect the coastal lands and the island states and will increase the number of hurricanes and inundations. The Western Balkans region is no exception to the severe impacts that are caused by climate change throughout the world. In 2020, for instance, the European Commission observed that the Western Balkans is one of the regions in Europe that is most deeply affected by the impact of climate change (European Commission 2020). It has been estimated that if the trend of rising temperatures is projected to continue, the temperature increases in the region are estimated to be between 1.7 – 4.0°C, and even exceeding 5.0°C by the end of the century (Regional Cooperation Council, 2018). These projections are dependent on the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but they raise great concerns in the region, mainly because of the serious climate security risks stemming from increasing climate hazards such as drought, heatwaves, and tropical storms (Brsakoska Bazerkoska & Stojkovski 2024).

What is also clear from the abovementioned statements is the linkage between climate change and security. Although the association between security and climate change and its impacts dates back to the 1970s, it started to come to prominence in the 1990s, as a national security matter, but especially since 2007, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Report was issued, and when the UN Security Council discussed for the first time the question of climate change (Trombetta, 2023(a), p.2,3). Following that year, climate change has been often portrayed as "a threat in itself and as a "threat multiplier" or "risk multiplier" (Ibid, p.3). In addition to posing territorial threats, in the form of, for instance, rising sea levels or fires and droughts, climate change undermines the basic environmental security, which consists of food security, energy security, economic security and access to fundamental natural resources, and it impacts the health of individuals and communities, with the poorest and most vulnerable individuals and communities most at risk. The degradation of the environment might result in increased rates of conflict over scarce resources, which have the capacity to produce environmental refugees that will likely flee affected areas. When these essential components of security – health, community, environment, livelihoods and the economy – are affected by climate change, the rising human insecurity can contribute to rising national and global conflict and insecurity (Castro Pereira 2015).

Yet, despite these connections, many states and authors still do not agree with framing climate change as a security issue. This is mainly the case because climate change should be seen as a sustainable development issue and not as a security issue. Moreover, the scientific evidence for linking climate change and security is not sufficiently clear (UN Doc.S/PV.8926, 2021, p,4, 12).[3] Additionally, the securitization of an issue in itself

[3] *As China and Russia have argued in the UN Security Council debate on climate and security.*

carries numerous problems. In this context, the article will deal with the connection between climate change and security and the security risks that climate change poses. It will further elaborate on why climate change, as a multidimensional problem, is, inter alia, a security issue. Finally, it will focus on the Western Balkans, and the security challenges climate change poses in this region.

Climate change as a security issue

In order to answer whether climate change should be seen as a security question, it is necessary to deconstruct the concept of security into its components. For many scholars, answering what security is, includes defining, first and foremost, the "referent object" of security, or who should be secured and what values should be secured (Baldwin 1997, p.13-16; Martin 2022, p.249, 250)? Additionally, it is necessary to ascertain who should provide the security, by what means it should be provided and what is the actual threat to be protected from (Ibid)?

The traditional, and for a very long time predominant, view of security is through the lens of the nation-state, and realism as an IR theory. The state, in this account, is the referent object of protection, and territorial integrity and stability, as well as political independence, are the values that should be secured. The threat is external, meaning it comes from outside of the state borders, usually in the face of another state, and it involves the (threat or) use of force. The response to this kind of threat is mainly reactionary and involves the state's armed forces.

But this understanding has been highly contested throughout the years. Many scholars emphasize that the understanding of a "threat" should be much broader and include not just external and military dangers, but occurrences such as "epidemics, floods, earthquakes, or droughts" (Baldwin 1997, p.15,16; Ullman 1993). In fact, even the UN Security Council, the international community's primary authority on international peace and security, endorsed this view when it characterized the Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 in Western Africa as a threat to international peace and security, in light of Article 39 of the UN Charter (UN Doc. S/Res/2177 (2014)). The Council even authorized a series of measures to address the spread of the virus. For instance, it called on all UN member states to lift general travel and border restrictions, which were imposed due to the Ebola spread, to facilitate the delivery of aid and personnel to the most affected countries, and to fight against misinformation about the outbreak (Ibid). In this case, the referent object of protection is not a single nation-state, but the whole region of (Western) Africa or the whole international community; the values to be secured were human health and human life; the means of protection were not military, and the "threat" was not remotely related to the use of force, nor was it "external". Therefore, all this discussion shows that the concept of "security" is socially constructed, and not a given term (Trombetta 2023(b), p.77). It is an amalgam of social practices that include "the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects" (Buzan et al. 1998, p.25). Security can include traditional, military threats, but it can also encompass threats that in themselves do not concern the use of force, but which are of huge gravity and which could further impact traditional security concerns.

In light of this, climate change, which is a complex and multidimensional issue, should be treated, inter alia, as a "non-traditional" security issue. Climate change has strong connections (much stronger compared to Ebola, for example) with international security. To begin with, according to one recent research, "62.3% of the studies find evidence that climate change variables are associated with higher levels of conflict" (Sakaguchi et al 2017, p.640). Granted, climate change is "rarely a direct cause of conflict", but "there is ample evidence that its effects

exacerbate important drivers and contextual factors of conflict and fragility" such as increasing "resource demands, environmental degradation and uneven development" (Detges et al. 2020, p.11, 4 International Crisis Group 2021). Thus, as the UN Security Council recognized in its Presidential Statement on climate change, in the long run, climate change may "aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security" (UN Doc. S/PRST/2011/15 (2011)). In this regard, the Council has pointed out in its decisions on some specific conflicts and crises (most notably, the Lake Chad Basin and Somalia) the link and adverse effect between climate change and violent conflicts.[4] Environmental considerations can also be found in UN peacekeeping operations (Maertens 2018). Furthermore, while climate change may in some cases be a direct threat to communities and individuals, like, for example, the prediction of the disappearance of (the territories) of four Small Island Developing States by the middle of this century due to climate change-driven rising sea levels (Nevitt 2021, p.529, 535), in principle, climate change and its implications pose indirect threats. Many experts explain that, in addition to temperature rises, melting glaciers and rising sea levels, climate change will (continue to) cause and/or exacerbate extreme weather conditions, such as the increase in the intensity and/or frequency of heatwaves, fires, storms, floods, droughts, etc. (Ibid, p.533-535; Barnett & Adger 2007, p.640). This will lead to shortages of and will reduce the access to natural resources, food and water for many individuals around the world, endangering human health and/or causing the rise of "environmentally induced migrants" (IOM 2007; UNGA 2008), and further impact larger social processes and sectors, like agriculture, the production sector, and the institutional, economic and social development and prosperity of states and individuals (Barnett &Adger 2007; UN Secretary General 2009). Thus, climate change is a threat multiplier or a security risk multiplier (CNA 2007; UNEP 2022). It is for this reason that many states[5] and international bodies, like, for instance, the UN Climate-Security Mechanism (UNEP 2021), recognize climate change as a security issue and further scrutinize the relationship between climate change and security.

Nevertheless, claiming that climate change should be considered as a security issue, since security is a constructed term and climate change is related to and/or exacerbates many security risks, still does not provide a precise enough answer of what kind of security issue is climate change? Who exactly and what values are to be protected against climate change and its effects and by what means? For some, climate change is a national security issue of states, meaning that the referent object to be secured against climate change and its effects is the state itself (US Department of Defense 2019; Kavalski 2023). For many others, climate change is a human security issue, meaning the focus is on the vulnerabilities and insecurities experienced by individuals, groups and societies and not on states as isolated and enclosed entities (UNDP 1994; Adger et al. 2014; Jamshidi 2019). Human security discourses on climate change are often accompanied by or used interchangeably with the concept of "international" or "global" security, which protects the international order and welfare, understood from the perspectives of both the community of states but also (and primarily) the human community (Elliott 2023; Martin 2022). It is not the aim of this article to provide a definitive answer concerning the most appropriate 'type' of security for the threat of climate change. However, as the UNDP has stressed,

[4] *See all the meetings as well as documents and relevant passages of the UN Security Council on climate change and its impacts, in Security Council Report (2021), pp.18-27; Security Council Report (2022) pp.12,13.; Maertens &Trombetta (2023), pp.185-187.*

[5] *For instance, 113 States co-sponsored a thematic draft resolution to the UN Security Council in 2021 (that was not adopted due to a Russian veto) in which the relationship between climate and security was once again recognized. UN Doc. S/2021/990 (2021); UN Doc. S/PV.8926 (2021).*

it would be "ethically indefensible" to perceive climate change and its security implications solely from a nationalist and statist perspective (UNDP 2007, p.167), since this is a collective problem that requires collective action (UN Doc. S/2019/113 2019, p.3), and since this would only widen the gap between "the world's haves and have-nots" causing mass resentment and further worsening of international security for all countries (UNDP 2007, p.167; Martin 2022, p.251). Thus, although in some cases national and human (and the other 'types' of) security may not exclude one another but be complementary, it seems that in general, human/international security is a much more suitable framework for analysing and addressing climate change as a security question, since, as Guterres has emphasized, climate change demands a "concept of security that puts people at its centre" (United Nations 2021b).

The bigger point, however, is that climate change poses an enormous, pressing threat to the international community as a whole – states and persons – and that it should be considered as a security issue. What is distinctive about framing an issue as a security one is that securitization draws with itself a sense of urgency and importance, it points to the gravity and prominence of an issue and of the need to lift that issue "above ordinary politics" (Martin 2022, p.250,252; Trombetta 2023(b), p.77). This, in turn, implies prioritization of resources and a certain set of policies over others, and in assigning responsibilities (Trombetta 2023(a), p.4; Martin 2022, p.250). Claiming that climate change is a security issue, however, does not mean that the notorious "securitization logic" of "[allowing] for exceptional measures, the breaking of democratic procedures, and the inscription of enemies" (Trombetta 2023(b), p.79) automatically follows. As Trombetta points out, "[t]ransforming climate change into a security issue is not about applying fixed meanings of security and the practices associated with them, [but] it is a reflexive and contextualized process that generates new meanings and practices", such as, for example, precautionary approaches or resilience measures, instead of reactionary and military measures, that transform the dynamics and meaning of securitizing an issue (Maertens & Trombetta 2023, p.191; Trombetta 2023(b), p.83). Similarly, stating that climate change is a security issue does not mean that it is not simultaneously a sustainable development, an economic, energy-resources, or a human rights issue.[6] Climate change is a complex issue that has multiple, intertwined aspects. But labelling it, inter alia, as a security issue means that, as Kofi Annan stressed back in 2007, "climate change must take its place alongside [the] threats [of] conflict, poverty, [and] the proliferation of deadly weapons […] that have traditionally monopolized first-order political attention" (UNFCCC 2007, p.24), and that an urgent collective response is needed.

Climate change as a security issue in the Western Balkans

Security-related risks due to climate change have not spared the Western Balkan region. It was in 2014 when a historic flooding caused over €2 billion in damages and losses in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which equals nearly 15 % of the country's GDP. The floods caused over €1.5 billion in damages and losses in Serbia – 5 % of its GDP (Gelder 2018). Afterwards, during the summer of 2017 the region witnessed record temperatures that buckled train tracks, and also fueled dozens of fires across the Balkans. The 2017 record temperatures caused a drought in

[6] *See for example, the recent European Court of Human Rights judgment in the case Verein Klima Seniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland, available at https://ennhri.org/news-and-blog/the-grand-chamber-of-the-european-court-of-human-rights-issues-groundbreaking-judgment-on-climate-change-and-human-rights/#:~:text=The%20Court%20stated%20that%20Article,being%20and%20quality%20of%20life.*

Serbia which led to a drop in agriculture output of nearly 10 percent. In Albania, €200 million were spent on energy imports amid a devastating drought (Ibid). The summers of 2021, 2022 and 2023 subsequently brought the hottest weather the region has seen for 30 years, which contributed, among other factors, to numerous wildfires in Albania, Greece and Republic of North Macedonia, alongside with other countries in the Mediterranean region (Abnett 2021). These extreme events that occurred in the region in the past decade serve as reminders of how vulnerable the region is to climate-related shocks. They contribute heavily to human health issues, the loss of species, water supply shortages and reduced agriculture production, as well as to the increase of extreme events and migration. All these growing climate hazards, such as drought, heatwaves, and tropical storms, are increasing the climate security risks in the Balkans.

The climate crises, when coupled with the vulnerability of the post-conflict vulnerable societies following the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia, make the Balkans an important region for climate security analysis (Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security 2022). Compared to the other countries on a global level, climate risks in the Balkans fall slightly below average (Ibid). Nevertheless, the region is vulnerable to the security risks arising from the specific combination of factors in the region which is characterized by legacies of war and a political climate that enabled the flourishing of organized crime, corruption and illegal migration, including climate change as part of the equation. The intensifying impacts of climate change have a potential to contribute to the existing post-conflict tensions and to threaten Europe's broader climate goals.

The Western Balkan countries are vulnerable to the climate change effects in the areas that are closely connected to the human security of their peoples. Primarily, the area of water supply in the region is heavily affected by climate change, raising human security concerns. With the projected temperature increase, especially during the summer, the projections are that the requirements for water supply will increase, and in the long-term this might contribute to the lowering of water supply accompanied by worsening water quality. This could lead to an increasing discrepancy between water needs and water availability, threatening human security, and aggravating the sanitary and hygienic conditions, particularly in rural communities (Belgrade Security Forum 2021; Платформа 27 2022; UN Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021; Zurovec et al. 2015).

Moreover, Western Balkan's agricultural production could suffer significant losses by the end of this century if appropriate adaptation measures are not taken as the climate of the region is rapidly changing. The episodes of severe droughts that have been devastating the region in the past few years are decreasing agricultural production and increasing the cost of the basic agricultural products on the market. The projected climate change and temperature rise in the region can only worsen these trends, which further affect human security (Ibid).

Aside from the effects of climate change, there are numerous other challenges connected to environmental protection in the Western Balkan countries. The issue of pollution is an important concern in terms of environmental health, the health of the people living in the region and the overall human security. Air pollution remains an important problem in many urban and industrial areas, due to emissions from motor vehicles and industry, especially emissions from ageing mines and power and manufacturing plants (EEAS Report 2010). Moreover, the generation of municipal waste has risen steadily in the Western Balkans. Waste management is weak in many parts of the region and many waste facilities are old. Another problem are the abandoned landfills. Additionally, the accumulated industrial waste, and in particular mining waste, is also a serious problem in some areas (Ibid).

Furthermore, climate change impacts might also increase the region's vulnerability to Chinese and Russian influence. This is an important factor in light of the implementation of the environmental standards in the Western Balkans, as well as in connection to the energy security of the region. At present, the Chinese investments in the Western Balkans are largely undermining the EU environmental standards and the Energy Community Treaty[7], to which all the Western Balkan countries are parties. Despite the EU's standards directed towards using renewable energy, there are cases of Western Balkan countries contracting Chinese state owned firms to build coal power units. One example is the Chinese economic influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the coal power plant in Tuzla was built with a Chinese investment. The investment is directed towards replacing the older plant and causing less pollution (Lakic 2019). However, building a coal power plant does not contribute towards the EU and ECT principles for sustainable development and climate change action. In relation to the Russian economic presence in the region, it can be noted that it is not reflected in any major investments in the Western Balkans, but is mainly reflected through Russian energy firms. Russian energy firms enjoy a near-monopoly in Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska (Reljić 2017). Lukoil Neftochim, Gazprom Neft and Zarubezhneft control most of the oil trade in Bulgaria, Serbia and Republika Srpska respectively (Bechev 2015). Gazprom remains a monopoly supplier of gas to most countries in the region, with the exception of Greece, Romania and Croatia. As elsewhere in Europe, Russia uses the gas as a diplomatic tool (Ibid). These influences only increase the GHG emissions, arising from electricity production, especially since it is one of the largest emitters and contributes towards increasing the climate change effects in the region.

Conclusion

The article elaborated on the theoretical and states' approach on why climate change, which in its core is a multidimensional problem, should be considered as a security issue as well. The analysis of climate change as a global challenge, with direct environmental, political and socioeconomic repercussions for countries reveals that it presents an enormous, pressing threat to the international community as a whole – states and persons – and therefore it should be considered as a security issue as well. In this context, the article argues that framing climate change as a security issue contributes to its sense of urgency and importance, providing for a different approach that includes precautionary or resilience measures, instead of reactionary and military measures. Classifying climate change as a security issue only adds to its complexity. It does not mean that it is not simultaneously a sustainable development, an economic, energy-resources, or a human rights issue, but treating it as a security issue adds to it the need for an urgent collective response.

The article also focuses on the risks and the perception of climate change in Western Balkan countries. All the Western Balkan countries are vulnerable to the effects of climate change and in this context they are all susceptible to different security risks. Therefore, these countries need an engaged climate security action that has the possibility to offer positive opportunities for post-conflict peacebuilding and cooperation in the region. This type of action might also contribute towards building a strong framework of human security for the Western Balkans. All these efforts will be critical to continuing to mitigate and adapt to climate change and build peace, security, and climate resilience in the Western Balkans. However, these needs are often

[7] *The Energy Community Treaty is designed to bring the environmental policies and pollution standards of the Western Balkan countries in line with those of the EU.*

detected and elaborated from outside the Western Balkan countries within different UN and NATO forums. When looking within the countries and their engagement on climate security, there is very little, if any, initiative or action connected to climate security to be found.

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