



DIRECT AND INDIRECT COSTS OF AMMUNITION DEPOT EXPLOSIONS IN SERBIA

Research Report

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ABBREVIATIONS

SAF-Serbian Armed Forces

MAC- Mine Action Centre

FGD -Focus Group Discussions

CSO- Civil Society Organization

ACPP- Alternative Citizens Parliament Paracin

BCSP- Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

NCO -Non-Commissioned Officer

YPA -Yugoslav People's Army

FRY -Federal Republic Of Yugoslavia

MoD -Ministry Of Defence

UXO- Unexploded Ordnance

MHQP- Municipality Operational Headquarters for Assistance to Citizens (Paracin)

MCI- Ministry for Capital Investments

RSD- Serbian Dinar

EMERCOM- Russian Ministry For Emergency Situations

PPU -Prvi Partizan Factory Uzice

MoI- Ministry of Interior

MLSP- Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

CASE PARACIN

Location: Town of Paracin, Central Serbia, 156 kilometres SE from Belgrade, in the vicinity of European Route E75

The site of explosion: Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) ammunition depot, located on the “Karadjordjevo” hill 3 kilometres from the centre of Paracin, exploded on October 19, 2006 at 0350hrs. Before NATO’s armed intervention in 1999, the depot complex included 20 objects, of which 17 were destroyed in the bombing. In the aftermath of the bombing, the depot consisted of 6 objects intended for storing ammunition and 5 support objects. All in all, over 4110 of explosive ordnance (3150 tons in objects and 960 tons in the open) was stored in the depot.

Date(s) of field research: June 30 and July 1, 2011

Citizens Awareness of the Incident

Citizens of Paracin and near-by towns of Cuprija and Jagodina were well acquainted with the fact that a large ammunition depot of the SAF was located close to them. For this there are several reasons. First, the depot had existed for several decades, being built in 1956. Second, it was in this object that in 1987 a much reported incident occurred, when Aziz Keljmendi, an ethnic Albanian conscript murdered four and wounded five soldiers of Yugoslav People’s Army (YPA). Thirdly, in the course of NATO campaign against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) the depot was heavily bombed on several occasions. Finally, a number of citizens owned either their homes or weekend retreats, along with gardens and fields with crops in the vicinity of the depot. This contributed to their extensive knowledge of all its objects and measures being undertaken by the SAF, which is why citizens knew the level of security in the object. During the FGD they claimed that the depot was well secured, with two circles of wire, look-out posts, as well as soldiers with dogs.

Ever since the depot was built, apart from what happened in 1987, there were no bigger incidents. Even in the course of NATO bombing, potentially catastrophic consequences for citizens were avoided by dislocation of ordnance from the object. All this contributed to citizens learning to live with an armed depot being close to their homes, and led to an even greater surprise and disbelief when the depot exploded in 2006. Finally, reasons we have displayed represent the root cause for conspiracy theories explaining why explosion happened, from the role of organized crime to act of terrorism.

Citizens Immediate Reaction to the Incident

Citizens woke up by a series of large explosions early in the morning between 0330 and 0400hrs. At the first moment they could not identify the origin of these explosions. Most of interviewees first thought that it was the gas station, located on the highway nearby, that exploded, however, as the explosions continued and started becoming stronger, even stories how Serbia is again under NATO attack emerged. Windows were shattered, while on a number of objects doors were blown out due to the force of the shockwave. Most interviewees, especially the ones who were situated closer to the depot, said how debris flew all over. Some even found unexploded ordnance in their house yards and houses. The strongest explosion occurred at 0600hrs, sending a shockwave that resembled a minor earthquake. In the first 60-90 minutes after initial explosions, no information on what exactly is happening reached citizens. Confusion reigned, and many citizens spontaneously went to the town centre. Others went changing TV channels and radio frequencies, hoping to get some information on what exactly were going on. Explosions continued until 1850hrs.

Causes of the Incident

Official cause was the chemical decomposition of gunpowder into its original chemical components, making it extremely unstable and leading to explosion. For the incident, Lt Darko Kostic was indicted and convicted to prison sentence.

However, this official version of events remains unknown to a number of citizens, who rather hold to their own interpretations. One of them believes how this was an act of terrorism, since the depot was badly secured (with just two rows of wire, look-out posts and guards with dogs) and because gunpowder “can not simply explode for any apparent reason”. Others believe how soldiers and officers stole and sold ammunition, which is why they decided to cause an explosion in order to conceal the lack of ordnance. Some went as far as saying how police actually caught individuals taking ammunition away, and that it was the ensuing fire fight that caused the explosion. Some heard an airplane flying over firing a missile on the depot, and explained this by “West being mad for Serbia’s failure to capture (Ratko) Mladic”.

Those who had access to the official report produced after the investigation handled by SAF, believe that the convicted lieutenant is in fact not guilty, since he alone could not prevent the accident, and that the real culprits should be sought at the highest echelons of the SAF and Ministry of Defence (MoD). In their opinion, depot was filled with ammunition to the limit of capacity, which was relocated in the eve of NATO bombing and later returned, never to be stored properly. Many storage objects were destroyed in NATO bombing, which is why much of the ordnance, including the most sensitive anti-aircraft ammunition was kept in the open, greatly increasing the risk of “sweating”. All this could not be prevented by Lt Kostic, since such decisions were beyond his authority. Several interviewees insisted how men working in the object warned their superiors that ammunition was not stored properly, yet all their calls fell to deaf ears. This is the reason why most discussants believe those responsible are servicemen and civilians on the higher levels of SAF and MoD hierarchy, and the reason why there is no debate in public.

Casualties and Damage caused by the Incident

According to statements of municipality representatives, as well as the SAF and Red Cross, there were no casualties. However, according to the statement made by ACPD President Ilic, one woman of older age died. Apparently, this victim experienced a state of shock with the first explosions, and she passed away after the strongest explosion took place. According to death certificate, heart attack was determined as the cause of death, which was instant and came to be at 0600hrs. Ilic knew victims' family. Still this case is not debated in public while officials continue to claim that no casualties were either found, or reported. Instead, they reported of one (1) person seriously injured, and fifteen (15) with light injuries. One of women participating in FGD said that explosion pushed her meters away, how her eardrum was blown, several ribs broken, that she suffered brain haematoma all leading to her spending eight days in coma. One of participants witnessed of a situation where emergency response teams had to intervene because an older man was seriously injured. All other participants experienced minor injuries and suffered great shock. All this leads us to a conclusion that the number of people with greater and minor injuries was higher than the one actually reported in the official statistics.

Paracin suffered extensive material damage, mainly in the form of shattered window glass, window frames and doors blown out, as well as roofs collapsing on inhabited buildings and factories. In a number of objects, walls and ceilings were damaged. Local authorities filed a total of 4740 objects with 13375 damages. One house, for instance, nearly collapsed after the explosion. According to local authorities, material damage was the single greatest problem they encountered.

Considerable damage was caused to crops, pastures and orchards, since the blast scattered significant quantities of ammunition, including ordnance of higher calibre, not exploding on impact.

While material damage represented the greatest problem for local authorities, for citizens intangible damages represented the greatest concern. All participants in the

FGD claimed how they had experienced enormous shock on the day of explosion, and kept being under heightened stress for the following year and a half, as the mine clearance continued. Apparently, although the limit for maximum daily amount of unexploded ordnance (UXO) to be destroyed was set at 50 kilograms, in reality quantities of explosives exceeded several hundred kilograms. Despite the fact that these controlled explosions happened at a previously announced time, well known to citizens, intensity of explosions was highly disturbing. This is why they asked local authorities and the SAF to stop. Citizens believe how a number of health problems they have to endure present a direct consequence of their prolonged exposure to stress. According to the President of ACPP, on the basis of conversations he had with doctors in Paracin Hospital, after the explosion Paracin witnessed a rise in the number of patients suffering from various types of cancer. Health deterioration presents a bigger issue for the citizens than material damage, and they have shown great dissatisfaction with the fact that authorities have expressed no interest in addressing what they see as a problem. Taking into account the overall economic conditions and the state of health system in Serbia this problem becomes even greater.

Explosion caused greatest damage to the neighbourhood of “7. juli”, being closest to the depot. To make matters worse, most of its inhabitants are refugees from the former Yugoslavia and families of a lower socio-economic status.

For all the consequences brought by the explosion, as well as NATO bombing campaign in Paracin, citizens fiercely opposed the initiative put forward by local authorities to build a factory of industrial explosives on the site of the depot.

Response to the incident by Local Authorities and the Government

Although they were initially perplexed by events, representatives of local authorities were quick to organize themselves. President of Paracin Municipality Sasa Paunovic summoned heads of departments and municipality services to a meeting, which resulted in the establishment of an Information Section. Another body which was formed was Paracin Municipality Operational Headquarters for Assistance to Citizens (MHQP), as first contact was being made with Red Cross, SAF, MoD and other relevant ministries. According to the representatives of local authorities, their first task was to determine the level of risk citizens and the area of Paracin were exposed to. SAF came out with the first estimate of what exactly was going on around 0730hrs, while President Paunovic organized the first press conference at 0800. Only after the SAF presented their estimate municipality had learned how 130 people living in “7. juli” neighbourhood were at greatest risk, while over 3000 citizens living in other parts of Paracin were facing less of a serious threat. It was around this time that the evacuation of 80 citizens from the “7. juli” neighbourhood began.

Between 0700 and 0800hrs local authorities began coordinating their actions with Municipality’s Red Cross, from whom they will receive assistance in protective foil for windows and roofs as rain was expected. Issues of food and accommodation were also to be addressed as many persons were evacuated. To this end, one temporary accommodation made of tents was ready, as several buses owned by a local transport company were placed on stand by; yet, the second evacuation never came to be. Blankets and other means of personal hygiene were also made available by the Red Cross. Twenty one members of this institution took part.

Red Cross representative also spoke of problems they faced in their response to crisis. First, they did not have enough vehicles of their own at disposal. Second, they had no storage facility where they could place aid and materiel. Thirdly, Red Cross personnel is all-volunteer, having to place their daily jobs at risk since a number of employers was not willing to allow prolonged absence from work. Only due to the

limited scale of the incident this problem did not surface. Finally, outdated legal framework contributed to confusion where no one knew precisely what was whose task.

The issue of outdated legal framework was equally emphasized by other interviewees. From the standpoint of local authorities, they did not know what by law their competency was and what was not. As the President of Municipality had said, they faced a choice: help the citizens and thus break the law, or observe the law and do almost nothing, while there is no promise of help arriving (from the Government).

Interviewees witnessed SAF and police blocking main roads up to a distance of 1,5 kilometres from the depot, preventing anyone from coming close to the site. Yet, according to their accounts, local, unpaved roads were left unsecured. Police was deployed to key points in the town in order to prevent looting, which did not occur. Some of citizens we have interviewed said that police officers were brought from other towns as well, since they could not recognize them.

Government and local authorities' representatives claimed how fire brigade was on the site of explosion very fast, while citizens complained that it took them 45 minutes to answer first call, although it should take no more than 5 minutes to reach the depot by car (truck).

People we have interviewed also claim that not a single authorities' representative informed them whether it is safe for them to return to their homes; so they took the risk and returned on their own.

One argument was present throughout the conversations we have undertaken: that, in the end, "all weight fell on the shoulders of municipality. (Belgrade-based) politicians were only there for a photo-op."

The Role of Media

First television crew filming explosions was not from any of the Paracin-based channels, but Palma TV from the near-by town of Jagodina. This is why it was first reported on Palma TV around 0430hrs that an explosion happened in the military depot, which was soon proven by video broadcasting.

Above mentioned Channel M reached the depot much later, around 0600hrs, although journalists were present in the office at 0430hrs. One of the FGD participants, who has a family member working for the Channel M, said how they had available numerous information concerning the explosion primarily through citizens calling. Yet, they decided not to broadcast any of them without the consent of authorities, meaning they were willing to wait official statements. According to the Chief Editor of the Channel M, they hoped to avoid spreading of disinformation and rumours. He said how they attempted to reach by phone SAF commands in Nis and Belgrade, but how it was not before 0700 hrs that officially sanctioned information started arriving to their desk. Channel M also broadcasted Municipality's President news conference. Channel M continued to report from the site, and was further involved in informing citizens on events surrounding the explosion.

However, several citizens protested that they were not notified on the exact deadlines for reporting damage caused to their property, as well as another possibility which was at their disposal: to file their complaints on the damage estimates done by Commission formed by the municipality. Many of them called the television on and on again, trying to find out more of the process. All this amounts to a conclusion that local television failed to inform citizens accordingly. Accordingly, Channel M missed opportunity to investigate causes of the incident, and had only transmitted the official version.

Assistance provided by Local Authorities and the Government

Main role in dealing with consequences was played by local authorities, with the help of ministries in charge, primarily Ministry for Capital Investments (MCI). Since material damage was huge, local authorities had directed their effort at addressing immediate consequences of the explosion. The MHQP opened a bank account where donations could be made, established an Call Centre in order to keep citizens informed, and had formed five separate bodies (commissions). Of these five commissions, the one tasked with filing cases of damage had the most difficult and demanding assignment, which is why 83 of its employees from October 19 to December 15, 2006 had to work long hours – from 0730 to 2200.

Damage estimates made by this Commission were significantly greater than the funds provided by Government of Serbia – 35 million Serbian dinars (RSD). Government therefore decided on paying for some of the costs directly. According to the Head of Finance Department in Paracin Municipality, those who were hardest hit were the first to be attended. Citizens, not companies were the top priority.

Problems in providing assistance

First issue actors had to face was the deficit of glasscutters, who had decided to use the increased demand for their services as an excuse to form higher prices. This contributed to a feeling of dissatisfaction among citizens and local authorities. For citizens the problem was even greater, since it was the period of year with prevalent rain, while the process of repairing glass moved on slowly. Citizens thus had to hire glasscutters individually, not waiting for the municipality, which pushed prices a notch higher. It turned out that precisely for these costs they could not receive adequate compensation, since municipality had set a lower price for hiring glass cutting services.

Citizens also expressed their suspicion that misuse of public funds occurred. Several interviewees said how Minister of Capital Investments, Velimir Ilic, hired the company “Vujic Valjevo” which is run by his party member to work on addressing

the effects of the explosion. If this is correct, then the mentioned company used a total of 100 million RSD to “cover” just a few schools and educational facilities, while the Municipality “covered” whole town with just over 30 million RSD.

We were also informed that Jagodina received funding from the Ministry for Capital Investments, although it had not suffered any damage by the explosion. The principal reason for this is the fact that Jagodina’s Mayor was, at the time, coalition partner in the Government (and a friend) of Minister Ilic.

Participants in the FGD were especially bitter since Municipality’s Commission was slow in determining damages, and had warned BCSP team how this Commission displayed arrogance in daily communication with citizens, and was not ready to approve on many cases of damage; in members of the Commission’s opinion, damages were caused not by explosion, but simply buildings being old. Further on, citizens had no knowledge of their right to file a complaint on the record made by Commission representatives. Even those who knew better decided not to press forward, fearing the cost of hiring an attorney.

Another problem was that the Commission approved only of immediate damage and costs of its repair: for instance, if there was a crack in the wall, the Commission would determine compensation for filling in this crack, not a wider intervention on the wall. This is why as the mine clearance went on, new cracks soon opened. A general impression among citizens is that local authorities were mostly concerned with repairing windows, doors and rooftops, while everything else came to be of secondary importance.

We should add that, again according to local authorities, they faced significant challenges in determining damage to crops, pastures and orchards. Citizens are univocal in saying how no real estimates were organized in this regard at all.

Citizens found it hard to grasp why local authorities were not interested in addressing intangible, non-material damage. One participant of the FGD, diagnosed with a brain haematoma, partial loss of hearing and several broken ribs, who had

spent eight days in coma, was not given any documentation of her injuries so that she could file for compensation. She instead received lawyer's advice to file an official complaint to the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg.

Citizens also pointed to the fact that they had endured great stress and that centres (or mobile teams) for psychological support had to be organized. Their general impression is that both Government and local authorities have been ignorant of citizens' problems, treating them as plain subjects instead like human beings.

Disposal of UXO

Significant part of the work of addressing the consequences of explosion was related to disposal (clearing the terrain) of UXO. First disposal was done by the SAF, who cleared only the UXO visible on the ground. Search for UXO that had stuck deep into the terrain was not handled by the SAF since it neither had the necessary equipment, or the financial means. This is the reason why most of the humanitarian de-mining was done by Republic of Serbia's MAC. Since the proposed route for "South Stream" pipeline should run through Paracin area, Russian Government provided the funding, while the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) team was placed in charge of the operation. According to Director of MAC Petar Mihajlovic, only a small part of the site where depot was situated remains to be attended.

An issue of concern for citizens was presented by the fact that in the course of de-mining, UXO were destroyed in quantities greater than it was allowed by law, as we have mentioned. This caused great stress among children. Due to protest of citizens, de-mining continued at a slower pace, and was performed in sites located away from populated areas.

Cooperation between key actors

As we have mentioned twice already, the legal framework was outdated, with key laws adopted before the break-up of Yugoslavia. This made any clear division of roles impossible. Our discussants from the Municipality complained how they expected more expert advice and opinion from the Government, especially the MoD. In their view, representatives of this Ministry were arrogant and ignorant, failing to see local authorities as equals. Precisely because of this lack of advice, local authorities took many risks by interpreting the law freely.

From our conversations with the Red Cross, we have learned that “job was done” only due to personal connections existing between various actors in the field. Only by fortune was the Red Cross President for Paracin chairing the local Civil Defence HQ, in effect making cooperation between these two institutions swift. Even more: Red Cross volunteers received full information of the scale of the incident at 0500 hrs, two hours before SAF went public with their statement. The fact that Paunovic has been an official in the town’s administration since 2000 also helped, since he was able to establish informal contacts with many actors. Interviewees believe that without these informal contacts, reaction would be far less efficient.

Another important fact which explains the quick response of the local actors was that only eight months prior to explosion, Red Cross in Paracin organized a drill, simulating several accident scenarios. The simulation was financed by International Federation of Committees of Red Cross.

In the Municipality of Paracin, we were informed how they believe their cooperation with police and the MCI was satisfactory. However, to citizens, reaction of principal actors looked far less coordinated.

CASE UZICE

Location: Town of Uzice, Western Serbia, 200 kilometres SW of Belgrade

The site of explosion: Prvi partizan Uzice (PPU) ammunition factory, underground gunpowder filling facility “Rupa” (“The Hole” in Serbian), 3 kilometres east to the town centre

Date(s) of field research: July 11 and 12, 2011

Citizens Awareness of the Incident

Explosion occurred about 2115hrs, on September 2, 2009. Seven people died of suffocating by inhaling enormous amounts of smoke, and further 15 of them were injured. No material damage had been done, apart to the facility which was completely destroyed in the blast.

Beginnings of the PPU date all the way back to 1928, when the first ammunition factory was built. Citizens were well aware of its presence, but they had gone through a process of “socialisation” where PPU was first observed from a standpoint of being a “job opportunity” rather than “potential threat”. Only once did an explosion occur, and this happened in 1941 as an act of sabotage during the final months of short lived “Uzice Republic”. Most of employees had stated how “they used the same procedures all the time”, that human factor could not have been involved in the blast, but rather the “type of gun powder used (which was imported from Belgium)”.¹ We noted a general trust in procedures and high level of awareness among employees. Still, official version of the reasons behind the explosion is still unavailable, since the case led against several workers in the PPU has not been concluded. So far, in a two year period, only two hearings were held

¹ PPU has been working with the FN Herstal for several years now.

with the third slated for September 2011. Judge (prosecutor in Anglo-Saxon legal tradition) in charge of the investigation has not been re-elected to that position and was unable to present her view of the situation. Citizens feel that this omission to re-elect the same prosecutor to the case was a way of exerting political pressure.

Citizens and Local Actors Immediate Reaction to the Incident

Most of the interviewees were alerted by their colleagues as the news quickly spread. Even the Fire and Rescue Unit was notified by one citizen, not waiting for a call from factory security. Informal networks of communication prevailed, so in a relatively short period of time front yard and parking lot was full with workers, retired workers (willing to help in any way possible) and members of employees' families. One media reporter happened to walk in the park situated some 100 meters from the entrance to the factory when she heard the explosion; she immediately alerted the rest of the crew, which was on its way back to Uzice. Fire and Rescue Unit's reaction was quick and they were present in "a matter of minutes". In total, 16 vehicles with 50 fire-and-rescue men were on spot within five minutes. The problem was that PPU being a MoD controlled factory never, according to the firemen's testimony, provided their local Unit with detailed maps of corridors, which made their attempt to reach the injured workers extremely dangerous. This is the reason why they had to lean on to the assistance of one factory worker who volunteered to guide them in the facility. An employee of the PPU however, said that he could not accept what the firemen said, since Fire and Rescue Unit was conducting drills inside the factory facilities before. All of the persons we spoke to however agreed that in general reaction was quick, and that local authorities were present on site, communicating with employees and victims.

Fire and Rescue Unit entered the facility step by step, assisted by one employee. There were several after explosions that could hurt them. Also, they had to go back occasionally to replace oxygen canisters which left an impression on citizens that "they were ill equipped, and without masks". This was repeated by several employees during our interviews. It should be said that one security guard on duty

at the time of the blast tried to intervene immediately, but he was soon left unconscious due to lack of proper equipment. He was eventually saved by fire-and-rescue men from factory corridors.

Causes of the Incident

The exact cause of Uzice explosion is still unknown. Since the case led in Uzice Court has yet to be concluded, police is not allowed, until investigation officially ends, to share their findings. Employees in the PPU are also very reluctant to speak about the causes of this tragedy. However, one of the interviewees, who work in the Ministry of Interior (MoI) Sector for Emergency Situations Management, shared his belief that in 99% of cases explosions are caused by human factor; either directly, because of improper clothing, negligence of procedures, overconfidence, or, on a higher level of decision-making, lack of awareness; for instance, storing ammunition without any safety precautions, or allowing workers to perform their duty in unsafe environment. The official version of events is that gunpowder was being poured from one box to another within a station in the “Rupa” facility which was neither designated, nor equipped for that. After 15 minutes, gunpowder was ignited and a massive explosion occurred, which was followed with an outburst of fire and release of smoke. Fire expanded and used up all available oxygen in the facility that is located one floor below. There, 7 workers were trapped, since they had no other escape route, with their only exit usually shut by large steel doors sealing off their station. Yet, if these steel doors were shut, their lives could have been saved. Instead, doors were malfunctioned, broken away from the frame (apparently by some stones, placed so that more air could come in on hot and humid days) and fell, leading employees to their deaths in matter of seconds.

Working conditions were harsh: several employees informed us that temperature was high, reaching 30 degrees Celsius, while due to instability of gunpowder it should have never exceeded 20 degrees. One official complaint was filed by workers few days prior to the incident; the answer they received was that the entire ventilation system has been overhauled during the vacation season. It is important

to note how every August workers go on a “collective vacation” whereas factory systems are being repaired. Workers also complained about great humidity, due to the very position of the facility being beneath the hill covered with forest, and union representative confirmed that “every bullet built in that factory remains 8% more expensive compared to bullets made in other location”. PPU has another location above the ground on which union member referred.

Casualties and Damage caused by the Incident

As we have explained, since it is located under a hill, facility “Rupa” is relatively isolated from the town of Uzice. Hence, no other damage was caused by the blast. However, human loss was great – 7 men and women working in the PPU died, along with 15 more workers being injured. No road was blocked, no land was contaminated, and no schools were closed. It should be noted that a far greater tragedy was avoided due to a heroic reaction of the Fire and Rescue Unit, which prevented fire from spreading to storage full of gunpowder and glaze materiel. Casualties, as we mentioned, were working one floor under the facility where explosion occurred, and due to malfunction of protection doors, in matter of seconds were left without oxygen, causing them to suffocate to death.

Casualties were non qualified workers, men and women from Uzice and surrounding towns and villages. It took three months for the “Rupa” facility to become operational again.

Response to the incident by Local Authorities and the Government

As previously mentioned, no harm was done to Uzice infrastructure, so daily life quickly returned to normalcy. Roads and schools were open while local services were available. In the course of the night following the explosion, Minister of Interior came to Uzice to show support to the efforts of local Police and Fire and Rescue Unit, and was later on followed by Minister of Defence. Minister of Interior addressed local media 2 hours after the explosion. Local authorities were also present on the scene of the incident where citizens and other employees were able

to communicate with them. Medical crews went into factory compound to take care of the victims, bringing them to a local hospital. There were 15 workers with injuries that were treated and then dismissed from hospital. Uzice Red Cross did not take part in the rescue effort. Uzice Fire and Rescue Unit were placed under high alert, and they managed to control and sustain the fire in the PPU facility. Help from the fire and rescue units located nearby – in the towns of Cacak and Pozega – was underway, yet was deemed unnecessary, since Uzice alone could muster 50 fire fighters and 16 vehicles in short time. It took 7 days for police officers to finish the preliminary investigation in factory premises, and “in the interest of court procedure” results are still unknown.

PPU never undertook a Risk Assessment Act, to which they are obliged by the law. They had a contract with private company which was responsible to perform this assessment, but that contract was never put in practice, as noted in our interview with the MLSP representative. Furthermore, person in charge of protection from fire is, in practice, an older employee or an employee with lowered work ability. That this was the case in the Uzice blast as well was clear from the trial proceedings, where person in question almost went into a state of nervous breakdown during trials. Also, lack of fully fledged and equipped fire and rescue team with medical service being only supplementary aggravated the possibility of disaster. Fully owned and controlled by the state, with several members of managerial board acting generals in the SAF, PPU experienced overlap of competences that made crisis management inefficient. Inspection sent by MLSP could only reach head of department, usually a lawyer, and an unsuited partner in determining eventual problems in the factory. As for the overall work conditions in the factory, inspector of the MLSP said “I wasn’t able to see anything good there”.

Only lower ranks were held responsible, as it was the case in Paracin; prosecution therefore indicted five persons: facility manager who was on duty (by coincidence, foreman scheduled to be on duty was present at the marriage ceremony of his son); one employee in charge for fire protection measures; one manual worker; station

manager and manager of the unit in question (gunpowder filling unit). Neither the director of the PPU, nor members of managerial board were held responsible for this tragedy. Due to absence of official cause for the explosion, rumours surfaced how it was in fact an act of sabotage. Employees believed how explosion was caused by extensive usage of Belgian originated gunpowder instead of the usual one, since “Belgians are competing with us globally”. People still feel concerned about their safety, but are reluctant to talk about it, since having a job in this factory helps them survive in a town with high unemployment rate.

The facility went under thorough repairs and after 3 months it was “back in business”. Fire prevention system was repaired, yet two of our interviewees stated that only 15 months after the tragedy they experienced an incident again: a fire, but on a smaller scale. The impression of some of respondents is that nothing has changed since then. Others recognized the installation of a video surveillance system, but are not certain for what purpose. Union representative feels that bigger concerns are in place now, and that some time even the management exaggerates. Now when the temperature goes up, whole process stops until conditions are favourable for production again. An old idea to relocate factory facilities outside Uzice was revived after the tragedy. This should make the production process and city safer. On the other hand, most of respondents asked us “whose land should that be (where the factory is about to be relocated)”, sensing possibility for corruption.

The Role of Media

Local media, cooperating with TV Pink (a television which has obtained national coverage rights) managed to enter the factory premises with fire fighters during the rescue operation. They made exclusive shots of accident, filmed flooded corridors, fire and smoke. They were later on banned from entering the factory, but that clip went in the air. Their reporting was continued with an interview with Minister of Interior Ivica Dacic, who was present on the scene of the accident 2 hours later. Still, the story was not present in the airwaves for long. For a few days, news outlets repeated main data about the explosion, but interest in the story slowly decreased.

“Only mistake that we made” said the Chief Editor of the local TV station we interviewed “was an interview with a family member of deceased worker. People did not like that; everybody thought we are exploiting others’ misery. After that we made no attempt to revive the story”.

Government Assistance and Further Preventive Measures

Local authorities made an effort to communicate with family members of the deceased, trying to find ways for compensating their loss. Municipal Secretariat for Social Affairs along with the PPU management, made an effort to provide jobs in the PPU, according to qualifications, to family members of the persons deceased so that the PPU could retain its role of “provider” to every family affected. Also, scholarships were given to children of deceased workers.

Two unions in the PPU encouraged their employees and they separately collected money in order to help the victims and their families.

Members of family were reimbursed by PPU on several grounds. First, PPU management had paid the cost of funeral. Second, scholarships were provided for children in amount of 25% of an average salary. Short term compensation (approximately 33000 EUR) was paid for each deceased worker. Insurance was also paid for family members. PPU offered jobs for spouses, children or relatives, and most families accepted this.

Government of Serbia redirected around 8000000 RSD (around EUR 80000) as assistance to family members of deceased workers.

One consequence of this tragic event was the formation of the Sector for Emergency Situations Management within the Ministry of Interior, enabled by the Law on Emergency Situations (adopted in October 2009). This body is held responsible for all emergency situations, incorporating human and material resources of Ministry of Defence and strengthening cooperation between the two ministries. In practice, that

means that there are no more unknown or uncharted premises for fire department, even if they are military compounds.

On local level, PPU now has one person for occupational safety and health (as law prescribes) with competences greater than those of person in charge for fire protection. With video surveillance and repaired installation, it is believed that progress was made. However, labour inspector and security expert share the opinion that equipment is “from the 1970s”, or “from Middle Ages”, and that serious problems might emerge. Lack of standards for high risk objects remains problematic. Local fire department is conducting drills from time to time, and they have apparently prepared plans for “what and when” in crisis situations.

From the point of view of the MLSP inspector, there are two strategic problems: first is automatic copy-paste of EU laws without sensitivity for local practice that makes those laws unusable. The other problem is more concrete, being the lack of Law on Insurance on Occupational Accident, which will stimulate employers to invest (and to implement) occupational safety and health. He finished his remarks with statement “In this country politics is everything – which is tragic”.