

## Almost a million people in Serbia, Croatia and Hungary drink water in which the level of arsenic is higher than allowed by law

About 923,000 people drink carcinogenic water from public waterworks in eastern Croatia, northern Serbia and southern Hungary, our research showed. Thousands of people in Romania who drink water from their own wells could also be at risk.

In all four countries, the maximum permitted amount of arsenic is 10 micrograms per liter,  $\mu\text{g} / \text{L}$ . This is the limit recommended by the WHO and prescribed by EU laws that are accepted by many countries that are not yet members, including Serbia. But BIRN found that the amount of arsenic was many times higher in dozens of towns, cities and villages, despite the accepted obligation to purify drinking water. In Novi Becej, the level of arsenic is as much as 27 times higher than allowed. The biggest problems are in Vojvodina, because here more than 653,000 people use carcinogenic water from the water supply system. About 173,000 people in Croatia and 100,000 in Hungary are exposed to arsenic levels above the permitted limits.

There is no research that would show how the presence of arsenic in drinking water affects people in Vojvodina. Such studies do not exist in eastern Croatia either.

But research conducted in Hungary, Romania and Slovakia in 2012 as part of the EU's Arsenic Health Risk Assessment Project and the Molecular Biology Program led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that long-term exposure to low levels of arsenic in drinking water may be associated with basal cell carcinoma, which is the most common form of skin cancer. This has been determined even for quantities that are only slightly increased in relation to the legally allowed limit of  $10 \mu\text{g} / \text{L}$ .

Local media in Hungary subsequently reported that 300 people die each year from long-term exposure to arsenic from drinking water, citing research by the Hungarian Public Health and Medical Surveillance Service, ANTSZ.

In Serbia, BIRN mapped sites with arsenic levels above  $10 \mu\text{g} / \text{L}$  for the whole of Vojvodina, using data obtained from 41 requests for access to information of public importance submitted to local water companies and public health services. The data were collected in the period from January to October 2017. The research showed that 102 cities, towns and villages in Vojvodina - with a total of 653,160 inhabitants - are in the danger zone. All these places are supplied with water from plants that are not equipped with technology for removing arsenic from groundwater.

Water is safe to drink in Novi Sad, but Zrenjanin, where 77,000 people live, is in one of the most endangered zones. In the last six months, the level of arsenic in the water here was up to  $194 \mu\text{g} / \text{L}$ .

Subotica, a city of almost 106,000, has up to  $99 \mu\text{g} / \text{L}$  of arsenic in the water in some places, although local public health services claim that 80 percent of the population uses

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clean water thanks to a treatment plant built in 1991.

The Provincial Sanitary Inspection in Vojvodina did not answer questions about which authorities failed to ban the use of such drinking water.

The most alarming are the results from Novi Becej, whose 13,010 inhabitants use water in which the arsenic content is as high as 273 µg / L. Although this is as much as 27 times the legal maximum, the authorities have not banned the use of drinking water or provided alternative sources of supply.

“Water was declared ‘technical’ ten years ago,” says the mayor Sasa Maksimovic, which means that it is only suitable for use for industrial purposes.

### **Price of clean water**

Removal of arsenic from groundwater is a major problem due to the high cost of such projects. Local authorities usually pass on the costs of water purification to consumers through monthly bills, which is why some people endanger their own health by using water from their own wells. Greenpeace toxicologist Djerdjeli Simon says that is exactly what happened in the rural parts of Hungary after the purification programs raised the price of water.

“The wells are not registered, and since groundwater is polluted in the central, southern and eastern parts of the country, the water that people drink there contains arsenic,” he says.

In Vojvodina, Serbia, the residents of Zrenjanin are still waiting to see what will happen to the bills when the newly built treatment plant starts working. According to the contract concluded between the city and the Italian company that built the plant, which was published on the website of the local water supply system, the purification will increase the price by 0.28 euros per cubic meter of water.

Source: birn.rs