

Is Gagauzia Signalling the Future of Disaster-Driven Civil Unrest?

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Outside influence could increase the frequency of civil unrest after natural disasters. Historically, very few such events have precipitated widespread civil unrest, but concern about the threat has tended to linger anyway, due to an intuitive connection that has lacked evidence. Protests in the Gagauzia region of Moldova resulting from a severe drought this summer show that disinformation and other forms of influence could add a new factor to the transition from simmering grievance to post-disaster civil unrest in the affected population. Given the increased frequency of natural disasters that seems likely as a result of climate change, disinformation could make post-disaster civil unrest much more common.

How natural disasters can increase the risk of civil unrest

The link between natural disasters and attendant civil unrest has been notoriously difficult to ascertain, particularly due to the paucity of data and infrequency of occurrence. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction ([UNDRR](#)), a natural disaster is “a serious disruption of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impact.” Civil unrest is defined by [Must and Rustad](#) as “demonstrations, protests and the use of political violence,” with [Oyefusi](#) adding that it can range from “peaceful protests” to “militarized struggle.” Such activities would emanate from societal actors and be directed toward governments or other influential institutions.

The connection between those two rarities – natural disasters and civil unrest – is at best considered questionable, with many considering it tenuous. Homer-Dixon [concedes](#) that “there is little correlation between measures of relative deprivation [in this case instigated by

natural disasters] and civil conflict.” Peters and Kelman claim, “Disaster researchers have spent decades challenging strong narratives in academic literature and popular media that argue that disasters result in conflict.” At the other end of the spectrum, [Nel and Righarts](#) claim they managed to find 225 instances of civil unrest from natural disasters and [Ide et al.](#) estimating 176. However, their respective analyses provide little insight into the underlying events.

More realistically, the historical literature suggests that the connection between natural disasters and civil unrest is close enough to seem intuitive but frustrated by missing links. [Levy](#) observes a connection between mass migration and conflict and a connection between environmental degradation and migration, but he is not able to link those two conditions. Xu et al. elegantly explain it: “[It] was found that natural disaster caused social conflicts did not follow the simple logic that ‘natural disaster A leads to conflict B’. In most studies, the natural disaster caused social conflict had an overall adverse impact on the society and increased social risk.” There is an implied intermediate factor here – or collection of them.

To understand the missing link implied by Levy and Xu et al., a review of specific cases is necessary. As King and Zeng observe, there are times when popular statistical methods fall short, making the “inefficient” process of digging into cases advantageous. After a careful review of more than 13,000 natural disaster entries in EM-DAT in conjunction with supplemental data sources, however, this author found a mere [22 instances](#) where a natural disaster truly precipitated civil unrest, using a qualitative process that did involve some judgment. The review of historical cases in EM-DAT and subsequent distillation to the 22 events mentioned above excludes instances where civil unrest or conflict was already in progress, where the disaster had no exacerbating effect (even when accommodated with an unspecified, judgment-driven time lag). As a result, the use of a case study approach for examining the clear instances of disaster-induced civil unrest identified in this author’s previous research makes sense.

Past infrequency should be no reason for complacency. The confluence of climate change, geopolitical volatility, and information and activities intended to influence populations affected by natural disaster could greatly increase the risk of future disaster-induced civil unrest. An increase in natural disasters due to climate change may induce more post-disaster

civil unrest: More disaster means more opportunity for unrest. An increase in activity at the disaster-civil unrest nexus could also result from a worsening of the societal conditions that contribute to civil unrest through natural disasters, such as reduced water supply, as evidenced in the 2021 protests over [water shortages](#) in Iran.

The conditions for a non-linear increase in post-disaster civil unrest are an increase in frequency and severity of disasters due to climate change, and an attendant sharp change in access to basic necessities. The risk of unrest is further exacerbated by other factors that could impact how a natural disaster event affects a population, such as how repressive a government is and how competently and evenly it distributes post-event aid and support.

Developments on the ground suggest the need to add a new facet to scholarly debates on post-disaster civil unrest: external intervention. Targeted external influence campaigns could trigger civil unrest after a disaster event by shifting perspectives on pre-existing grievances and post-event government responses. To understand how information campaigns could compound the risk of post-disaster civil unrest, one can turn to Gagauzia.

Drought and civil unrest in Moldova

Moldova is an unlikely case for post-disaster civil unrest. It has experienced fewer than twenty natural disasters since becoming an independent state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, it does have a history of [severe droughts, and the one beginning last year has caused the agricultural sector to shrink by 18 percent. Worse, the OECD expects Moldova's drought risk to intensify](#). At the same time, the country's dependence on Russian gas has stoked [energy security fears, accompanying broader economic security concerns](#). Inflation reached [34 percent last year](#). Drought-related [protests](#) stretched through August 2022, although since then they have broadened to additionally address climate, energy, and economic grievances.

Gagauzia, a semi-autonomous region in Moldova, shows particularly acute signs of post-disaster civil unrest risk. It is also well suited to explore the role that outside influence can play in stoking it. The region is heavily dependent [upon agriculture](#), which has [exacerbated the effects](#) of the drought. Tensions with the government in Chisinau are also nurtured by its historical preference for [alignment](#) with the Soviet Union/ its Russian successor state, in part due to its hostile views regarding the Moldovan-Romanian [majority](#). It should come as [no](#)

[surprise](#) that “[p]ro-Russian sentiments are high” in the region, particularly given that the perception of Russia as a source of security predates World War II. This has opened the door to Russian influence in the region, taking advantage of the effects of the drought and other economic woes to foment further anti-Cisinau sentiment. While one could [claim](#) that “Russian meddling in Gagauzia is nothing new,” you’d also need to leave room for the possibility that, to some, outside involvement is seen as [support](#).

As evidenced by reporting in TASS, Russia’s strong messaging aimed at increasing the risk of post-disaster civil unrest by exacerbating local fears about [energy](#) and [economic](#) security. This position is further supported by TASS’s, emphasis on recent civil unrest (identified by [Drury and Olson](#) as the strongest indicator of post-disaster civil unrest) and a general encouragement to turn away from a national government accused of [corruption](#). This applies all the more to cases in which ethnic and cultural [divisions](#) could lead to a greater acceptance or even welcoming of external intervention , further exacerbating the possibility that a protracted drought could turn Moldova into a cautionary tale for the rest of the world. Interference in Moldova during a natural disaster – particularly involving a marginalized group that is open to outside influence – could become a model for future interference in other disaster-affected states.

Grievance, opportunity cost, and action

For a population affected by a natural disaster, the decision to act can come down to “opportunity cost[s],” according to [Nel and Righarts](#), although other intervening factors could be involved, as well, such as pre-existing grievances (admittedly a “catch all” category from Drury and Olson), a government response deemed unacceptable by the affected population (currently a concern following the Kharamanmaraş earthquake in Türkiye/ Turkey and Syria), or broader government policies that are inconsistent with overarching societal beliefs (like the climate change protests triggered by the 2020 Australian wildfires). Accepting the status quo has to become less tolerable than the risks associated with action. The fact that post-disaster unrest is so infrequent speaks to how difficult it is to tip the scale. The protests in Gagauzia – and Moldova more generally – suggest that the opportunity costs may be shifting already, a natural consequence of disasters, reduced food production, and degraded energy and economic security. Further, external actors can affect the likelihood of unrest by

highlighting threats to the satisfaction of basic necessities, for instance. Whether these address legitimate local grievances or are undermining another government's legitimacy is ultimately irrelevant.

The risk of destabilization is only seemingly low. The risk of post-disaster unrest is already rising due to climate change and an increase in attendant natural disasters. Influence campaigns have now been shown to pose an additional threat in already volatile situations, and refinement of how such efforts are conducted could make them more effective in the future. Community resilience, therefore, will have to expand from a focus on the effects of climate to a more holistic view of the risk environment, including the sentiment of the societies affected.

