

Last month, the Serbian government cancelled administrative acts related to negotiations with multinational Rio Tinto and also abolished the spatial plan for its lithium mine. The environmentalists welcomed the government's decision and celebrated the victory since they have been fighting against the controversial mining project for a long time, leading protests all across the country for several months. The massive demonstrations culminated in road blockages at the end of last year, which seemed a never-ending story and eventually forced the government to step back.

Soon, things turned out not to be so optimistic. The media revealed that the expropriation of the land used for lithium exploration had continued even after the government cancelled the project. Activists became suspicious, feeling they had been deceived to be temporarily silenced. However, 3 April, the general election date, was fast approaching; so they organised themselves again and gathered before the presidential building in Belgrade, where they had been sleeping in tents for the previous week. Their request was to adopt a new law which would ban the exploration and exploitation of lithium and boron in Serbia. Nevertheless, they had run out of time seeing as the National Assembly had disbanded on 15 February.

Bosnian-based mining engineer Darko K. has worked for another multinational for years and explains that the Balkans are rich in mineral resources, inciting the arrival of many foreign investors, now and in the future. The states are too poor and ill-equipped to run the operations themselves, so their only role is to ensure that the investors fulfil the environmental standards.

"And - even more important - to make all the steps transparent. It is not reasonable to be against the investments in advance. The state is obliged to protect all the aspects of its citizens' lives, and investors are obliged to behave accordingly. If anything is hidden, suspicion rises and so does the fear of the locals," Darko told FairPlanet.

He said the solution is simple and currently exemplified in Bosnia, where a foreign investor is interested in lead, zinc and barite exploitation in an abandoned mine of a small town.

"They didn't take a single step before ensuring the locals were familiar with [their operation]. And they continue, step by step, to do nothing before the community has all the information. So far, there has been no resistance," Darko added.