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Article

Empowering the Regional Network of Experts for Disaster Risk Management in the Western Balkans by the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management

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Abstract: The Western Balkans region is persistently vulnerable to natural hazards, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional capacities, necessitating a collaborative approach to disaster risk management. This paper presents a comprehensive project led by the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (NSD-URVs) in Belgrade, aiming to establish and strengthen a regional network of experts in disaster risk management. The project focuses on building expertise, facilitating knowledge exchange, promoting expert coordination, and enhancing cross-border collaboration. Key activities include developing a web platform, organizing an international conference, and advocating for regional policies that integrate best practices and innovations in disaster risk management. The expected outcomes are the establishment of a cohesive network, enhanced expertise and coordination, and improved preparedness and responsiveness to disasters. By leveraging collective expertise and resources, this initiative aims to fortify the region's resilience against potential disasters. Addressing the identified gaps and implementing the proposed policy recommendations can significantly enhance the region's resilience to natural hazards. Future research should focus on the implementation and impact of these recommendations to ensure continuous improvement in disaster preparedness and response.

Keywords: disaster risk management; regional network; Western Balkans; cross-border collaboration; capacity building; knowledge exchange; scientific-professional society for disaster risk management

Introduction

The Western Balkans region faces persistent challenges related to disaster risk management, characterized by a complex interplay of natural hazards, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional capacities [1-6]. The Southeast European countries, constituting the Western Balkans, are persistently vulnerable to an array of disasters, ranging from earthquakes and floods to snowstorms, droughts, and forest fires [7-17]. Crucially, these disasters do not respect geopolitical boundaries, making collaborative efforts among nations imperative [9,18-26].

The incapacity of individual countries to manage the aftermath of such disasters independently underscores the necessity for a network of experts capable of offering timely and effective assistance [27,28]. In numerous instances, these countries must lean on their neighbours or international organizations for support [29,30]. The current state of disaster preparedness and response is often insufficient, leading to increased vulnerability and socio-economic losses [31-39]. Despite the presence of a regional network of experts, the effectiveness of disaster risk management efforts is hindered by gaps in expertise, coordination, and resource allocation.

In the Western Balkans, the lack of a dedicated network of experts in disaster risk management has significant repercussions for both the efficiency and coordination of handling potential hazards. Establishing such a network is vital for numerous reasons [1-3]. Firstly, without this network, there's

a barrier to the smooth exchange and transfer of crucial information, knowledge, and experiences throughout the various stages of managing disaster risks. Creating this network would enable faster and more effective communication of pertinent information. Secondly, having a network of experts creates a foundation for collective learning from past incidents and the implementation of best practices, thereby improving the region's readiness and swift response to potential disasters. Moreover, when experts from different countries coordinate, it enhances risk reduction by facilitating quicker and more efficient actions in critical situations.

The network's collaborative nature promotes intersectoral cooperation among experts from government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, leading to a more holistic approach to disaster risk management. Additionally, connecting experts across borders enhances coordination at an interstate level, which is essential for effectively managing risks that cross national boundaries [27,28]. In essence, forming a network of disaster risk management experts is a critical step in bolstering the preparedness and resilience of the Western Balkans against potential disasters [29,30].

Furthermore, the establishment of such a network introduces a system for collective learning based on shared experiences and best practices [40]. By creating a platform where experts can learn from both the successes and failures of past efforts, the region improves its adaptive capacity and prepares more thoroughly for potential disasters [41]. This wealth of knowledge not only aids immediate response efforts but also aids in crafting long-term strategies for risk reduction and resilience enhancement. The network's collaborative nature also ensures a comprehensive and well-coordinated disaster risk management strategy that goes beyond individual organizational or sectoral limits [41].

Moreover, the interconnection of experts across borders is crucial. Improved coordination at the interstate level is essential for handling risks that often surpass national borders. Disasters do not respect geopolitical boundaries, and a network that facilitates cross-border collaboration ensures a more effective response to challenges that could affect multiple countries at once [1-6]. This interconnectedness strengthens regional resilience by leveraging the collective expertise and resources of neighbouring nations. Ultimately, the creation of a network of experts for disaster risk management is not just a procedural step; it is a strategic necessity to fortify the Western Balkans' preparedness and resilience against potential disasters [7-17,42].

This paper presents a comprehensive project led by the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (NSD-URVs), Belgrade, to establish and strengthen the capacity of a regional network of experts for disaster risk management in the Western Balkans. The project focuses on building expertise, facilitating knowledge exchange, promoting expert coordination, and enhancing cross-border collaboration. Key activities include the development of a web platform, organizing an international conference, and advocating for regional policies that integrate best practices and innovations in disaster risk management. The expected outcomes are the establishment of a cohesive network, enhanced expertise and coordination, and improved preparedness and responsiveness to disasters. This initiative aims to fortify the region's resilience against potential disasters by leveraging collective expertise and resources.

2. Strengthening Regional Disaster Resilience through Expert Collaboration in the Western Balkans

Acknowledging the crucial role of non-governmental organizations and civil society in disaster risk management (actively shaping public policy, supporting risk reduction initiatives, advocating for greater preparedness and resilience, aiding vulnerable populations, and collaborating with emergency services) the decision was made to establish the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (SPS-DRM, Figure 1) on June 15, 2018 [43]. This society was created to unite scientists and practitioners from Serbia and the surrounding region to jointly advance theoretical and empirical knowledge and support local decision-makers and emergency management leaders. Following the proposal of Prof. Dr. Vladimir M. Cvetković, professors from the Faculty of Security, the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, the Faculty of Geography, and the

Faculty of Forestry unanimously adopted the Statute and formally established the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (SPS-DRM) [43,44].

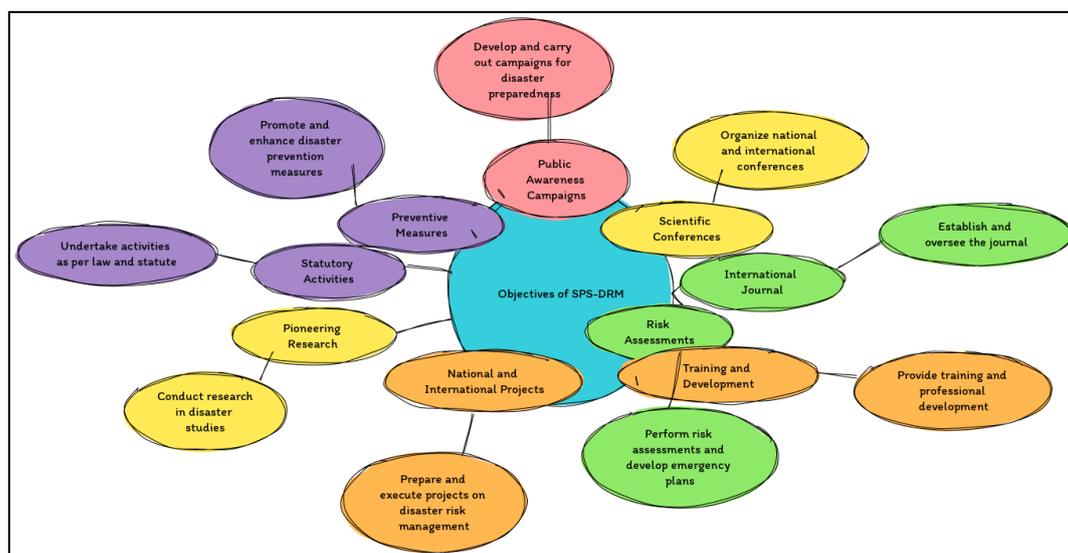


Figure 1. Mindmap diagram of the objectives of the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management.

The Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (SPS-DRM) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization established indefinitely to advance the theoretical knowledge base in disaster risk management. Its activities include conducting quantitative and qualitative research, organizing national and international conferences, launching and managing journals, providing training and risk assessments, and engaging in other academic pursuits within this field [43,44]. Objectives of the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management (SPS-DRM): a) conduct pioneering research in disaster studies; b) establish and oversee the International Journal of Disaster Risk Management; c) prepare, apply for, and execute national and international projects addressing various aspects of disaster risk management; d) promote, design, implement, and enhance preventive measures against disasters; e) develop and carry out campaigns, programs, and plans to raise public awareness about the importance of disaster preparedness; f) organize national and international scientific conferences on disaster risk management; g) perform professional risk assessments and develop emergency protection and rescue plans; h) organize and provide various forms of training, courses, seminars, and professional development for citizens, students, and employees of interested institutions; i) undertake other activities in accordance with the law and its Statute (www.upravljanje-rizicima.com).

To further enhance the Society's scientific endeavours, on December 21, 2020, the Statute was ratified, and the International Institute for Disaster Research (IIDR) was established. The primary mission of the IIDR is to conduct scientific research in the domain of disaster studies. The Institute operates in compliance with the Law on Scientific Research Activities of Serbia and follows a defined programmatic orientation. The Institute's core activities encompass basic, applied, and developmental research in disaster risk management, which includes: investigating the phenomenology of disasters and hazards; exploring preparedness and risk mitigation strategies; researching protection and rescue operations during disasters; studying disaster recovery processes; examining disaster risk management frameworks; investigating international cooperation and legal aspects related to disasters; and undertaking other relevant tasks as outlined in the Statute [43,44]. Within the scientific and publishing activities of the Society, a significant number of textbooks, monographs, and collections have been published: *Media System of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Changes in Identity* – scientific monograph, 2023; *Fire Risks in Correctional Institutions* – scientific monograph, 2023; *Tactics of Protection and Rescue in Disasters* – textbook, 2022; *Legal and Security Aspects of Disaster Risk Management* – a collection of papers, 2022; *Disaster Risk Management* –

textbook, 2020; Myths about Disasters: Truths and Misconceptions – scientific monograph, 2021; Management in Nuclear Disasters – scientific monograph, 2021; Security Risks and Disasters – practicum, 2021; Disaster Risk Management and Protection and Rescue Systems – practicum, 2021; Collection of Regulations in the Field of Disaster Risk Management, 2019; Tactics of Protection and Rescue in Emergencies: Field Experiences and Lessons Learned – a collection of papers, 2021. The Society's collaborators have written more than five projects in the field of emergencies and over 100 scientific papers (www.upravljanje-rizicima.com).

The main goal of the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management is to establish and strengthen the capacity of the regional network of experts for disaster risk management in the Western Balkans. Specific objectives include: a) building expertise in disaster risk management: strengthen the knowledge and skills of the regional network of experts in disaster risk management through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives; b) facilitating knowledge exchange about disaster risk management: foster a culture of information sharing and collaborative learning within the network to enhance the collective understanding of disaster risk management strategies; c) promoting coordination among experts: improve coordination mechanisms among experts, government agencies, and relevant stakeholders to ensure a more cohesive and efficient response to disasters; d) strengthening cross-border collaboration among experts: strengthen collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms among Western Balkan countries experts for disaster risk management to facilitate a more coordinated regional response to disaster events; e) strengthening capacity for quick response: enhance the preparedness and responsiveness of the regional network, enabling a swift and effective reaction to emerging disasters; f) enhancing advocacy for regional policies: advocate for policies that support the integration of best practices and innovations in disaster risk management, both at the regional and national levels [43,44].

3. Develop and Update the Web Platform of the Regional Network of Experts with Open-Access

This project involves developing a comprehensive web platform for the Regional Network of Experts, designed to offer unrestricted access to information on disaster risk management in the Western Balkans. The platform will function as a central hub for disseminating knowledge, resources, and updates. We aim to design a user-friendly interface that ensures easy navigation and quick access to pertinent information. Recognizing the diverse expertise within our network, the platform will be tailored to meet various user needs.

A robust Content Management System (CMS) will be implemented to allow straightforward content updates, keeping the platform up-to-date with the latest events, resources, and profiles of experts. As the project progresses, our emphasis will be on enhancing the accessibility of the web platform. We will adhere to open access principles to enable easy retrieval, downloading, and sharing of information, thereby promoting collaboration and the exchange of knowledge. Inclusivity will be a key consideration; we plan to support the region's linguistic diversity by offering multilingual capabilities on the platform. Additionally, we will integrate interactive elements such as forums, discussion boards, and webinars to encourage active engagement and cooperation among the network's experts.

Security will be paramount, with strong measures in place to protect sensitive information and preserve the integrity of the platform. To further empower our users, we will provide training sessions to facilitate effective navigation and establish a dedicated support system for continuous assistance and troubleshooting. We will also schedule regular updates and maintenance to adapt to emerging needs, incorporate new features, and continuously improve the platform. Through these initiatives, the web platform is set to become a dynamic and inclusive resource, enhancing collaboration and providing open access to invaluable information within the Regional Network of Experts for Disaster Risk Management in the Western Balkans.

4. Building an Open Regional Network of Experts for Disaster Risk Management in the Western Balkans to Facilitate the Transfer of Knowledge, Experience and Thoughts

Establishing a dynamic Regional Network of Experts (Scientific-Practitioners community) made up of scientists and practitioners in the field of disaster risk management, which as a platform will enable the transfer of knowledge and experience, more professional identification of deficiencies and obstacles, as well as innovative opportunities to improve the disaster risk management system itself in Western Balkan (Figure 2). In addition, in its sustainable development, and after the end of the project, it will provide a solid basis for its institutionalization to provide expert and advisory support to decision-makers in an increasingly complicated decision-making environment. By announcing public calls in the media and established websites, sending emails, direct contacts and other means, all theorists and practitioners who directly or indirectly deal with the mentioned area will be gathered. Strategies and programs will be developed to bring them together and work together. In this way, a national consensus of scientists and experts will be created to express clearer needs to improve the system itself.

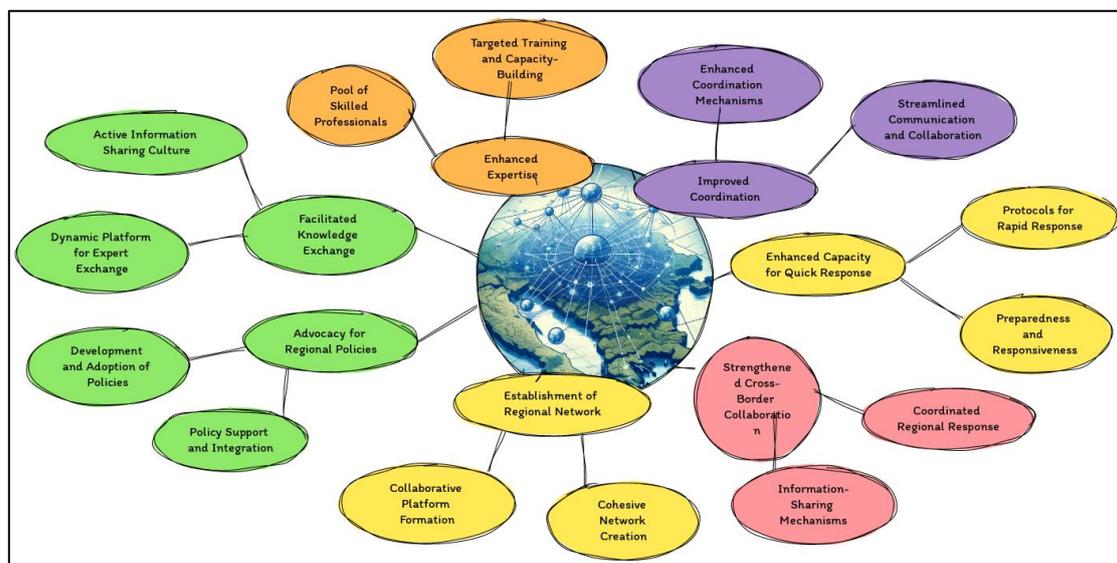


Figure 2. Mindmap diagram of the initiatives and structures for the Regional Network of Experts for Disaster Risk Management.

Also, this network will include activities involving the planning and execution of a comprehensive online international conference to bring together experts and stakeholders within the Regional Network for Disaster Risk Management in the Western Balkans. The purpose of the conference is to facilitate knowledge exchange, foster collaboration, and address key challenges and innovations in disaster risk management.

The following are key components of this activity: a) event planning and coordination: develop a detailed plan outlining the conference objectives, agenda, and key topics for discussion; coordinate with relevant stakeholders, including experts, governmental agencies, and partner organizations, to ensure a diverse and impactful event; b) technology infrastructure: select and implement appropriate online conferencing platforms and tools to facilitate smooth and interactive virtual participation; conduct technical tests and provide support to participants to ensure a seamless virtual conference experience; c) speaker and presenter engagement: identify and invite renowned speakers, experts, and practitioners in the field of disaster risk management to present keynote addresses and insights; facilitate speaker engagement and preparation, including pre-conference briefings and coordination of presentation materials; d) knowledge sharing sessions: organize various knowledge-sharing sessions, including panel discussions, workshops, and interactive forums, to address specific themes and challenges within disaster risk management; encourage active participation and engagement among conference attendees through Q&A sessions and virtual networking opportunities; e) multilingual support: provide multilingual support to accommodate the linguistic diversity of the region, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all participants; f) promotion and outreach: develop a comprehensive promotional strategy to raise awareness and attract a diverse audience, including

experts, policymakers, and the general public; utilize various communication channels, such as social media, press releases, and partner networks, to maximize outreach; g) post-conference evaluation: conduct a thorough evaluation of the conference, gathering feedback from participants to assess the success of the event; use insights from the evaluation to inform future conferences and improve the overall effectiveness of knowledge dissemination.

5. Enhancing Advocacy for Regional Policies

Effective disaster risk management requires robust policies that integrate best practices and innovations [42,45-51]. To achieve this, a comprehensive advocacy strategy is essential. The following are key components of this activity (Figure 2): a) policy analysis and research: conduct an in-depth analysis of existing regional and national policies related to disaster risk management; undertake research to identify best practices and innovations in disaster risk management on both regional and global scales; b) stakeholder engagement: engage with key stakeholders, including government officials, policymakers, and relevant organizations, to understand their perspectives on policy integration and innovation; foster collaborative relationships with stakeholders to ensure inclusive advocacy efforts; c) development of advocacy materials: create advocacy materials that highlight the importance of integrating best practices and innovations in disaster risk management; develop informative documents, reports, and presentations to communicate key policy recommendations to decision-makers; d) public awareness campaigns: design and implement public awareness campaigns to educate the broader community about the significance of policy integration and innovation in disaster risk management; utilize various communication channels, including social media, workshops, and community events, to disseminate information; e) engagement with decision-makers: establish channels of communication with regional and national decision-makers to present advocacy materials and discuss the benefits of policy integration; arrange meetings, workshops, or seminars to actively engage decision-makers in constructive dialogue; f) collaboration with advocacy groups: collaborate with existing advocacy groups, NGO-s, and relevant entities that share similar goals in disaster risk management; g) policy recommendations and lobbying: formulate clear and concise policy recommendations based on research findings and stakeholder input; engage in targeted lobbying efforts to promote the adoption and implementation of recommended policies; h) monitoring and evaluation: implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system to assess the impact of advocacy efforts on policy integration; gather feedback from stakeholders and adjust advocacy strategies accordingly for continuous improvement.

Through these activities, the project aims to advocate effectively for regional policies that promote the integration of best practices and innovations in disaster risk management, fostering resilience and preparedness at both regional and national levels (Figure 3).

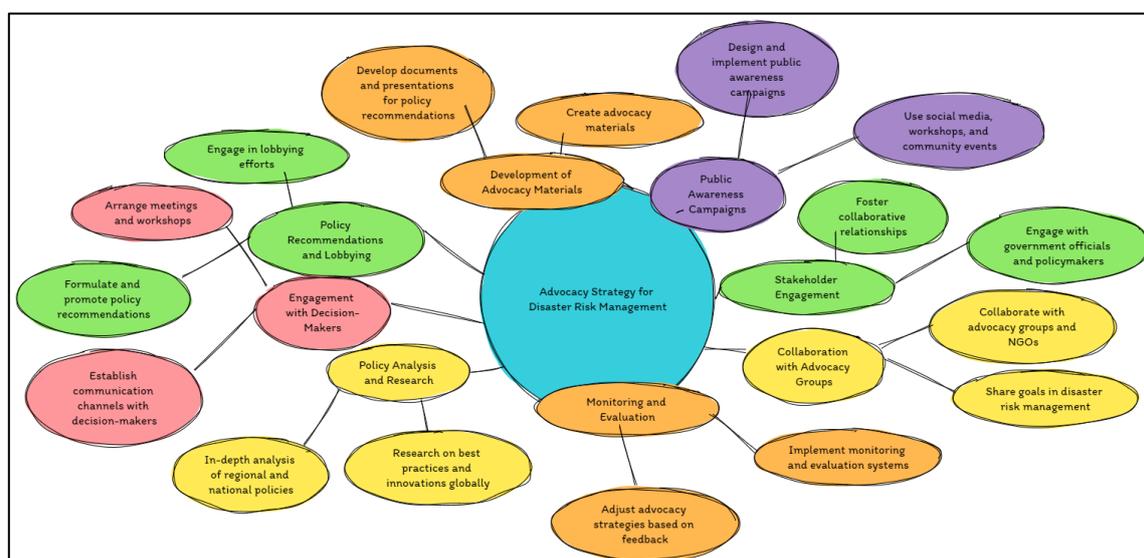


Figure 3. Mindmap diagram of the enhancing advocacy for regional policies.

6. Results with Recommendations

This section outlines the expected key outcomes and significant advancements in disaster risk management across the Western Balkans. It foresees the successful establishment of a regional network of experts, which will enhance knowledge sharing, elevate expertise levels, and strengthen coordination frameworks. These developments and successes are poised to demonstrate the efficacy and impact of joint efforts in boosting regional resilience and preparedness for managing disasters. Additionally, the recommendations provided aim to further solidify these advancements and ensure a resilient and proactive approach to disaster management across the region.

- Establishment of the regional network of experts for disaster risk management in the Western Balkans: successful creation and establishment of a cohesive regional network comprising experts in disaster risk management; formation of a collaborative platform for ongoing knowledge exchange, coordination, and joint initiatives among experts in the Western Balkans;
- Facilitated knowledge and experience exchange: established a dynamic platform for experts to exchange insights, experiences, and strategies, thereby enhancing the collective understanding of disaster risk management; cultivated a culture of active information sharing and collaborative learning within the network;
- Enhanced expertise in disaster risk management: strengthened the knowledge and skills of the regional network of experts through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives; developed a pool of highly skilled professionals well-versed in the latest advancements and best practices in disaster risk management;
- Improved coordination mechanisms among experts: enhanced coordination mechanisms among experts, government agencies, and relevant stakeholders; fostered a more cohesive and efficient response to disasters by facilitating streamlined communication and collaboration;
- Strengthened cross-border collaboration: successfully strengthened collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms among experts from Western Balkan countries; facilitated a more coordinated regional response to disaster events through increased cooperation and knowledge exchange across borders;
- Enhanced capacity for quick response: improved the preparedness and responsiveness of the regional network to swiftly and effectively react to emerging disasters; established efficient protocols and mechanisms for rapid response, reducing the impact of disasters on the region;
- Advocacy for regional policies: successfully advocated for policies supporting the integration of best practices and innovations in disaster risk management; contributed to the development and adoption of policies at both regional and national levels, fostering a more resilient and proactive approach to disaster management.

These outcomes collectively signify the project's success in establishing a robust Regional Network of Experts for Disaster Risk Management in the Western Balkans, serving as a cornerstone for effective disaster response and collaboration in the region.

7. Conclusions

The establishment and strengthening of a regional network of experts for disaster risk management in the Western Balkans will be a significant step towards enhancing resilience and preparedness for disasters. This initiative, led by the Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management, Belgrade, will aim to form a cohesive network of experts that will facilitate continuous knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and strategic planning, thereby significantly improving the collective understanding and capacity for disaster risk management. One of the key outcomes will be

the creation of a dynamic platform enabling experts to exchange insights and strategies, cultivating a culture of active information sharing and collaborative learning within the network. Through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives, the knowledge and skills of the experts will be significantly enhanced, leading to the formation of a group of highly qualified professionals ready to implement the latest practices in disaster risk management.

Improved coordination mechanisms among experts, government agencies, and relevant stakeholders, along with strengthened cross-border collaboration, will contribute to more efficient disaster response through streamlined communication and cooperation. Additionally, the preparedness and responsiveness of the network to swiftly and effectively react to emerging disasters will be improved, reducing the impact of disasters on the region. Also, successful advocacy for policies that support the integration of best practices and innovations in disaster risk management will contribute to the development and adoption of policies at both regional and national levels, fostering a more resilient and proactive approach to disaster management.

These results will have profound implications for the Western Balkans region. Firstly, they will enable better preparedness and response to disasters, thereby reducing socio-economic losses and increasing the safety of the population. Secondly, the established network of experts will serve as a foundation for further collaboration and development, ensuring sustainability and continuous progress in disaster risk management. Finally, these efforts will set standards and examples that can be applied in other regions facing similar challenges. Overall, the initiatives and achievements outlined in this paper will emphasize the importance of regional cooperation, continuous knowledge exchange, and strong policies in combating disaster risks. Through joint efforts and commitment, the Western Balkans region can become a model of resilience and effective disaster management for other regions around the world.

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