

# ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD: A CASE STUDY

## 1. Introduction

This paper will examine the question of environmental migration, more specifically, those migrations provoked or encouraged by climate change and environmental pressures on certain individuals. The specific aim of this paper is to offer, in first place, a general overview of the issue. The intention here is to underline the challenges that one has to face while trying to conceptualize this phenomenon and the repercussions of this definitional chaos on the legal discussion. Secondly, in order to give a proper contextualisation of what was previously reported, the presentation of a case study will follow. The latter discusses about the 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina and it works also as clear evidence that Europe itself is going to be affected by these climate-related migrations. After that, one final point will be dedicated to some recommendations for the future.

## 2. Environmental migrants: a difficult category to be defined

In the history of human migration, the phenomenon of “climate migrants” is certainly a new-born. And exactly because of its novelty, the very nature of this topic is still surrounded by great confusion. It is possible to identify two main challenges that complicate the discussion around this topic:

1. There are serious difficulties in determining the actual relevance of the phenomenon, other than its real scope.
2. Equal difficulties can be faced in the attempt to “isolate” the climate factor in an individual’s choice to migrate.

The first challenge is connected to the fact that the humanitarian, political, and economic relevance of the phenomenon significantly changes depending on how and how much the global average temperature will effectively rise in future<sup>1</sup>. As it is well known, the current pledges on climate refer to the 2015 Paris Agreement, whose goal is to:

«Hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels [...]»<sup>2</sup>

The problem here is that, in practice, we have no absolute certainty that every signatory state is going to respect the agreed parameters on emissions, being these demanding and expensive to achieve, especially for some countries. Moreover, even if we think of the best-case scenario, in which all the parameters are faithfully respected by all the subjects, there are still reasonable doubts as to whether these parameters are going to be enough to avoid, or at least mitigate, devastating consequences. So, given that in practice, there is absolutely no certainty that the Paris Agreement’s goals will be met, it is also difficult to come up with appropriate solutions to face the issue. As a consequence, any proposed management or resolution to the issue of climate-related migrations only makes sense if the Paris Agreement’s goals are met. So, basically, being able to rely only on predictions relating to the relevance of the problem, many important information, including for example the number of people involved are in the best hypothesis a mere “guess”.

On the other hand, the second challenge refers to the fact that an individual can be pushed to leave his or her country for many different reasons and it is often difficult to determine which factor has played the decisive role in taking such decision. The choice to migrate depends indeed on a complex set of factors, among which global warming and environmental pressures can be important but rarely exclusive or decisive. It’s much more credible to say, in fact, that climate change is a factor which can exacerbate already socially, economically and politically fragile situations.

The study of “climate migrants” is, as we have seen, object of different discourses and interpretations that create a certain degree of conceptual confusion. There is still not an agreed definition of this category of migrants and this definitional chaos also produces important, negative, effects on the legal

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<sup>1</sup> International Law and the Protection of “Climate Refugees”, Giovanni Sciaccalunga, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> Paris Agreement, Article 2 (a): [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english\\_paris\\_agreement.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf)

discussion. In fact, this certainly does not help the purposes of a shared, unitary and useful legal conceptualization of the phenomenon. At the same time, this discourse becomes crucial when it comes to giving specific rights to migrants and guarantee them an adequate protection.

To shed some light on the issue, it is useful to keep in mind two important dichotomies while referring to the environmental migrants:

1. **Compulsory** vs. **Voluntary** nature of the migration. In the first case, the migration is forced because the negative effects of climate change have made areas no longer habitable. In the second one, are included individuals who are also exposed to the bad effects of climate change, but who decide deliberately to migrate. Probably, they decided to migrate *also* because of climate pressures, but they are not in the immediate and acute need for assistance.
2. **Permanent** vs. **Temporary** migration. The first kind of migration concerns victims of climate processes, that is the gradual and slow degradation of the environment (e.g., sea-level rise, desertification). In this case, the affected area would become totally uninhabitable with no possibilities for the individuals to ever return there. The second kind of migration refers instead to victims of climate events (e.g., floods, landslides). The displacement tends here to be temporary and the return possible in most of the cases. However, the period of time can differ depending on the vulnerability of the communities affected or on the efforts put in place for recovering the affected areas.

As we can see, there are many factors to take into account while trying to define this category and consequently, the official definitions try to include as much as possible all the mentioned components. It follows the one given by the International Organisation for Migration, according to which **environmental migrants** are:

«Persons or groups of persons who, because of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that have a negative impact on their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their homes, either temporarily or permanently, and move within the territory or abroad. »<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Europe

Is Europe worried about the problem of migration due to climate change? And at what extent will it be affected by it? Being the one of climate change a global question, there is no way of considering any part of the globe unthreatened by its consequences. And indeed, Europe is and will be a culminating point for this kind of migrations. It will be affected both directly and indirectly by them. Indirectly because, if it is not true that there are places on Earth which are free from danger, it is true that there are some areas that are more at risk than others. And speaking of them, Europe is very likely to become a destination point for future migrants coming from Africa and the Middle East who will be forced to move because of droughts and desertification. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that Europe will have climate migration problems in its own right (e.g., the increase of sea level and its effect on places like Venice or the Netherlands).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, without having to look into a distant future, climate migrants are already among us, and they are indeed *Europeans*. The following case study is evidence of this.

## 3. A case study: the 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 An unprecedented natural disaster

From 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> May 2014 the Balkan states, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, were struck by a record-breaking rainfall which led to gigantic floods and numerous landslides. It was an unprecedented

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<sup>3</sup> IOM Perspectives on Migration, Environment and Climate Change:

[https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/meccinfosheet\\_climatechangeactivities.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/meccinfosheet_climatechangeactivities.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Euronews article: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2015/07/10/climate-change-and-migration-a-hot-issue-for-europe>

<sup>5</sup> IOM The State of Environmental Migration 2015, pp. 187-200:

[https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/state\\_environmental\\_migration\\_2014\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/state_environmental_migration_2014_0_0.pdf)

natural disaster if we consider that three months' worth of rain fell in the space of just those three days. The devastating consequences were exacerbated also by the geographical conformation of the Bosnian territory that presents a vast number of rivers descending from higher elevations and feeding into the Sava River downstream. This caused sudden flash floods and extended inundations in the vast lower plains. Floods affected almost one third of the country and about 1,5 million of people were estimated to be affected (where the total population is 3,8 million). The area was not recovered until a few weeks, people could not return and the supply of aids was made very difficult.

The damage was enormous: floods submerged vast spaces and in some areas of the country the water level reached the second floor of the houses with people remaining trapped on their roofs. Ten of thousands of homes were severely damaged. In addition to that, livestock were severely affected as well as crops and yields, in a country that relies very much on the agricultural production. Simultaneously, heavy rains caused more than 3000 landslides across the country. Data account again for thousands of damaged or completely destroyed houses plus many others evacuated for being at risk of being affected by further landslides.

### **3.2 Massive internal displacement**

The consequences in terms of displacement, were exceptionally huge in size. The needs assessment<sup>6</sup> endorsed by the UN, the European Union and the World Bank cites a total of 89,981 internally displaced people, among which some found temporary accommodation at relatives' or friends' houses, while others were evacuated to temporary accommodation facilities (TAFs). The evacuation and rescue processes were conducted in an extremely chaotic way, other than having been drastically belated. It became clear that the magnitude of the catastrophe was not envisaged by public authorities beforehand and the population was taken by surprise. But the poor response capacity of the governments was probably aggravated by limited resources: the lack of public investment and maintenance of infrastructure added to the reduced professionalism of politicians can only lead to slow responses in times of crisis.

As far as the TAFs are concerned, they included mostly public buildings, most of which (57%) were schools. By the end of the crisis, were counted a total of 55 of TAFs hosting 1,531 people. To this number must be added also those people who were being hosted by relatives but who came to TAFs to obtain food and non-food items and that contributed to increase the humanitarian pressure on those structures. The situation was then further exacerbated by the forced closing of collective centres located in schools due to the start of the school year in September. On the other hand, this also put pressure for the reconstruction and relocation process to begin.

### **3.3 Long term consequences: migration abroad**

As the reconstruction and relocation process progressed, many people were able to return to their homes or to new, relocated ones. But internal displacement is not the only consequence that these events can produce. It is in fact estimated that, between 2014 and 2017, 150,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina left their country and moved abroad<sup>7</sup>. The disaster of 2014 triggered the worst exodus from Bosnia since the civil war of 1992.

One category of people who was more likely to emigrate was the ethnic group of Bosnian Croats. The Bosnian law, indeed, give them the right to possess a Croatian Passport and this opened to them doors to the European Union. Following the floods, many of them left to look for opportunities in Europe, where the most popular destinations were Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.<sup>8</sup> The floods may not have been the only factor pushing people to leave the country, but for many it definitely was the final-straw in their decision-making.

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<sup>6</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina Recovery Needs Assessment, Floods 14 – 19 May:

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/delegacijaEU\\_2014070913592248eng.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/delegacijaEU_2014070913592248eng.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Migration Profile Bosnia and Herzegovina:

[file:///C:/Users/USER/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps\\_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/3/Attachments/2020%20CP%20-%20Bosnia%20ed%20Erzegovina%20EN\[1156\].pdf](file:///C:/Users/USER/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/3/Attachments/2020%20CP%20-%20Bosnia%20ed%20Erzegovina%20EN[1156].pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Euronews article: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/05/how-climate-change-triggered-a-second-exodus-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

Generally speaking, the main categories that decided to emigrate after the 2014 disaster were young people, especially males of working-age. But the natural disaster emergency led to the same decision also other categories of residents. One example refers to those families whose male members were already working abroad. After the flooding, in fact, the rest of the family members took the chance to join them, causing the emigration of many women and children too.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendation for the future**

The floods of 2014 are very likely to be connected with the question of climate change. The globe is indeed inserted inside a huge climatic system and this means that changes in some parts of the globe can lead to drastic consequences in other ones. This is one of the direct consequences of climate change: in the attempt of restoring a balance, atmospheric phenomena are going to be less frequent but carried to extremes when they occur, and that was exactly what happened with rain-fall in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fact is that, the climate models suggest that these situations will become more and more common in the future, which is why early action should be taken to address these recommendations.

The first level on which is necessary to intervene is the one of regulatory frameworks in the field of management of natural disasters, which are already existing but that must be enhanced and updated. Given that it is basically impossible to avoid natural hazards from happening, the only solution we have is to boost investments in prevention and preparedness. In the specific case of the Bosnian episode, some precautions could have at least limited the damage, for example: more adequate disaster risk reduction measures, the preventive implementation of evacuation plans complemented by better meteorological forecasting or even the preventive activity of identifying beforehand existing buildings that can serve as TAFs in case of emergency.

More in general, on the large scale, action should be taken to coordinate efforts at international level. It is important that the countries of the international community make commitments to eradicate the problem. The first step, as has been done thus far, is to focus on the mitigation of climate change by setting emission targets. At the same time, it would be very useful to introduce proper policy responses aimed at helping countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Lastly, as far as the migration discourse is concerned, it might be helpful to work on the expansion of the definition of “refugee” including environmental migrants inside it. This would guarantee a proper protection to this category and allow the international system to provide for environmental migrants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> IOM Migration Research Series, “Migration and Climate Change”, pp. 36-39:  
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