



## E07: Zooming In and Zooming Out: From COVID crisis to Climate Crisis and Back

O: Although I truly admire the way that the world regrouped and responded to the COVID-19 crisis, it got me thinking about all the other challenges we're facing, but not responding to them in such an agile manner. Let's take climate change for example, or, as I prefer, the climate crisis. How do we go about this one? This is the topic of this episode of our Fusing Futures podcast. I'm delighted to welcome a fellow member of the BOS alumni network, Damjan Bogunović, who is working as Environment Program Coordinator at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Belgrade office.

**D: We woke up in a world in which borders are closed, airplanes stop flying, roads are empty, in the world in which our social and, to some extent, environmental ecosystems changed, and we've instantly recognized this as a crisis. Most countries did at least and adjusted accordingly as fast as possible. The climate crisis is, as you've said, or climate emergency was put aside, even the COP, the annual UN climate summit, that was supposed to happen in the UK later this year was postponed. COVID-19 was for them a much greater emergency.**

O: COVID-19 crisis and climate change are apparently very much connected, at least with this narrative that has emerged. The narrative of nature's revival or even in nature striking back to humans. Although the news of nature is healing at the face of decreasing of human activities are pleasant, I must admit that I find this narrative troublesome and annoying. So can you tell me a little bit more, how do you see this narrative and what are its downsides, especially when we think about getting people on board with the environment, protection and related topics?

**D: The renewing of nature or native revival is, in my view, quite a naive narrative. The underline idea is correct, human activity is disturbing the balance in our planetary ecosystems and we're close to a point of no return, or rather a point in which the science at our disposal has no clear answers on what might happen. Such is the case of the planet warming more than two degrees Celsius. Science cannot tell us with precision what will happen then, there are too many variables in the climate system. Now the underline idea is correct, our ecosystems are often out of balance, but this idea that nature is somehow fighting back in a mystical way, is taking the agency from us citizens and people of the planet. It is a pacifying discourse. Did we need this to happen in order to see that we don't need to travel as much for business? Did we really not know that we need less cars on the streets and more public transport and cycling lanes and pedestrian zones. Anyway, now that we have suddenly realized, and this rush of clean, unpolluted air has mystically appeared, the question is: What will we do about it? Can we think of ways of living in harmony with the environment.**

O: You already mentioned the response to the COVID-19 crisis. So what is different here to the way that we approach the crisis that we're talking about here, which is the climate crisis?

**D: Well, I would say that there are some very important parallels between COVID-19 crisis and the climate change crisis. For example, much has been said about the disproportionate effect that the pandemic has had on the vulnerable communities similar**

to the HIV pandemic. In the United States, for example, the African-American communities were disproportionately affected. We can only read a bit about what is going on with the informal settlements and Roma communities in the region. I would also say that there are some very important parallels with regard to knowledge production and this science policy interface. More broadly, I was very much struck by the speed with which science was translated into policy when it comes to COVID-19. When it comes to climate change, we have the science, but translating science into policies and implementing these policies is the problem. We often talk about evidence, base, decision, making, processes and BOS works on this as well. In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis was immediately recognized as a crisis, by most countries. UK was slow to react and Sweden have a very specific answer, but the understanding that we're facing a crisis was there. We did not know nearly enough about the virus, but our countries took all the precautionary measures. When it comes to environmental problems and climate emergency, this is not the case. And I think perhaps short termism is a problem. We cannot see past the first quarter if we are a corporation or a four to five-year period in case of a democratically elected government. Perhaps that is something very invite to people and to societies, or at least to contemporary societies. I'm often reminded of a story of New College in Oxford. New College was founded in 1379. It is one of the oldest Oxfords colleges. It has, like other colleges, a great dining hall with huge oak beams across the top. And it was discovered that when college was founded, a grove of oaks had being planted to replace the beans in the dining hall when they become rotten, because oak beams always become rotten in the end. This plan has then been passed down from one forester to the next for over five hundred years. And at the same time, couple of centuries later, most of European forests were depleted. But, hey, at least, we know that the seed of sustainability had been planted.

O: As you said, translating science into policy is taking a lot of time in the case of climate t change. The European Union, however, seems to acknowledge this urgency, so the Green New Deal is European Union's ambitious policy framework through which sustainability is addressed from all sides, from economy to the environment. What is the situation with the Green New Deal now? Is it affected by the COVID-19 crisis and how could the Green New Deal contribute to the post COVID-19 economic recovery?

D: The latest edition of The Economist, as we recording this on the 25th of May, which is Dan mladosti (The Relay of Youth), used to be in Socialist Yugoslavia. Well, the latest edition of The Economist came out a few days ago and, on the cover, the message is - *Seized the moment*. In other words, the looming economic crisis will provide an opportunity to rebuild the economy and when you're rebuilding house, you can introduce different new measures, for example new planting systems or energy efficiency measures or heat pumps for floor heating and so on. And there are many ways to insert sustainability elements or create sustainability, checks and balances. For example, governments loans to businesses could incorporate sustainability criteria, green energy development could be a chance to reduce unemployment, for example. Green deal is as a broad framework for a just transition to a climate. Neutral sustainably economy is a very ambitious project. It remains to be seen what kind of impact it will have and will it spark such a transition in your neighborhoods, which I think is very important with measures such as carbon border taxes or perhaps some other mechanisms, such as financial ones.

*Nostalgia: I always wanted to transform my yard into a little garden full of organic fruits and vegies, but there was never a perfect moment to start just to learn more about when it's right time to plan those tomatoes or how much water cucumbers need or how to prepare the soil for those watermelons. Excuses, excuses and more excuses. Until one day when nature decided to give*

*me a great big lesson. You are never ready enough. I will not forget that May of 2014 when Serbia battled flood disaster. That yard that I planned on transforming into little yard was completely flooded and the whole neighborhood suffered from this major catastrophe. We fought this together only to learn that we will never be prepared enough.*

**D: I work with the at the Heinrich Böll Foundation and we work a lot with rest foundation, climate policy related issue. We commonly come back to a very basic principle - you cannot manage what you don't measure. We need to measure and analyze first. For example, look at air pollution, a huge percentage of the measuring stations do not work. We need to have a solid data basis, and then we can discuss solutions. I would say that number one priority is proper data and proper analysis definitely. And secondly, in order to achieve a systemic change, we need the strategy. EU as a strategic goal, should provide a broad framework for improving the state of the environment, and the energy community should serve as a stepping stone on this path, but a clear strategy that will be developed from the inside is what's lacking, and this strategy needs to be developed by backcasting, not forecasting and I'll give you an example – urban mobility. In order to have cleaner, more functioning cities with less cars, we cannot forecast how much parking spaces and roads we need, because an empirical evidence is pretty convincing. You can never have enough cars and parking spaces. So, what a city needs, is a vision. What kind of mobility do we wish to have in twenty years time, how many car journeys, what percentage of bicycle users etc. And then we need a strategy - how do we get there within the given time frame. That is not the way that spatial planning works in Belgrade, for example, and the effects can be felt by citizens jammed in their cars every day. Same is with Serbia and neighboring countries, on a broader scale there has to be a vision of an energy sector, not based on brown coal of the lowest possible quality. Then there has to be a strategy. So far, we haven't seen a vision. There is just the framework of EU integration, which gives guidance, the Paris Agreement as well, of course, but the reason has to come from the inside and the strategy has to come in partnership with European partners. This transformation needs to be a wholesome transformation, a socio-ecological one. We need the transformation in everything from flood defenses, we need the transformation in agriculture and an overall economy. Different successful solution exists all over Europe and it's just about finding the right mix of policies and implementing them, implementing them persistently and then evaluating them and adjusting when needed.**

O: Apparently, our reality and the problems we are facing in the region are much more basic. So, let's take an example of the flooding in 2014 which heavily affected Serbian Bosnia. We have missed the momentum to turn that crisis into new policy development for building climate resilient society?

**D: That is an excellent example. Rebuilding after a crisis, gives us an opportunity to rebuild in a different way. Developments after devastating floods in 2014 did not lead to a Green New Deal in the Western Balkans, unfortunately. As we had previously discussed, I believe we ought to seize the moment and, after all, fossil fuels based energies produced distributed and charged almost entirely by public enterprises and should serve the public interest. However, this is not the case by openly or indirectly supporting fossil fuels, public authorities and publicly owned companies reproduce the economic status quo. Now that status quo is so heavily disturbed, perhaps we will get the chance to green the rebuilding of the economy. What we in the region need generally and not just in relation to the crisis, is a very good institute, which is call for evidence before designing a policy of any sort. We have to see which solutions exist which worked and so on. Then we need to adopt the policy based on this call and then wait for it now comes the fun bit, valuate and adapt the**

**policies we were needed. For example, we could start by monetizing the externalities of the existing coal-based energy systems. Let's see how much it would all cost, even the most expensive solutions, even the best available technology, we're still throwing around unfounded arguments such as, if we don't use coal, we'll, have to use expensive import electricity, instead of looking at the data.**

O: While the decision makers in this region apparently keep their heads buried in coal in the face of the climate crisis, there are some good examples of local and regional initiatives that do put sustainable development into practice. What are some good examples that we already have in our neighborhood?

**D: We often look at the German example of energy transition, although there are many other ones in Europe which are not as branded, if you wish. The most fabulous thing about the German model is the percentage of citizens initiatives and citizens becoming not only consumers of renewable energy, but also produces. Citizens becoming prosumers. Now, similar things are happening in the region and we are witnessing a certain development in Croatia and in other places as well, including Serbia. Island of Krk is a fabulous example. Their vision is an energy-independent island and they're on a good path of achieving it through energy cooperative. We, in Belgrade are working with a promising newly formed energy cooperative and we're very hopeful about this as well.**

O: Finally, what is your key take from this episode for lighting up our listeners?

**D: We are living the hard lessons learned by many cities, many countries, many societies before us. We can try and leapfrog, avoid the mistakes made by others.**

O: Fusing Futures: Light them up is Belgrade Open Schools audio podcast. BOS alumni, Damjan Bogunović, Gordana Bojanić, Jelena Šapić and myself, Ognjan Pantić took part in making this episode. Aleksa Račić and Marko Mitrović supported us by designing the sound and audio effects. If you enjoyed this episode, don't forget to click subscribe at Apple podcast or any other application use for listening to podcasts. For more updates follow us on Instagram and Twitter.