

Dragan Sakić was born in the village of Brezjak, near Loznica, where he spent more than forty years. In this small place of about 170 inhabitants, Dragan had a house of about fifty square meters, a garden and a little bit of land. Today, the Sakic family has only land left in Brezjak, and they may sell it as well. They are just one of the families that sold the property to Rio Sava Exploration, the Serbian branch of the Rio Tinto Group, which has been buying land in the area since last year to build a lithium mine. The big money he has been offering for the purchase of houses and land in recent months, however, has been divided and quarreled with neighbors.

While collecting hay with his son, **Dragan** says that he received a little more than 80 thousand euros from the company *Rio Tinto*, even though the real value was not even 15 thousand. He left his native village with his family and moved ten kilometers away, where he lives in a house ten times bigger. Still, he doesn't think he's better.

"I sold it only because everyone sold it. Let's not stay here alone, that's why. By the way, I was always against (mine prim.nov), and I went to those protests, but what's the point? " According to *Rio Tinto*, by mid-July this year, almost half of the planned 52 households had been evicted in the village of Brezjak. Stefan Janković, a representative of the company, told the *Center for Investigative Reporting in Serbia* (CINS) that of the 250 hectares – as planned for the mine – they now own almost 40%. In addition to this, pre-agreements have been signed with some locals.

"The purchase of land is going well for now, we can freely say", Janković estimates.

A square meter of a house in this area can now be sold for about 470 euros, while a square meter in a garage, pantry, pigsty, barn, basement is worth about 200 euros. Fences, gates, concrete paths in the yard are additionally paid for, and everyone who sells the house receives an additional 5,000 euros. There is also a bonus for those who move out in the first four months of receiving the offer – an additional several thousand euros.

Sold houses today look like ruins from the war because their owners take away the tiles, windows and doors.

However, the sale of the land was one of the points of contention between the company and those who now oppose the construction of the mine. The data obtained by CINS and conversations with locals, activists and representatives of *Rio Tinto* show how this company has been giving money to the local community for years, has been a guest at local celebrations, and today has managed to seduce even families with its activities.

Miladin Đurđević from the association *Ne damo Jadar* calls the way the company approached the locals "the mechanism of a cooked frog":

“If you put a frog in hot water, it jumps out and escapes. But if you put it in the cold and continue to heat it, you will cook a frog. That’s how they are locals”.

Rio Tinto, money and first problems

One of the employees in the company *Rio Tinto* asked in the ambulance of the Loznica Health Center in the village of Brezjak if they had a refrigerator that would provide storage of serum against snake bites. The ambulance said that they needed a refrigerator, and the company donated 250 thousand dinars to them, from which they bought not only him, but also an ECG and an air conditioner.

The company also gave money to local communities in the vicinity of the future mine. So, for example, in the *local community of Stupnica*, they bought balls and equipment for the football club, and asphalted the field for the elementary school. The field roads used by the company’s vehicles were also filled in, according to the response of this local community to CINS.

For three students of the *Vuk Karadžić* High School in Loznica, Rio Tinto paid the registration fee for a stay at the *Petnica Research Station*.

Data from the Treasury Administration provided to us by the *Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team* (PAKT) show that *Rio Tinto* gave over 11.6 million dinars to schools, local communities, the Health Center and the Cultural Center in Loznica in the period from 2011 to March 2020. The money that the company invested is probably even bigger. Thus, the *Cultural Center Vuk Karadzic* from Loznica, in response to CINS, says that Rio Tinto set aside 19.2 million dinars for them. They explained that the company has a legal obligation to finance archaeological protection research, in this case the archeological site of Paulje.

Archaeologist **Rada Gligorić** from the *Jadar Museum* in Loznica, with whom CINS journalists spoke at one of the places where archeological excavations are being carried out, explains that the procedure was accelerated due to the mine:

“What we might do in 10 or 20 years, we do in five or six years. And we have secured funds”.

In addition, the company boasts a number of benefits that enable people whose properties are of interest to them – they give vouchers for purchases in an agricultural store, offer a warehouse to store things during the move, hire a real estate agency that finds offers for relocation.

“They (*Rio Tinto*) present it as a kind of social responsibility or cooperation with the local community. But certainly in that way, they tried to approve the local community “, explains Miroslav Mijatović from PAKT.

The company has been friendly to the locals from the beginning, they explain in the local association *Ne damo Jadar*, which opposes the construction of the mine.

“Since 2004, they have come here and studied the mentality of the people, family conditions, who has any problems, psychological profiles of people, they came to celebrations, to festivities”, says **Nebojša Petković**, a member of the Association.

However, at one point, everything changes. Activists we spoke to say that the uprising was caused by land conversion, in the fall of last year, without the knowledge of the people.

Namely, at the request of the *City of Loznica*, agricultural and forest land in the area where the mine is planned was changed to land in the construction area, according to the cadastre solutions that CINS had insight into. The conversion fee was paid by Rio Tinto, although it was not the owner of the land at the time.

The conversion more than doubled the taxes to the owners, and it also brought into question whether they will be able to sow in the fields in the future because it is no longer agricultural land, explains Mijatović from PAKT. In addition, he states, people will no longer be able to receive state subsidies or raise loans for agriculture.

“The institutions of the system have been made available to a foreign company, and they have absolutely neglected the interest of the citizens who pay them”, says Mijatović.

Thus, changes are being made to the Spatial Plan of the special purpose area for the realization of this project, which is being prepared by the *Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure* on the initiative of *Rio Tinto*. It would place the landfill for waste disposal from the mine closer to the mine, ie to the place where the fertile land is today. The reason is purely economic in nature – it is more profitable for the company than to transport waste. The company explains that the process of changing the plan is underway, as well as that the purchase of that land has not started yet.

Rio Tinto discovered the existence of the mineral jadarite in this area in 2004. Lithium can be extracted from it, which, among other things, is used for the production of batteries for electric cars and storage of renewable energy sources. Since then, they have been conducting tests, and although it is not yet certain that the company will build a mine, the decisions one after the other give them that opportunity. The company announces that it plans to start building an access road to the mine.

“The government is doing everything to start this project. She sided with Rio Tinto. We feel abandoned, abandoned, abandoned, forgotten “, says **Marijana Trbović Petković** from *Ne damo Jadar* and adds:

“If the state wanted to take care of this village and this people and what it would look like, it should have nicely formed its own team that will work in parallel with the company.” (...)

And not to leave us to the company to scrape us as they want. ”

With a bar on the door of the company Rio Tinto

Dragan Sakić, who sold the property to *Rio Tinto*, explains to CINS that he does not want the mine because he thinks that the fact that he moved does not protect him from potential harmful consequences. He still does not want to sell his 30 acres of land:

“I told them that when everyone sells and everyone decides, then I will give it to them.”

According to Marijana Trbović Petković, the choice that *Rio Tinto* put before the locals divided the people in the village, which was previously harmonious.

“They quarreled as a family. Even our grandfather stole one field, he didn’t dare the rest, so the chaos turned out to be alive. (...) So you have two brothers, one sells, one won’t, you have godparents, that’s it. ”

In recent months, there have been frequent incidents in the village of Brezjak involving some local activists. So, for example, some locals mind that black security jeeps patrol the village because they see it as pressure on the population, while on the other hand the company explains that they only guard abandoned houses so that no one would move into them.

A minor incident also happened while CINS journalists were talking at the *Rio Tinto* office in Brezjak. One local, while cultivating the land, came across a bar with which the land was marked. With a shout that he could break the machine because of that, he threw it angrily at the company’s door. In *Rio Tinto*, they justified themselves by saying that they were not to blame, but that the *Roads of Serbia* were marking the route for the road.

“You know how, until a year ago, all these people cooperated with us, leased a plot in which we had wells. They took money from Rio Tinto, signed contracts with us and now all of a sudden we are not valid “, explains Stefan Janković.

Some locals sold their forests to Rio Tinto, and then illegally cut down trees. The PAKT organization reported this to the inspection, which filed misdemeanor charges against those people, according to the documentation obtained by CINS.

Marijana Trbović Petković has mixed feelings when she talks about people who sold property. She understands those who lived harder, and says that she is glad for some, like Dragan Sakić. At the same time, he does not hide his anger while touring the abandoned parts of the village together with the CINS team:

“Everyone was screaming for money”.

Source: Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo Srbije