

Last week, a distraught looking herdsman from Northern Greece told this reporter out of the blue that CETA would be the nail in his coffin. The Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement between Canada and the EU has been in the making for seven years, and was scheduled to be signed this Thursday. CETA would give Canadian mining companies a huge stick with which to beat EU states that don't want dirty extraction projects. In Greece, that's a life or death question.

Their hope, and that of many millions of Europeans, rests on resistance from one region in the small country of Belgium.

When Syriza took Greece by storm in January 2015, the left-wing party did so with a promise to stop gold and copper extraction in the Skouries mines, which would destroy the ecologically rich and pristine region of Halkidiki. Hellas Gold, subsidiary of the Canadian mining giant Eldorado Gold, had to redo its homework for the permits it needed. One year later, the corporation wrote off \$1.25 billion, contributing to a 75% drop in its stock price. But Eldorado continued to apply legal pressure and in early 2016, its fortunes started rising again after several secondary permits were granted. The company still needs the key permit, to build a metallurgy plant to process the gold and copper—but today, Eldorado Gold seems full of renewed hope that it can re-secure the deal. CETA, if ever ratified, would pour cement on it.

Enough poison to kill everyone on the planet. Three times.

In the official story, the central issue is a technical one: can Hellas Gold convince the Greek government that the process known as “flash smelting” is feasible for the ores extracted in Halkidiki? This method of producing gold and other metals from ore is common, and according to Eldorado's permits, it's the company's only option. The only alternative, using cyanide, was in fact banned by the Greek Supreme court due to its expected devastating impact on the area.

Lately, Eldorado Gold's problems in Halkidiki can be summed up in one word: arsenic. Eldorado plans to process Skouries ore together with that of the nearby Olympias mine, which is very rich in the poisonous substance: flash smelting will produce more than 20,000 tons of arsenic every year. That exceeds arsenic limits in China by sixteen times, and EU limits by almost 30 times. To put these figures into context: Hellas Gold plans to unearth enough poison to kill every single human on earth. Three times. skouries-mijn-in-opbouw-1 Convincing the Greek government that flash smelting is safe will be a challenge—not least because Eldorado Gold had cheated earlier on in the approvals process, by submitting ore samples from areas outside the ones they were going to dig up. And then there are earthquakes. A seismic expert from Aristotle University evaluated the company's

claims about the resilience of its three waste dams and found them to be completely flawed. A highly active fault line runs directly under the largest of the three dams, which is currently under construction. It's like building a nuclear waste storage site on top of a dormant volcano.

Eldorado Gold has wasted no time in storing arsenic waste from other mines at the still-unfinished dam site. Putting the cart before the horse is a strategy that has served the company well in the past; after obtaining a permit to install machinery on the future Skouries mine location, Eldorado used it to lay the foundations for the metallurgy plant, which did not have a building permit. When I visited last week, the site was bustling with activity from bulldozers, trucks, and cranes. Huge swaths of Mount Kakavos, where the mines will be built, were already flattened. Where there used to be the sound of bees, there were now the buzzing operations of a tax-evading corporation that doesn't abide by irksome things like environmental laws. This is encouraged by the troika of Greece's creditors, who, according to former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, used "fiscal waterboarding" on the Greek government to impose all kinds of conditions, like reducing the number of environmental permits. Never mind that this violates EU law.

Enough honey, olive oil, and feta to support healthy and happy livelihoods for all. But to return to the buzzing bees: understand that these are no ordinary bees. A beekeeper from the nearby town of Arnaia won a prize for the world's best honey. The more than 1,000 beekeepers in Halkidiki represent an economy in itself that is vital to the area. When a dust plume of 2,162 tons per hour from the Skouries arrives, to take the company's own estimate, that economy is one of many that are bound to be hard-hit. The same goes for olive oil and feta cheese, two other valuable products made in this region by more people than the mine will ever employ.

Giorgos Karinas drinks now and then beer in Megali Panagia. Beekeeper Giorgos Karinas, 41, endures in Megali Panagia, the closest village to the planned Skouries mines. He would object if I wrote "lives," because he says his whole life is on pause: "We have lived in eternal uncertainty for so many years now. I have bees and I make olive oil, but I cannot invest anything until the mine is decided on. How will I sell my honey and olive oil if their toxic dust and polluted water ruins this area?"

He brings us to scenic places in the village, including a natural spring restored over a decade ago with money from the EU. He talks about the mining resistance in a melancholic way: "Back in 2006 we had 5,000 people signing the petition against the mine, more than the entire population of this village! But after the 2008 crisis, many people here lost their jobs in the construction sector, and some started to work for Eldorado. Now the village is

divided. I'm thinking of leaving if the mine goes ahead." That radical option was invoked by many people I spoke with, although nobody knew where they would go.

Giorgos Vlachos, 50, is from the most recent generation of goat and sheep herdsman who roam the area. His village used to have dozens of families with goat and sheep, but he's the last man standing. Here in Palechori, most people now have some relationship to the mine, and it's hard to be on the opposing side. "In this village, fathers tell their daughters to marry a miner," Giorgos says. He married a woman from Thessaloniki and started a family at a relatively late age (his two kids are 5 years and 5 months old). With his baby sleeping, we meet in a kind of garage that serves as a storage space for his milk, paperwork, and his children's toys. It has become hard for him to meet journalists in public in his own village. "The mining company is running a campaign and in this area you are either with or against them. This village chose temporary jobs and a mass murderer called asbestos, which is contained in the Skouries deposit."

giorgos-vlachosIt's not that the people don't know about asbestos. When I drove into Megali Panagia, I was welcomed by a banner: "Asbestos is a slow killer but don't forget that it will come." Until recently, the mining company hid the fact that in addition to the arsenic problem, the Skouries ore is itself rich with asbestos. But in January 2016, this was confirmed by the state geological institute.

Abruptly, Giorgos brings up CETA—something I hadn't planned to discuss with him. "If they sign CETA it is all over." Asked to explain, he says that "our government already fought with the Canadians over the fact that they want to produce feta, our trademark cheese. They got a compromise over that and are no longer against CETA. But when CETA comes, they will say they have to allow the mine because otherwise they will face a multi-billion court case." That's possible thanks to new investor rights contained in CETA and other trade deals, which allow corporations to directly sue governments for damages over policies that threaten their profits.

Back in Thessaloniki, I ask Hellenic Mining Watch activist Maria Kadoglou how much Eldorado could demand from Greece if CETA is ratified and the company doesn't get the flash smelting permit. "That's anybody's guess," she says, "but look to Romania, where Gabriel Resources is suing the government for \$2.7 billion for rejecting the Rosia Montana gold mine. And they never even got as far as approved Environmental Impact Assessment. Look, Eldorado claims they have already spent \$700 million and that the potential profits amount to \$10 billion, so anything in between is very realistic."

As a Belgian citizen, it was a special time to be visiting Halkidiki: the only person standing in the way of a mining inferno seemed to be Paul Magnette, Minister-President of the

Belgian region of Wallonia. As of this writing, Belgium was unable to sign CETA because of Wallonia's opposition, with Marnette citing the secret arbitration as one of the major unresolved issues. Within Europe the pressure on Walloons is huge—but the support from citizens, NGOs, trade unions, and even economists is also huge. If Marnette kills CETA, he might just get a statue in Halkidiki.

Two imminent decisions have profound stakes for tens of thousands of Greeks. Anytime now, Environment Minister Panos Skourletis will let Eldorado Gold know whether they can do flash melting or not. And anytime now, the fate of CETA will become clear. If the deal moves forward, it would most likely mean approval of the mines, the loss of thousands of sustainable and meaningful jobs, displacement, and long-term environmental destruction. It's crunch time, and someone will feel the impact: either Eldorado Gold or the Greek people.

source: antigoldgr.org